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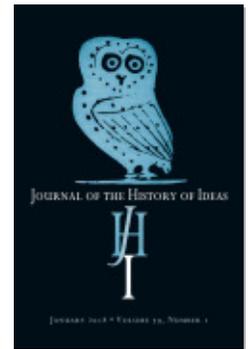
Empires, Nations, and Revolutions

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Empires, Nations, and Revolutions

Jeremy Adelman

The fate of empires and the making of nations in the age of revolutions were central to the field of “Atlantic history” from the very start of its own formation as a field of scholarship seeking to transcend idiographic, nationally bound narratives about the rise of the “West.” When R. R. Palmer composed his classic two-volume *The Age of Democratic Revolution* about the forty-year epic culminating in Napoleon’s defeat, he argued that these upheavals were essentially democratic, which he defined as signifying “a new feeling or kind of equality, or at least a discomfort with older forms of social stratification and formal rank.” Palmer sought to transcend entrenched, exceptionalist national narratives. Now that the Cold War is over, Palmer has been recovered for a post-nationalist, post-socialist turn in history. His vision—transnational, Atlantic, or worldwide in scale—offered a historic framing for the temper of the times, which saw the spread of liberal democracy as the dominant tidal process. Its triumph emboldened Atlantic history after 1989. Nowadays, the underlying tenets of the liberal *imaginaire* and universalizing scale are both under assault.¹

Yet, Palmer’s efforts to plot a narrative that escaped the fastened grip of national destinies, to evoke the age of revolutions as more than just the

This article re-engages earlier work and focuses more on the problem of imperial sovereignty and revolutions. See Jeremy Adelman, “An Age of Imperial Revolutions,” *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 319–40.

¹ R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), vol. I; Lester D. Langley, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

expression of the unique insight of patriotic “founders” or *philosophes*, relied on unquestioned assumptions about nationhood: that it was the sequel to empire once the force of democracy erupted onto the stage. Nationhood was the evolved form, the only form, in which democracy could realize itself because nations were the peerless bounded units in which comembers could acknowledge the equal rights of others, which lay at the theoretical core of democracy, liberalism, and the kind of civic nationalism that Palmer and others extolled.² The assumptions about nationhood had their corollary in the assumptions made about the anciens régimes they replaced: just as the nascent democratic nations were imagined as born with the traits that would drive them into maturity, the old regimes were aristocratic monarchies in irreversible decline, their moral foundations yielding to intellectual and social changes they could not stop.

Sixty years later, our perspective on Atlantic empires looks very different. It would be hard to imagine how one would narrate their stories without placing colonialism, slave labor, and the explosive struggles for emancipation at the center; none of these got swept away by the arrival of new forms of political representation. By the same token, the work on early nationalism has revealed just how “constructed”—uneven, incomplete, and labored—the transition was. The very turn to Atlantic history that Palmer sought to motivate has exposed some older presumptions about imperial arrangements that thrived off legalized systems of privilege and legitimated regimes of inequality.³ For the most part, however, American, French, and even Iberian revolutions have been narrated as the products of autonomous impulses unfolding within their borders, as basic rigidities of sprawling and overextended regimes that gave way to government-toppling insurrections, most especially in the inaugural upheaval of 1776, whose historiography stamped so much of how we have come to understand empires, revolutions, and nationhood. One result has been to treat Latin American concepts and struggles as pale replicas, derivatives, or unworkable rip-offs of the original, eliminating the possibility of local intellectual histories with their own dynamics and autonomy.⁴

² This, of course, created a problem for liberals who wanted theirs to be a universal creed to transcend history, culture, and race, becoming the ideology of a concert of interest-swapping nations. See Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁴ Peggy Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Networks of Trade and Revolution, 1713–1826* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

We are confronted with a dilemma. Going “Atlantic” or global aimed to transcend internal logics and exceptionalist narratives; but scaling up this way has often erased the significance of the particularities of place that frame and make sense of the stories of dissolution or integration, or has reduced them, as Elías Palti notes in his introduction, to deviations from a prescribed norm, a “rational pattern” as he puts it. How to frame an entangled history of revolutions that admits local meanings and does not simply pathologize those that do not measure up to the ideal? How to connect histories of empires and nations once they are not bound by basic internal logics?

One way is to question whether there was some uniform switch in the meaning of sovereignty that fueled the long transition from anciens régimes to modern ones. There are two basic strains to conventional narratives. One comes from international relations theory, which sees the meaning of sovereignty more or less stabilizing around 1648, associated with the later idealized notion of a “Westphalian System.” In this storyline, rulers accepted the premise that their dominions reached the limits of their borders—and there they stopped, absolutely. The territorial lines separating states got fixed so that rulers could focus on consolidating capacities within each regime. Only with the rise of twentieth-century norms of liberal internationalism would this pacted system give way, albeit with fits and starts. The limits to this approach are now many, and have been catalogued: the recognition of persistent interdependence of states, the incompleteness of their dominions, the durability of multilayered, composite structures within them, and even the interlacing of global exchanges of ideas and networks that made boundaries much more porous and absolute than the traditional interpretation of the Westphalian tradition permitted.⁵ The second, often correlated, view comes from a constitutional tradition that charted kings ceding power, authority, and responsibility from themselves to subjects, and in so doing transforming them into citizens, a journey that began with a ruler as sovereign and ended with the triumph of “popular sovereignty.” This, too, has come under fire over the decades, not least because the notion of who the people were—or are—remains contested and unfinished.⁶

⁵ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr, eds., “Introduction” in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 9, 11, 13, et al.

⁶ Jeremy Adelman, “Mimesis and Rivalry: European Empires and Global Regimes,” *Journal of Global History* 10 (2015): 77–98; Christopher Bickerton, Philip Cunliffe, and Alexander Gourevitch, “Politics without Sovereignty,” in *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations*, ed. Bickerton, Cunliffe, and Gourevitch (London: University College London Press, 2007), 20–38; Robert Jackson, *Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 78–83.

What is important to note is that (1) these two conceptions of sovereignty-in-transition are central to the narrative about the making of the modern world and the conditions of what is regarded as modern, and (2) they witness their triumphal and failed switches in the age of revolutions, from about the 1770s to 1820. Recent work on the age of revolutions has revealed the need to step back and reconstruct a global history of the era that treats the revolutions as connected and encompassing without presuming that they are driven by a single, teleological purpose.⁷

This reconstruction needs to begin with a new understanding of what kinds of anciens régimes were at stake to be transformed and the recognition that these struggles unfolded in particular institutional settings—colonies as parts of empires, which assembled the components of eighteenth-century notions of sovereignty. What distinguished empires was not their absolute definitions of sovereignty, but as Lauren Benton has shown in her study of legal pluralism across a variety of colonial contexts, their amalgamation of a variety of institutional practices and their incomplete territorial contours.⁸ The relationship between empire and territory thus shifted when the notion of sovereignty got reset from one that rests on self-evident principles of rulership, especially as regimes sprawled overseas, into a view of sovereignty that constituted an unstable and shifting assortment of understandings and practices. Conceptions of sovereignty might be seen not as explanations of how old orders fell and new orders emerged, but as the consequences of struggles to sort out rival ideas and meanings. If the traditional Westphalian narrative rested on the triumph of a European design and a basic contest that unfolded at the centers of power and radiated outward to be borrowed, adapted, and imitated in the national, territorial form, attention to interactions within and between imperial regimes, including at their fringes, makes the emergent design a contingent effect of a wider struggle for power, one that made room for local struggles in peripheries that would shape the histories of the cores.⁹

The shifting identification of empire with territoriality laid the context for the ways in which the meaning of sovereignty itself changed in the run

⁷ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

⁸ Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹ Adelman, “Mimesis and Rivalry: European Empires and Global Regimes.”

up to—and as a cause of—revolution. Empires did not begin with ambitions of territorial indelibility. Only with time did sovereignty become associated with territory. What is important is that empires spread European notions of sovereignty to distant shores with less concern for legal homogeneity up to the definable boundaries of empire than the Westphalian narrative admitted. They were rather more polyglot and vague—exemplified by the prominence of grey zones that shaded the incomplete and contingent reach of empires, grey zones that would eventually evolve into borderlands. What is more, this greying of the anciens régimes applied not just to the outer reaches of empires that entangled them with rivals, but to their local countryside and blurry, and contested, frontiers.¹⁰

One of the effects of the escalating imperial rivalries was to drive monarchs and merchants to become more and more territorially minded over the course of the eighteenth century. More rivalry led to more landgrabbing. The accent on territoriality intensified the disequilibrium and the outward expansion of European states; empires did not enter crises because they could not adapt; it was not so much the refusal to change as change itself that yielded to the tensions of empire that eventually shattered the fiscal bulwarks of rivals. By the middle of the eighteenth century, rulers and ministers wrangled over how to adapt their ways and embark on increasingly ambitious plans to modify the institutions, private and public, that held their emporia together. Though each regime set about to modify their imperial pacts, it is important to stress that they did so in response to the ways in which empires coiled together into a single, internally competitive and increasingly disequilibrated regime. Here the Iberian cases played an important function. First, because they were the sites for latecomers—Dutch, English, and French—to interlope, prey, and grab, they were the first to experiment with top-to-bottom modifications of the relationships among the Iberian-imperial parts. Various described as the Bourbon (for Spain) or Pombaline (for Portugal) reforms, they had multiple means to pursue a broad objective: to reconstitute the empires so that private rents and public revenues flowed more effectively to support and defend the contours of imperial states, contours that were being defined more and more

¹⁰ Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104 (1999), 814–41; Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); for a view of territorializing sovereignty from one side and for another side see Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

as territorially bounded by the treaty systems they signed. As Fradera and Elliott have shown, these experiments often served as models for their rivals; they challenge the common story of sclerotic, hopelessly backward-looking examples.¹¹ Indeed, reform recombined important aspects of empires, and gave them enough stamina to suggest that predictions of their inevitable falls, and certainly their impossible adjustment, were at the very least premature. If Abbé Raynal and Adam Smith singled out the Spanish empire in particular as an example of a polity addicted to silver, it reflected their yearning for their own governments to shed their own bullionist predilections. Accordingly, the efforts by Parliament to revamp the status of monopoly trading companies and transform the fiscal instruments of empire to connect the “parts” more directly in the service of the “whole” shot through the French and English drives to out-muscle the other. The very term *mercantilism* emerged as a label for envisioning policies of imperial sovereignty that rejected old, monopolistic and specie-thirsty concepts of rule.

Remaking empires challenged older imperial pacts. Reform provoked a riptide of opposition, less to the principles and more to the practices of new imperial sovereignty, both in the metropolises and (more ominously) in the colonies. From the 1760s, British colonists and their commercial patrons in Britain bridled at the flurry of commercial and fiscal demands. But these protests were hardly unique. Pombal ran into resistance in Lisbon, which got fierce when his patron, the king, José I, died in 1777, leaving the minister exposed to his many detractors. In Madrid, bread riots brought an end to experiments in free grain trade. In the Americas there was even more unrest. The Tupac Amaru revolt in the Central Andes, Comunero uprisings further north, seditious activity across New Spain, and the aborted Tiradentes movement in Brazil all exemplified the various ways in which colonial peoples saw the reforms as being effective enough to disturb tacit and not-so-tacit colonial pacts among peripheral rulers and between them and subaltern agents.¹²

Adaptation made the empires internally heterogeneous, while in some senses making them more externally similar. The challenge was balancing

¹¹ Josep María Fradera, *Colonia para después de un imperio* (Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2005); J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 10–11.

¹² Kenneth Maxwell, *Conflicts and Conspiracies: Brazil and Portugal, 1750–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 23–28, 67–71; Anthony McFarlane, “Rebellions in Late Colonial Spanish America: A Comparative Perspective,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14 (1983), 313–38.

the diversity within empire with the fiscal hunger and need to direct funds to metropolitan governments locked in intractable conflicts with rivals.¹³ While the American Revolution and the spasm of insurrection down the Andean spine were wake-up calls, these threats did not diminish the affiliation of sovereignty with the defense of empire. If anything, they were opportunities to reconstitute relations between the parts of empires. While the Seven Years' War, for instance, issued its blows, it also presented opportunities. P. J. Marshall suggests that, for the British, "territorial empire had survived and was quickly to resume its growth" in part because the pacts that rulers learned to make with colonial mediators were so effective at striking a compromise between the illusion of unequivocal imperial authority and an admixture of systems of sovereignty at the local and regional levels. In the same manner, global war did more to recast empires in Iberian domains than to sunder them. Once the 1790s sucked Spain and Portugal into the maelstrom (a point to which I will soon return), both regimes faced spikes in defense costs, but adapted in ways that reintegrated the parts of empires around a new matrix of slavery, silver, and decentered sovereignty. In the 1790s, we see Iberian authorities recalibrating colonial pacts in the same ways that the East India Company authorities renegotiated the alliances between the firm and its local mediating allies. At the same time, governors in the West and East Indies had to be mindful of local resistances, lest insurrection spread.¹⁴

There are three consequences to going beyond the Westphalian narrative and seeing Europe's empires as entangled with each other and thus simultaneously redrafting and reimagining the relationships between imperial parts as a way to cope with the inescapable reality of wider competition. First, it was not the discovery of new principles of sovereignty that compelled revolutionaries in the fringes and at home to challenge old principles of rule and to break with them; rather, it was the effort to reform empires to cope with rivals that unsettled the principles of imperial integration. Second, empires—not even the Iberian cases, so often rolled out as examples of the natural course of imperial decline—were hardly doomed

¹³ As Carlos Sempat Assadourian has observed about an earlier conjuncture, it was possible to reconcile multiple pressures within the social and economic "spaces" of empire. Assadourian, *El sistema de la economía colonial: El Mercado interior, regiones y espacio económico* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1982), 15–16.

¹⁴ P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America, c. 1750–1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5; Carlos Marichal, *La bancarrota del virreinato: Nueva España y las finanzas del imperio español, 1780–1810* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999); Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), chap. 3.

to overstretch or ossification, waiting for a more “modern” concept of sovereignty to come along and wipe the slate of the old order clean. This framework suggests that the transition at the heart of the age of revolution cannot be explained as one that saw a more modern, maturing, conception of sovereignty bursting to rid itself of an old imperial mold. This has implications for how we write about entanglements and the place of Iberian and Latin American stories of statehood in them. The breakdowns did not occur as prophesied (by Gibbon, and other figures of the Enlightenment), as first afflicting what were seen as the most backward of empires, the Iberians’, which could not accommodate new principles of enlightened freedom.¹⁵

The age of revolution did not smash up the old order in a way that sent each imperial part spinning off into its own orbit, as if the empires broke up to allow separable nation states to fill the vacated spaces of the anciens régimes with new concepts of, as Benedict Anderson famously said, “horizontal comradeship.” On the contrary: the inter-imperial, global regime not only spanned both Indies, it locked the rivals in an intractable struggle. With the outbreak of the French Revolution and the advent of total war, the cycle of conflict between empires ramped up, twisting imperial histories onto a new track from which it would become increasingly difficult to deviate. So interlocking were the rivalries that ramped-up competition could brook no bystanders. Indeed, initially Madrid and Lisbon sought to stay out of what seemed to be the continuation of an essentially Anglo-French contest. That was futile. For starters, there were advocates of pro-English and pro-French sides deep within the courts of both governments. They feuded bitterly over their allegiances to Paris or London, a match which grew increasingly bitter as the revolutionary wars gave way to Napoleon’s continental and Atlantic-wide ambitions.

If the inter-imperial regimes locked belligerents into an inescapable spiral, wartime adaptations had important effects on the internal balancing of empire and the relationship between and among its parts. Imperial dependency on the fringes gave local brokers an important role in maintaining the delicate equipoise within an empire that was being ravaged by disequilibrium between them. Increasingly, the primary sites in the governance of colonial affairs were the merchant guilds and municipal councils. Viceroys and high courts still weighed in, but there was a notable devolution of power to the delegated authorities of colonial ruling blocs and their assemblies of local

¹⁵ Cited in José Alvarez Junco, *Mater Dolorosa: La idea de España en el Siglo XIX* (Madrid: Taurus, 2001), 120–21.

potentates. While much has been made of figures such as Mexico's Servando Teresa de Mier or the Venezuelan adventurer Francisco de Miranda as apostles of independence, what dominated colonial deliberations was loyalty to monarchy and empire, exemplified by the concerned voices of José Ignacio de Pombo and José da Silva Lisboa.¹⁶

The internal rebalancing and local struggles for power should not be confused with the proto-national rumblings of creoles or local brokers yearning to break free to release a radical new political imaginary from the stultifying constraints of imperial overlords. Colonial loyalists urged imperial adaptation and accommodation to new commercial realities (for example, more open trade), to contain the spread of political convulsion and slave unrest. This does not mean that such reforms dissolved the prospect of new frictions. More open trade ran into resistance from old monopolistic commercial houses; many worried that local chambers, from guilds to municipal councils, drained viceroys of the authority they needed to siphon resources to the crown. But adaptations and even some of the resistances sprang from shared aspirations to redefine imperial sovereignty and to make denser the institutional latticework that would reintegrate the multiple parts of increasingly decentered empires. There was a simultaneous process of reassembling parts while giving them more, albeit partial, autonomy during the revolutionary conjuncture—which made governance complex, but not futile. Even where insurrection coursed through trans-Atlantic sinews, as in France or Britain's empires, these were hardly feeble and brittle regimes waiting for the last blow to bring them down; what is more, the insurgents were more concerned with defending rights within empire than the right to defect from it.¹⁷

The quest for an explanation for how the disequilibrium within wider inter-imperial regimes created revolutionary situations (and not that revolutionary forces brought down doomed empires) should not imply continuity. There was nonetheless an important break in the legal systems that braced the early modern Atlantic world together, a break that deepened

¹⁶ José Ignacio de Pombo, *Comercio y contrabando en Cartagena de Indias* (1800, 1804; repr. Bogotá, 1986); José da Silva Lisboa, *Observações sobre a prosperidade do Estado pelo Liberales principios da Nova Legislação* (Rio de Janeiro, 1810); Gabriel B. Paquette, "State-Civil Society Cooperation and Conflict in the Spanish Empire: The Intellectual and Political Activities of the Ultramarine *Consulados* and Economic Societies, c. 1780–1810," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39 (2007), 263–98.

¹⁷ John Lynch, "The Origins of Spanish Independence," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell, vol. 3, *From Independence to c. 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); David Brading, *Los orígenes del nacionalismo mexicano* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1983).

local experiments in sovereignty. What happened? One common answer to how sovereignty snapped has been the birth of national or creole consciousness within the colonies that severed allegiances to empire, monarchy, and aristocracy. Yet just as inevitabilist accounts of imperial decline underestimate the elasticities (and perforce, legacies) of empire, the narrative of the rise of the nation-state as no less inevitable reduces revolutionary outcomes to the degree to which models of nationhood had been allowed to mature under imperial rule. Just as we have been accustomed to close the gap between empire and nationhood in the age of revolution by presuming that the former was doomed, it has been a longstanding assumption that components of the latter ripened as the days of empire grew numbered.

To argue, as Benedict Anderson and others have, that nations emerged out of constructed fictive bonds, promoted by communicative activity, frees sovereignty from some of its primordial (“self-determining”) associations, but this account of national identity casts them in opposition to, and in repudiation of, empire. In doing so, nations still stand as natural sequels to empire, and given their more “modern,” leveled means of imagining social norms, they are better prepared for an Atlantic world (and eventually a globalized one) of trading nation-states.¹⁸

There is also a logical problem: the causal account for change owes a great deal to the presence (or absence) of necessary conditions, inferring that the outcome of modern nation-states depended on the identification of actors or agents whose ideas or interests were associated with systems that did not yet exist—“national,” “modern,” or “capitalist.” Indeed, there has been a long tradition of arguing that states that “failed” (starting with an image of Haiti, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has so trenchantly reminded us) could be reduced to the weakness of national and modern identities that made their revolutions so manqué, and thus condemned them to remain enthralled to feudal, neocolonial ways.¹⁹ The inevitability that coats the past leaves little to the passage that connected a world governed by empires with a later cycle of national state-formation. Not surprisingly, failure or success of precursor-empires and successor-nations were determined long

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), esp. chap. 4; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

before the transformation of sovereignty set in. No wonder the formula is so appealing.

If the steps between the imperial demise of empire and the emergence of something new were not plotted out in advance for actors to follow, how can we explain the breakdowns and localized experiments in alternative models of sovereignty? If the age of revolution was not simply a light switch that flipped on the Westphalian arrangement of self-determining nation states, we can see actors groping for an arrangement that would stabilize, not dismantle, old regimes, and in their experiments lay the conditions for new, constitutional, successors. Colonial and metropolitan ruling classes more often discussed the management of the crisis within a framework of “loyalty,” which yielded to changes in sovereignty as *processes* with beginnings that led nowhere and endings that surprised even the most prescient of actors, and eventually led actors to the “exit” option—in the sense that motivated Albert Hirschman to argue in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* that people cope with crises in a variety of ways, with an “inborn tendency toward instability” of even the most perfect of mixes.²⁰

The tendency to disequilibrium was not a brewing tempest within each empire; rather turmoil was embedded within an increasingly combustible inter-state system, riven by warfare in the 1790s, and escalating to an epic confrontation and Atlantic-wide war after 1805. Indeed, the growing weakness of state structures did not provoke secessionist movements when it would have been easiest to “exit.” Just as the reconstitution of empires was a response to competitive pressures of the eighteenth century, the final breakup of Iberian empires was the effect of even more heightened rivalry. What was new by 1800 was a struggle for transregional hegemony that shot through the empires’ alignments and legitimacy. The result was not the disruptive or shocking intervention of a Eurocentric concept of constitutionalism and sovereignty, imported and emulated at the fringes and doomed to fail because they lacked the right local “pre-conditions” to flourish, but a renegotiation of the pacts between colonial outposts and capitals as well as of those within the coalitions of forces in the peripheries. To the physiocratic *letrados* in Cartagena and Buenos Aires, all that was required was for authorities to turn ad hoc adjustments into a new model. In this way, ridding the empires of the agents of “corruption” would even

²⁰ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 126.

revitalize them and make them more durable. New perspectives on property, in fact, bore no automatic association with a new outlook on sovereignty.²¹

The possibility of an evolution toward a new pact between the component parts and actors in the Iberian empires, was not infinitely elastic for it was still subject to the external dynamics of inter-state conflict. Yet, actors on all sides tried to rethink incumbent regimes before giving up on them; renewed warfare was the last thing anyone wanted. In the end, the Spanish monarchy was toppled by Napoleon's sleight of hand, when the French invasion of 1807 turned into a lasting occupation of the Peninsula and the house arrest of the Spanish Bourbon monarchy. In short order, the Spanish empire was missing its keystone, prompting an upsurge of anxiety over how to govern an empire without a king. In Portugal, the French invasion simply displaced the emblem of sovereignty instead of decapitating it, as the monarchy took refuge in a new imperial capital, the erstwhile colonial outpost of Rio de Janeiro. "Americanizing" the monarchy spared it the immediate question of what bound the colonies to ancien régime sovereignty.²²

Striking at the cores of each empire, French armies forced local ruling cliques in each empire to improvise means for survival. These experiments rested on admixtures of new and old practices and ideas. To the urban guilds and municipal councils were added new practices of public representation in the form of elected assemblies and a freer press to restore loyalty to shaken systems. In the end, they did more to shake up old pacts and ruling coalitions than to stabilize new ones. The first main drive to stabilize imperial order was the transformation in communications. To resacralize monarchy and rebuild confidence in its ministers, governments in both empires lifted restrictions on the press (in Mexico, Lima, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere) or allowed a press to begin to take root in the first place (in Brazil, Caracas, Chile, and elsewhere). In Brazil, the role of the press was different, as the court brought the first printing press to the colony with an eye to using it as a means to promote closer ties between colonial subjects and the Braganza court. Either way, governments now had to cope with the birth of public opinion; this meant that contending with dissent (with either

²¹ Lisboa, *Princípios de Economia Política* (Lisboa, 1804), 112–16.

²² Brian Hamnett, *La política española en una época revolucionaria, 1790–1820* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), 57–67; Valentim Alexandre, *Os Sentidos do Império: Questão nacional e questão colonial na crise do Antigo Regime português* (Porto: Ed. Afrontamento, 1993).

inquisitorial zeal or indifference) was likely to produce much more than the mere consent of the governed.²³

This brings us to the second major effort to refound imperial sovereignty. In an effort to recombine the parts of empire on the backs of “public opinion,” metropolitan governments in Spain in 1808 and Portugal in 1820 called for constitutional assemblies to draft a founding charter of imperial nationhood to reinvigorate the ties between rulers and ruled. The Spanish Junta issued a clarion call to the colonies in the name of “the nation,” insisting “that the Spanish dominions in America are not colonies, but an essential and integral part of the Monarchy.” Accordingly, each part of the empire-nation was invited to elect and dispatch envoys to a new assembly charged with drafting a founding charter. Much the same unfolded in Portugal, albeit with a lag. Electoral activity in towns across both empires sprang to life (with a few exceptions). However, when American delegates arrived in the assemblies, they immediately encountered a wall of resistance to their understandings of the equality of all the subjects of the empire. The burst of electoral activity was meant to bolster the legitimacy of the regimes, and to some extent it did. But it also had the effect of revealing the colonial status of American subjects which until then could be mystified by the mechanisms of viceregal justice.²⁴

“Modern” modes of representation got fused to earlier social norms of patrician rule by merchants, lawyers, magistrates, and royal officials—and, in due course, militiamen and army leaders—drafting decrees, pacts, and rules for local urbanite hegemony over erstwhile colonial spaces. The invention of a public sphere erupted suddenly within Iberian-Atlantic societies, nurtured by the struggle to define and mold public opinion in favor of reconstituted imperial-nations, with the aim of creating new ways to refound the local social imaginaries of empire. This shift occurred during a dramatic contest for local political, social, and economic resources, which drove contestants to seize opportunities afforded by new mechanisms of

²³ François-Xavier Guerra and Annick Lempérière, “Introducción,” in *Los espacios públicos en Iberoamérica. Ambigüedades y problemas: Siglos XVIII–XIX*, ed. Guerra and Lempérière (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), 5–21; Victor Uribe-Uran, “The Birth of a Public Sphere in Latin America During the Age of Revolution,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000), 425–57; on elections in Mexico, see Virginia Guedea, “The Process of Mexican Independence,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 116–30; Victor Peralta Ruiz, *En defensa de la autoridad: Política y cultura bajo el gobierno del Virrey Abascal, 1806–1816* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2002); Renan Silva, *Prensa y revolución a finales del siglo XVIII* (Bogotá: La Carreta, 1988).

²⁴ *El Argos Americano*, November 18, 1881.

voice and representation. Defection, or exit, to a new model waiting in the wings after 1776 or 1789, of an idea of a glorious nation hankering to emerge from the collapsing old regimes, is not what fueled the revolutionary situations.

In reality, calls for independence were scarce. For the most part, the feuding in the colonies was over how best to cope with the crisis of the empire, using new means to legitimate it precisely in order to revive it. Where protagonists pushed furthest to re-imagine sovereignty—Caracas, Nueva Granada, Michoacán, and Guerrero (areas around Cundinamarca, Apatzingán and Chilpancingo)—announcements of home-rule led to civil war. In all cases, loyalists and their armies triumphed. Approval of a Spanish Constitution by deputies in the Cádiz Parliament seemed to be a plausible framework for revitalizing empire. Meanwhile, Brazilians got home rule *de facto* because there was nothing to secede from.²⁵

The point is that the idea of independence was anything but contagious. What was more pervasive was the internal discord, at times bloodletting, over how to reassemble the shattered parts of empire into new wholes under rapidly changing political ground rules. Iberian empires, like their rivals, were under threat in various ways by 1814; but they had not broken up. Rather than decompose, they recomposed. Save the outliers of the Thirteen Colonies and Saint Domingue, loyalists had the upper hand across the rest of the Americas. There were a few cases, like the band of home-rulers in the River Plate where secession got a toe-hold. But for the most part, empires had managed to reintegrate themselves in spite of the metropolitan crises of total war.

The landscape changed with the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the restoration of monarchy in Spain. The king launched a counter-revolution to recenter the empire by tearing up the short-lived constitution and reimagining himself as a benevolent absolutist. This had the effect of emboldening a new secessionist coalition to include many who embraced home-rule within the empire and its constitution. Now the civil war between loyalists intensified, and in doing so accelerated the mobilization and militarization of Indians, slaves, and plebian populations. By 1820, Ferdinand's ambitions were not just losing him loyalists in the colonies; turmoil spread through the very pillar of authority upon which he most rested: the army. In turn, the crisis of the Spanish empire engulfed Portugal,

²⁵ Jaime Rodríguez O., *The Independence of Spanish America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 3; Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution*, chap. 5; Roderick Barman, *Brazil: The Forging of a Nation, 1798–1852* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 43–55.

which had in fact gone the furthest to reconstruct sovereignty around a new spatial balance. When it threatened to curb Brazil's autonomy within empire, Brazil's ruling classes rallied behind the exit option, keeping monarchy and the notion of empire for themselves precisely to preserve the privileges of an ennobled slavocracy. Thus in general, from an Iberian-colonial perspective there was little left to remain loyal to; the armies of empire folded up their tents and joined secessionists or went home. It is at this point that "declarations of independence" spread as responses to the shakeup of empire at the core.²⁶

An important shift in the nature of conflict over sovereignty had taken place. The effort to create a centralized system (imagined as a "restoration") had shattered the compromises of previous years. The effort to impose an absolutist, nearly indivisible model of authority from the top and center not only presumed (and dreamed of) a centripetal authority that never existed, but also ran headlong into the fragile, local adaptations that had been improvised to prevent imperial dissolution and mass exit. It was at this stage, especially after 1814, that warfare spread, especially in South America, from the northern Andes to the River Plate, and soon engulfed the southern borderlands of Brazil. The result was a cascade of unintended effects which magnified the disequilibria within empires and blew them apart. As civil wars and contention spread within empire, they gave rise to new practices of authority and legitimacy from within the ranks of militaries on all sides. As the recruitment efforts for armies spread into the countryside, power shifted from cities to rural provinces. The militarization and ruralization of authority in turn pushed the struggle over public opinion into new domains of struggle over who constituted "the people" of crumbling empires. In doing so, the debate became increasingly polarized and militarized.²⁷

Civil wars within empires took the place of total wars between empires as the source of disequilibrium and ended with a wave of secessions. It was after 1814, and especially after 1820, when the tendons within the loyalist

²⁶ Margaret Woodward, "The Spanish Army and the Loss of America, 1810–1824," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 48 (1968), 586–90; Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808–1826* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 212–14; Timothy Anna, *Spain and the Loss of America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Isabel Lustosa, *Insultos impressos: A guerra dos jornalistas na independência, 1821–1823* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000); Márcia Regina Berbel, *A Nação como artefato: Deputados do Brasil nas Cortes Portuguesas, 1821–1822* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999).

²⁷ For a recent overview, see Hamnett, *The End of Iberian Rule on the American Continent, 1770–1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

military camps really began to snap, that defection turned into irreversible independence from Spain and Portugal. It was these civil wars that yielded to independence, and not secession that sparked the civil wars. What is more, many of the declarations of independence took the mantle of new empires; Brazil and Mexico, for instance, broke away from Lisbon and Madrid as self-declared empires seeking to be more virtuous sovereignties than the ones they replaced. Simón Bolívar's Andean confederation had many of the trappings of a regional imperial structure—features which his increasing numbers of critics brandished as reasons to secede in the name of disgruntled provinces, often likening the “Liberator” to his despotic nemesis in Madrid, Ferdinand VII.

This essay seeks to open a passage between a world of empires and a world of nations that does not presume the inevitable demise of the former or the triumph of the latter. Doing so frees our understandings of the politics of sovereignty from being reduced to either logic. This, after all, is what gave the age its revolutionary tonic—that there were so many plausible futures of sovereignty. These futures would be determined increasingly in the provinces that once belonged to an inter-imperial system and now had to be re-tethered to a post-1815 commercial and financial order.

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