

Re-Imagining Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean

Third reading group meeting, 10 January 2017, Main Seminar Room, The Latin American Centre, 1 Church Walk

The Impact of the Napoleonic Empire in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1803-1815

Attendees: Francesco Buscemi, Malcolm Deas, Rolando de la Guardia, Michael Drolet, John Elliott, Peter Hill, Graciela Iglesias-Rogers, Joanna Innes, Raymond Lavertue, Halbert Jones, Maurizio Isabella, Tony McFarlane, Mark Philp, Eduardo Posada Carbó, Laurence Whitehead

After a few introductory remarks about the project Eduardo introduced the session by identifying four central topics for discussion:

1. the role of external event as a trigger of change in the region – principally Napoleon's invasion of Portugal and Spain;
2. The distinctive case of Haiti/San Domingue, and the set of wider questions about the role of slavery in the region and its place as a factor in the decisions made about whether to push for independence.
3. The issue of sovereignty and its locus, with the contrast between its effective elimination or a period in Spain, and its transfer to Brazil by Portugal, ensuring that there was no vacuum of power and no fragmentation of sovereignty; whereas Spanish territories faced both that were filled in many cases by claims to self-styled, self-government.
4. The period 1808-10 and its importance in the region as elections were held both to the central Cortes and to local bodies. Did this produce a different form of politics after 1808 – and what might have been the impact in this period of a more modern language of popular sovereignty?

Moreover, as for the period itself, there is a question about how far we should see Independence as inevitable for the Spanish territories after 1814.

Joanna Innes: addressed the question of a vacuum of authority – it is an evocative phrase but raises the question of whether it isn't doing too much work. Is the situation really a problem of legitimacy – or is it a practical set of problems that prompt the developing responses of the territories?

Alan Knight: thought it was necessary to look at both, and also concerned the issue of who is being governed by whom.

Malcolm Deas: raised the comparative case of Vichy France. People were initially in favour of Ferdinand and loyalty; and it's false to say that the region was a scene of seething discontent. Moreover, authority was not central but was widely dispersed and with lots of centres, that meant that there was already a lot of self-government.

Peter Hill: raised the question of competing loyalism in a situation in which central authority was temporarily occluded.

Tony McFarlane: For those in Spain the King is still the King – people clung to the medieval view that the King could not resign, and that he needed the consent of the people to step down. In contrast, in Spanish America, a vacuum does appear – people begin to think, by 1810, that Cadiz cannot survive. Nonetheless, they still use the mask of Ferdinand to express their case and justify their actions.

Graciela Iglesias-Rogers thought this was also true for Spain

AK argued that there were many more tensions in Spanish America, and legitimacy became more important because of that; hence 1808 acts as a trigger, but it is not the basic case of the response. We can parallel the case with the War of Spanish Succession 100 years before, which had no such repercussions for Spanish America. There is in fact, in the years prior to 1808, abundant evidence of conflict and brewing problems which the crisis provides opportunities to voice. The discussion then focused on how far we should think of it as slow change, vs deep and developing tensions imperfectly constrained, and let loose.

Maurizio Isabella: asked whether the case AK was making was that revisionism had gone too far – that the old story of natural process towards independence, with its teleology, had been replaced by a story making independence more serendipitous might have gone too far.

AK thought the old nationalist teleology had been thrown off (and rightly) but writers like Jaime Rodriguez, now focussed on Napoleon – and argued that he dramatically disrupts an otherwise contented order.

TMcF: argued that the subaltern masses don't necessarily act in support of the reformer and independence: white factions in Cartagena vied for lower class support. In Peru, subaltern identification with the crown remained intact for a long period. It is often a case of people wanting to hold on to payments or tribute connected with the common ownership of land, that makes them resistant to a loss of relationship with the crown.

AK agreed that lots of people were divided. To begin with, certainly, they all pay lip-service to Ferdinand, but social and economic tensions over Spanish merchants and officials is potent, and provided many with reasons no to take the Spanish side. In the end, the patriots win.

JJ asked whether the movement to independence could in fact have been rolled back – and suggested that it is very difficult to say that it couldn't have been – people were very much still monarchist.

AK pointed to hindsight – that it happened and was republican – suggesting that while we shouldn't make it a telos, it has to weigh with us in thinking through the possibilities and intensities of commitments and beliefs.

John Elliott said that he was not happy with the idea of a road to independence – that in many respects it might be better to think of a road to empire – that what one sees are attempts at reconstitution of empire – like the Empire of liberty with Jefferson. And, in many respects, there are attempts to reconstruct composite monarchies even while ideas of popular sovereignty are emerging.

MD: worth recognising that Napoleon does not go down well anywhere – partly because of Spain; but also imprisonment of Pope. He (Napoleon) becomes unmentionable – in contrast Washington is seen very positively. France was much handicapped by this. Nonetheless true that after Napoleon you get a Bonapartist tradition that is attractive to the old military elite, and offers leadership models for a series of Bonapartist leaders, and that draws on the populist side of Bonapartism.

Laurence Whitehead: wanted to respond to an opening comment by MP about how the project was initially more focused on ideas, but has come to see the importance of institutions and practices – but here ideas seem to creep back in in relation to the vacuum of power. Events were a great shock to the system – and Haiti also; and American independence; and the anti-slavery movement –

marginal ideas became more central; people looked for guidance in a period of turbulence, so we need to look at the repertoire of ideas from before 1808 that they then drew on.

GIR pointed however also to the importance of the practices of elections in this period that developed its own dynamics.

Rolando de la Guardia: We should also ask about the importance of channels of communication and networks in the region so as to think about the way in which ideas might have spread – or not.

TMcF pointed out that there has been a focus on 1808/9, but elections were largely conducted in a very traditional manner, with networks amongst intellectual jostling to get their candidate elected.

GIR pointed out that you did also get people from the lower orders elected, and in one case an Indian; and that there are several elections – both to the central Cortes in Cadiz, but also to local juntas and cabildos.

TMcF thought that elections to the Cortes were often less important – few of those elected actually go. Jamie Rodriguez attaches importance to them because he works on Mexico, where they had a more significant place; but there is a lot of variation – and their impact varies, because mobilisation doesn't take the same form in every place. Moreover, news of the Cortes takes a long time to spread, and responses vary – the Viceroy of Peru drags his feet.

EPC So that when the Cortes does meet in Cadiz, the system is already unravelling and independence has become a more prominent issue, so Cadiz is marginal?

GIR – except that the mobilisation in the elections creates more civic participation, discussion etc – even if the outcome of the process is not substantive, the process was.

PH: re Vacuum and legitimacy. Is there a difference in the type of ferment in this period; are new groups being drawn in? And is it the crisis of authority that is the major factor, is that what leads to independence? We have all these new segments of people getting involved, but are they talking about independence, or does that just evolve as other things become exhausted?

AK: for several years there are various ways in which you can press your interests; but what happens when things tip towards independence? The reformed government is hopeless at negotiating; huge areas are no longer under Spanish control. Ferdinand VII's attempt to re-impose autocracy was deeply counter-productive, and closed off more middling routes which meant that people were left choosing between independence and an autocratic Spanish monarch.

JE: and yet there is a counter-case in Cuba – Why? Is it about slavery – with the Cuban elite fearing that they had no choice but between rule by Spain or by former slaves. Brazil also managed a negotiated transition towards independence under the monarchy as a way of preserving social order and slavery.

AK: indeed, elites in Cuba had a lot to lose.

Jl: but it is still a good question as to why they don't break free.

TMcF: one factor is that here's a very substantial body of Spaniards in Cuba.

MD: at the same time, we might say that there is very little interest more widely in Spain in maintaining the empire – as we can see by how little America features in accounts of the time. You do get an attempt to reconquer; but there's not a lot of pressure for reconquest – for Spaniards there's a sense of paths diverging.

EPC drew the discussion back to Brazil and slavery.

TMcF: are we asking whether independence was inevitable here too? Or did Ferdinand just get things wrong by looking for absolutism when what was required was a composite order? But there were also die-hard patriots.

AK: thought this might show that there's really a longer groundswell against Spain.

TMcF: but Peru could have remained in the empire, there are lots of local stories – Venezuela, Chile, Rio del Plata, New Granada etc. they are very different from each other.

Roland de la Guardia: raised the issue of the roles of notaries and judges in local areas – and how they exercised and understood their authority and how they implemented policies.

LW: raised the issue of what reconquered people would have to do – which could not be uniform across the nation. An unpublished book by Bentham thinking about the realities for Spain in the 1820s effectively argued: get rid of your colonies. There's also a question of the collapse of Spanish sea power compared to the British.

JE: of course, one option would have been representation in the Cortes.

EPC: although there's a problem with equal representation for the America – the difficulties of which prompted discussions of the way this might be handled.

AK: Brazil is a real counterfactual for Spanish America – effectively, shipping the king out there worked. Interestingly though that when Brazil becomes independent the monarch is called the emperor – nobody sets himself up as a king – they are not fashionable – emperors are more so – and Empire is an attempt in part to adjust to a more popular political world. And Napoleon is a model here – an emperor in charge of the French Republic!

MD All these military figures exemplify the principle of careers open to talents – and as such have a democratic element to them – and they are linked to soldiers demanding rights and resisting their subordinate status.

JJ: we also need to test these kinds of accounts against other cases – for example, we might look at why Britain doesn't lose Ireland. On the notaries issue – Laura Edwards has done interesting work on the American south about the contextual language of rights operationalized in local settings.

TMcF: there is a good deal of variation across the region – for example, blacks in Cartagena are mobilised in local politics, and they don't like Cadiz because it excludes blacks and *pardos* – whereas the new autonomous system is giving them rights – and then generating demands for relief from tribute

Mark Philp: worth pressing the question of the extent to which judges are part of the older order – how far is recourse to the legal system taken as the natural way to go, as against popular reaction or insurgence.

JE.: old legal authorities are dominated by Peninsulars and play a major role, in drafting constitutions etc – so they provide considerable continuity. Are referendums used?

EPC – not much in this period

JJ: not even to establish territory and country/boundary disputes?

AK: Guatemala dos vote to leave:

EPC and Venezuela in 1830s

LW: but in practice votes are often just about who you can get o the town meeting

TMcF: much the same as pronunciamentos which depend on acclamation.

MD – a related point is that there's a degree of decapitation in that people cannot agree even on which the capital city s/should be, so cities are engaged in a process of claiming rights too – generating often intense federal conflict, and with contested judicial authority. Rio becomes the centre of the empire, and Portugal became a colony. But, internally within Brazil, regions did not want to be subordinated to Rio – either from localism or from identification with Lisbon. In respect of slavery, the main issue was land tenure and conflicts between large and small landowners as o the slave economy.

EPC: on provincial rivalries – it is the case that the presence of Dom João in Rio helps create the unity – the mere presence of the sovereign maintaining unity. Also, there are parallels between Brazil and Cuba the place of slavery.

JJ See the Ferrer book on Haiti and Cuba.

AK: wanted to underline that the tension between centralists and federalists was extremely important. Also, in respect of law, there is a strong tradition of legalism and using the courts to resolve disputes. Guiardino shows a shift from claims in terms of 'rights under the crown' to 'rights under popular sovereignty'. People quickly pick up on different sets of legal claims – but there is a lot of old practices with old objectives utilising the new ideas., which makes it difficult to judge whether there really is a new language of liberty.

TMcF on slavery – there's no inevitability about slavery remaining, and of its having to be tied to their continuing dependence. Quarrels within Brazil for example suggest that they fear the British will destroy slavery and that that will encourage secessionism.

Meeting adjourned for lunch!