

## Re-Imagining Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean

**Second Reading group meeting, 11 October 2016, Main Seminar Room, The Latin American Centre, 1 Church Walk**

### **Transatlantic Connections: Enlightenment, the US Independence, the French Revolution**

Present: **José Brownrigg-Gleeson, Francesco Buscemi, Michaela Coletta, John Elliott, Rolando de la Guardia, David Doyle, Ludovic Frobert, Klaus Gallo, Peter Hill, Graciela Iglesias-Rogers, Joanna Innes, Halbert Jones, Viviana Mellone, Nicola Miller, Hussein Omar, Tony McFarlane, Mark Philp, Eduardo Posada Carbó, James Stafford, Guy Thomson.**

Eduardo Posada-Carbo introduced the session and Mark Philp talked a little about the project's past.

**Klaus Gallo** introduced the discussion, analyzing the influence of the enlightenment in the independence movements of the Caribbean and South America, albeit focusing principally on the states of the latter Spanish empire. One elementary point worth mentioning is that there is a good deal of 'new' historiography on this region and period, mainly produced in Latin America and Spain, that has not been translated [into English] during the last 20 years.

He drew attention to the difficulties in the concept of 'influence' – can influence only be regarded if it is put into practice? He thought this was a somewhat rigid concept.

Re: the Enlightenment. It is true that the French enlightenment tradition seems to have had a much greater impact in the early stages of the revolutionary period. The USA was not considered as strong an influence as the French revolutionary tradition. Most of the members of the elite circles in the region read and spoke French rather than English – hence in part their inclination toward France.

Worth adding to the reading list is Anthony Pagden's *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination* and its last chapter on Simon Bolivar and his early connection to French enlightenment thinking, especially authors such as Rousseau and Montesquieu. The Chiaramonte piece is also important for issues concerning recession of sovereignty – in 1810 certain theoretical arguments in favour of the reversion of sovereignty were put forward in Argentina, which were essentially founded on natural law principles. It is also true that French enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu were frequently quoted. Pagden points out that Bolivar in fact reverted from Rousseau to Montesquieu over time, taking a more determinist view. Also, when one reads newspapers of the early independence period, the various references of these authors were, however, used somewhat loosely for a wide variety of purposes – eg. Voltaire is often cited because he is regarded as anti-Church, and therefore in line with a liberal spirit. The resonance of his name represents a cultural reference to be followed, rather than a particular political stance.

Above all it was France and Britain that were viewed as essential referents in calling for a cultural separation from Spain and its traditions. In the early stages of the revolutionary process one finds certain elements of French Revolutionary culture – such as the literal transcriptions of Jacobin discourses for example- a rhetoric considered appropriate to justify and fortify the cause of independence. This is also visible in the formation of the first independent governments, which applied terminology such as Triumvirate and Directory.

In Argentina there was a turning point in 1816 when independence was declared. Following the fall of Napoleon, and the Congress of Vienna's restoration of monarchies, most Latin American states tried to adjust to this new reality – In line with their review of the French Revolution as having essentially failed in many respects- they now felt the need to install more traditional political systems in order to gain recognition from Europe. This partly explains why certain South American states attempted to find European princes with the express purpose of installing monarchies, so as to gain credibility within the new European order.

Britain was an obsession for most of the newly established South American governments as from 1810 – indeed it was the nation that most of these states wanted to establish diplomatic and commercial relations. Towards 1815-1816 it was also a model for emulation (but not direct copying – as if one could!) – so as 'to put an end to the revolution and commence order' as was expressed at that time by certain political referents in the region. As a result of these new desires, revolutionary rhetoric begins to fade and most political circles orientate more towards Britain.

The 5-6 years between 1810 and 1816 were also a key period for a wider penetration and circulation of books, but principally newspapers and pamphlets. Papers published extracts from classical texts, in Spanish, and the circulation of printed material gradually spread beyond elite circles, although how far is unclear. Book culture was slower to develop. After 1816 we see the arrival of even more publications. Also worth noticing at this point, is that ideological trends tended to shift away from natural law principles towards utilitarianism and the ideals of the ideologues, especially through authors such as Bentham and de Tracy. The influence of these more pragmatic and utilitarian principles became visible in the teaching of law and philosophy, and also in the application of certain social and political reforms. Such was the case of the extensive suffrage law declared by the Government of Buenos Aires in 1821. Regarding these reformation trends, it is worth noting that while Racine's work on English influence in the region is interesting, the category of "British aristocratic reform" she puts forward sounds rather vague and unhelpful. Indeed, the British statesman most often cited in Buenos Aires is Pitt, rather than reforming Whigs such as Fox or Sheridan. The link with Bentham is the closest one can make between political reformers in Latin America and the British radical tradition – therefore, the connection with Thomas Paine and 1790s radicalism is rather limited.

Certain spheres of popular culture also became important during these years – especially theatre and public festivals – which enables the more illiterate sectors of the population (the levels of illiteracy were still pretty wide) to have more access to the emerging cultural sphere. Chiaramonte works have been a major influence on people's idea of nationalism during this period– though KG is not sure he agrees with the emphasis he assigns to the influence of the natural law tradition. His theories regarding this issue are more relevant for the 1830s and 40s rather than the 1810s and 20s.

**Nicola Miller** – agreed that influence is very problematic – but reference is powerful – but working on Rousseau and Latin America it became clear that people were drawing on lots of different sources, and we need to get away from convenient packages such as ideologies, so as to recognise the richness and diversity of reference. With Rousseau for example, you need to think about who is lining him up with whom.

**David Doyle:** wondered whether we shouldn't just see the ideas as serving instrumental purposes, having little independent explanatory weight, and being used largely for post hoc justification.

**Peter Hill** – would be interested to hear of similarities with the European/Mediterranean case in terms of a shift from a focus on the French to a more elite conception of change – perhaps Rigas to Korais.

**Joanna Innes:** I agree that the case for of aristocratic reformers is much too vague. Had three points: 1. France has a huge literary culture – America hardly any – which might be why there's more on France. But the parallel concerns independence – there's nothing similar in France's revolution, unless French ideas are more bound up with claims about independence; 2. We read that people are looking back to France, but by the 1820s, a lot of the French are looking to America and Britain (especially), and there's not much in the literature on the orientation to post war Europe, rather than a turning to 18<sup>th</sup> C principles; 3. When they are rethinking in more pragmatic and utilitarian terms – do they rethink sovereignty as a principle, or does it begin to drop out?

**Tony McFarlane:** On influence – struck in reading Israel by its return to an older view of seeing ideas as the driving heart of liberal national project. There's something right about it, in that creoles in various cities are meeting and engaging in scientific and intellectual debate and activities, and sometimes seem to have political aspirations for reform or revolution. But Israel wholly ignores issues of sociability and the intricacies of networks which become important after 1808,

**KG** – in response: I agree on sociability – hence in part the interest after independence to promote new guidelines for the theatre and civic festivities, and also within the sphere of rituals, images and even architecture – An example of these regenerative tendencies can be seen, for example, in the attempt to replace bull-fighting, seen as barbarous, with alternative enlightened entertainments in some South American cities.

Furet's account of continuing relevance of ideas in France is a valuable guide. Agree that the post war culture is different – Pagden for example refers to the influence of Constant and the doctrinaires. Towards the late 1820's, Constant sustained that Bolivar was re-inventing ancient liberty with his controversial government in Gran Colombia; whereas de Tracy was more optimistic than most other European observers regarding the future of the new Latin America states, seeing them as an opportunity to construct things de novo. Also the return of the Bourbons in France partly explains why more statesmen in Latin America turned to alternatives that tended to treat political designs as a matter of utility and rationality – for instance, in Argentina Bernardino Rivadavia used Bentham's principles for the elaboration of a new legislative code, which he sent to Bentham himself who in turn forwarded it, without even bothering to read it, as a design to be implemented by the revolutionaries in Greece.

It is important to recognise that in 1810, people saw the novel political situation more in terms of sovereignty than independence. It was to serve as a mask for the future rule of King Ferdinand which only gradually became a cover for separation from Spain. Hence they needed to be careful about references to the United States. On the question of material interests: clearly these are important and ideas could only be used loosely. But in the development of the formation of militia units to combat the Spanish Army, for example, the militia commanders needed to persuade people of the legitimacy of their actions in order to convince them to join in.

**Graciela Iglesias-Rogers:** The influence looks too unidirectional. Theoretically there were no colonies in the Hispanic world, there were parts of kingdoms, and retroversion in the face of the collapse of power in Spain legitimated the formation of a new political head – and the juntas were instruments which took up the mantle of sovereignty and debated where it should be placed, albeit also often calling for

elections and the practices of representation to legitimize their standing. Throughout the Hispanic territories (with the exception of Argentina) elections were widespread.

**John Elliott:** Independence gets over-emphasised by historians – here's almost no case of secession in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> C (nearest are Dutch revolt and Portugal). That's partly because here are very strong emotional ties between the aristocratic elite and the sovereign, and very powerful fears of social upheaval. Creoles wanted more participation and stronger ties with Spain, and more home rule, but not independence. And that view took a good deal to break – and required some ideas about what a successful preservation of order would require and how it could be brought about. People also haven't mentioned the pursuit of happiness – and yet it was a central tenet of eighteenth century thinking – and monarchical thinking – with governors and kings appealing to it as an ideal that they are leading their people to.

**Mark Philp:** Struck by how Klaus used reversion of sovereignty as an utterly unproblematic idea – but it must rest on a deep consensus about the polity and its powers and underlying consent; I'm also interested in the multiplicity of emerging public spheres – which are surely a major transmission belt, but equally often mean that different groups will become attached to different ideas and interpretations et.; and was theatre in part about the development of an indigenous theatrical repertoire?

**Francesco Buscemi:** In the French Revolution the Social Contract is seen as important – but language seems more important than particular ideas – and Emile and the Confessions are just as influential – so citing Rousseau might have a very much wider and more diffuse reference.

**KG:** On recession of sovereignty there was a debate, three days before the new junta was established on 25 May 1810, which took place in the cabildo/municipality of Buenos Aires – with 2 creole lawyers pitting the case for reversion, basing their arguments on the theories of Spanish Philosophers such as Suarez; and two (including one priest) claiming there was no case for reversion. So the discussion regarding autonomy was to a certain extent already present, but had to be invoked in specific debates which show that there existed a certain development concerning circulation of ideas among the creole elites during the previous decades. In this sense, there is evidence that in some creole circles discussion revolved around the theories of Adam Smith and arguments in favour of freeing commerce from Spanish restrictions. Regarding the theatre – the revolutionaries were putting on plays by Shakespeare, Voltaire, and operas' such as the Barber of Seville – seeing these representations as part of a necessary process of improvement and regeneration. But these new modes of representation were also vigorously resisted in some quarters, especially by those close to the church – and therefore certain plays were attacked for splitting away from Spanish traditions.

Local representation was an attempt to deal with local differences. And the Rousseauian references were not necessarily to The Social Contract, but rather to Emile, The Confessions, and Letter from the Mountain etc.

**Michaela Coletta:** - there is also a sense that this is an opportunity to restart European culture – with the jungle as a natural space and a space for new human settlement and for the setting up of cultivation of land and the people in new forms. Worth thinking about late nineteenth century nation building which adopts older ideas and figures which doesn't mean they were influential in the process. One example is that it takes a very long time before people accept the construct of Latin America. The debate over the term was a long one. The press was central – although there were few books,

newspapers and pamphlets and periodicals were where translations were published – most of them coming from the Spanish press, with them being translated in Spain from the French and English. Most people were not able to read English so tended to read them in French or Spanish translation. Earlier generations might in fact have been more Anglophone – there are Venezuelan documents about independence that are in English

**James Stafford:** on retroversion of sovereignty – this seems to relate to an idea of corporate sovereignty which is constituted in the provincial assemblies so that when the ‘head’ fails it devolves down to intermediate institutions, but NOT down to the people – eg Brabant – it is not a conception of direct, unmediated sovereignty, which takes longer to develop.

**GIR-** exactly, it goes to the institutions and the junta, and these need to include the clergy and the military, and good honest people, so it could have very inclusive implications. And people see themselves as ruling on behalf of the crown – and that can give rise to what has been referred to as ‘permanent provisionalism’!

**JJ** – asked about the use of juntas earlier – does not seem to have been used

**Tony McFarlane** said that it’s a very conservative view of reversion – not going to the people – and that ideas about what is appropriate come and go very fast. After 1814 things change dramatically – it tends to wipe out earlier revolutionary principles.

**Jose Brownrigg-Gleeson** – said he was surprised by how much weight was given in the literature to exiles and personal connections – and yet very little reference was made to the events of the day in Britain – union with Ireland, Catholic emancipation etc. And reference to British thinkers seem to be to earlier generation – rather than to those in the 1790s.

**JJ** – the existence of this sub US and Caribbean space of a number of different European powers/empires does give a very different context for the idea of ‘influence’. What happens in other countries/empires becomes an important reference point for Spanish America – forcing comparisons with countries outside the immediate zone. Geggus article is useful for emphasising African traditions and the part they play- and we might think less about abstract texts and more about notions and practices embedded in everyday life, with these providing both resources for and constraints on the way people behave.

**NM** There were various plays on the revolution in theatres, but it’s worth taking a wider sweep including popular theatre, circuses, public entertainments – and the roles these playing in the construction of a pantheon of national heroes. And re: material interests – it’s important that it’s not reductively explanatory – conceptions of interests were influenced by degrees of participation- and people had to persuade others that they were not going against the will of God in moving to a separation with Spain.

**EPC:** The points that JE raised are important – the attachment to the monarchy and fear of social upheaval. And we need to attend to how people react to Haiti and the Tupac Amaru rebellions. Historians have increasingly moved away from UK and USA as examples, Racine’s piece identifies over 100 Spanish Americans at some point living in Britain, but we need to recognise the wealth and breadth of contacts and reference and not become fixated instead on Cadiz and France. It would also be useful to think more about the place of rumours and stories from these other rebellions and how they are spread – for example Polansky’s work on sailors as conduits of stories.

**KG** – With regard to JE’s point about Brazil – this region differs a lot from the rest of the continent and is marked by a strong British presence and influence that eventually also extends to other Latin American regions- although Bolivar tried at one point to draw a line between Brazilian imperialism and the imperialist practices of Spain and other European empires – it is, however, an important reference point.

On the question of exiles, in the 1810s and 20s they are coming to learn more about British political culture, and culture in general – especially Miranda – some of them are initially attracted to Holland House, but this circle is seen as too much connected to Spain and Spanish liberalism – so they later gravitate more to Bentham’s radical circles. A crucial role, in the support for the Latin American states, is played by the London publisher Rudolph Ackerman – who is especially important after 1810 in spreading and promoting, through newspapers and different publications, the ideals prevalent in the process of Spanish American independence.

African traditions are important – slavery was abolished in some states following independence, although it proved difficult to implement in places. African societies played a part in building their own communities – and participated in the independence movements. Cultural practices are also very important, and raise questions about how far political cultures modify people’s understanding of past and future forms of government. One reason for the ongoing lurking presence of the old regime is the lack of experience and know-how amongst those who are thrust (or thrust themselves ) into power.