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## Imperios, comerciantes, y los orígenes de la política en el mundo Ibero-americano

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### Resumen

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Este ensayo combina varios campos de investigación histórica para iluminar la edad de las revoluciones en América Latina: la crisis del mundo Ibero-Americano, la transformación del comportamiento mercantil, y el surgimiento de nuevos resortes de legitimidad política. Apunta a la importancia de la trata de esclavos en el Atlántico del Sur, y cómo la crisis de imperios provocó un golpe profundo a las economías basadas en la esclavitud. Las Guerras Trans-Atlánticas resultaron en una doble crisis, fiscal de los imperios y social para una régimen de acumulación. Los resultados de la coyuntura fueron nuevos actores sociales y nuevos modelos de política. En el debate en torno a la edad de revoluciones como continuidad o discontinuidad, este ensayo insiste en la importancia del cambio. Llama la atención sobre la centralidad de la esclavitud para la naturaleza de los regímenes y sobre el papel de las fuerzas sociales y económicas en la formación de las instituciones e ideas políticas.

**Palabras clave:** imperios; antiguo régimen; comercio; redes; mundo atlántico; revoluciones

### Empires, merchants, and the origins of politics in the Iberian Atlantic

#### Abstract

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This essay connects several fields of historical research about the age of revolutions in Latin America: the crisis of the Iberian Atlantic, the transformation of merchant capital, and the rise of new sources of political legitimacy. It points to the importance of the slave trade in the South Atlantic, and how the crisis of empires had a fundamental effect on slave economies. Warfare produced, therefore, a fiscal crisis of the empires and a social crisis of a regime of accumulation. The outcomes of the conjuncture were new social actors and new models of politics. In the debate about whether the age of revolutions was one of continuity or discontinuity in Latin America, this essay makes the case for discontinuity. It draws attention to

the centrality of slavery to the nature of the regimes. It also calls for attention to social and economic forces in the making of new political institutions and ideas.

**Keywords:** empires; *ancien régime*; commerce; networks; atlantic world; revolutions

## **Empires, merchants, and the origins of politics in the Iberian Atlantic**

This essay makes two inter-related claims about the Iberian empires at their height, with implications for how to understand the crisis of 1807-08. The first is that the Atlantic slave trade was inextricably bound up with European imperial trajectories. The second follows from this: the compound crises of empire were both resolved by – and then intensified by – the struggle over the traffic in African captives. Nowhere was this mutually constitutive dynamic between the slave trade and empire clearer than in the Spanish and Portuguese emporia.

The place of the slave trade –and challenges to it– have been remarkably absent from some of the classic narratives of the age of revolutions. This has changed in recent years, but is worth reminding ourselves that among English readers, classics like R.R. Palmer’s masterwork on “The Age of Democratic Revolutions” and Bernard Bailyn’s foundational work on Atlantic history leave Africans, the slave trade, and abolitionism out of the basic framing of Atlantic history.

It doesn’t get much better when we start to think about the more recent work on revolutions. Several years ago, the American historical establishment let the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade pass without mention. The American Historical Association did nothing at its annual conference to note 1807 ban on the slave trade. There was one major event in Ghana sponsored by the Omohundru Institute, but otherwise, nada. Then, when the bicentenary debates of Latin American independence ramped up in 2010, there was remarkable silence about the place of the slave trade in the decomposition of empires. Even the ink-spilling over the assembly at Cádiz and question of the imperial constitution forgot that race was a divisive seam. The monographs about the role of slaves in rebel and loyalist armies remained just that,

monographs which did not fundamentally alter the debate or understandings of the meanings of revolution.

This essay outlines how the divergent courses of revolutions in the Iberian Atlantic were shaped by the role of slavery and the slave trade. But to understand how the role that the slave trade –and the assault upon it– shaped trans-Atlantic regimes, one has to appreciate that the Iberian empires were part of an interlocking system of global competition. This is important because the compound pressures of a competitive global system forced regimes to adapt in ways that led to more, not less, dependence on unfree labor. This was both effective commercially and fiscally. But it had important unintended effects for the internal makeup of each empire, which events in Saint Domingue anticipated for the rest of the Americas.

Let us start with the nature of eighteenth-century competition. Rivalry among European powers was a feature of state-formation, as the late Charles Tilly reminded readers with his famous observation that, in Europe's contours, wars made states and states made wars. But what has perhaps been less observed is that increasingly war-making went global; we can reframe Tilly's formulation in more expanded ways, rendering European dynamics in a context that expands the boundaries of state-formation beyond Europe and which shaped its power balances within.

Doing so helps us understand the nature of the conflagration from the 1750s to the 1820s, for nowhere did European empires displace their rivalries more than across the Americas, fueled by the soaring "value" of possessions on account of the lucrative bond of unfree labor to resources just as freedom developed new valences in Europe. It is often forgotten that a spark for the War of the Spanish Succession was a contest over the control of the slave trade from Africa to Spanish colonies in the Americas. And thereafter, despite the Treaty of Utrecht's provisions, the struggle for mercantilist controls and territorial claims over the disputed borderlands of the mainland and islands of the Caribbean ramped up (Tilly, 1985; Stein, S. & Stein, B., 2000: 120-121).

For the Iberian empires, this presented a particular challenge. Unlike the relative latecomers from London or Paris, their claims to possession in the New World dated back to a precise, if entirely unworkable, settlement proclaimed by the Pope with the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), which claimed to have delineated Spanish and Portuguese territories and gave papal blessing to their missions to colonize them and convert their native populations. In the ensuing centuries, rivals preferred to raid and pillage; English

pirates, as Francis Drake famously noted, would give the Spanish no peace beyond the line, and the French also muscled in when they could.

But by the late seventeenth century, this kind of poaching activity gave way to territorial possession. As the founding empires, Iberian powers had to defend their borders from interlopers who graduated from privateering to outright occupation, and increasingly seized outposts as bases for contraband and settlement for their own plantations. Being “defensive” has often carried some baggage; it has often implied being older, more ossified, less agile and responsive to changes.

Not a few contemporaries in Lisbon and Madrid used this kind of alarmist rhetoric to accentuate the urgency of the pleas for change, which many subsequently took literally. The Spanish physiocrat, Pablo de Olavides argued that Spain was a reflection of England’s past: “England, that powerful and populated kingdom, was before in the same situation in which Spain finds itself today. It was devoted to the same erroneous principles and was poor, depopulated and miserable” (Paquette, 2013: 86).

This Black Legend rhetoric has had a long shelf-life; it is a view that has changed only in recent years. Without discounting the limits of Iberian feudality, more and more historians have come to see Iberians adapting their political economies precisely because they had to. Being first-comers, their models of sovereignty evolved in response to the globalization of European power; that they were first-comers meant that they had to transform inherited structures that had proven so effective in a different conjuncture. The challenge was less the inability to change, but that so much had to change (Paquette, 2008: 39; Maxwell, 1995).

Behind the defensive positions of the Iberian empires were deep debates about how to reform them to meet the growing political and military threats as the eighteenth century unfolded. 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. Various described as the Bourbon (for Spain) or Pombaline (for Portugal) reforms, these were portmanteaus for a variety of ways to pursue one broad objective: to reconstitute the empires so that private rents and public revenues flowed more effectively to support and defend the territorial contours of imperial states. Alexandre de Gusmão, the Portuguese imperial minister likened empires to bodies, and the flow of resources with trade was their lifeblood. What was needed was an “active” model of empire to replace the

“passive” one, a system of commercial colonization to supplant the spoils of conquest (Adelman, 2006).

Reform recombined important aspects of empires, and gave them enough stamina to endure the intensified scramble for the control of trade and defense of imperial frontiers. Old convoys, flotillas of specie-bearing merchantmen escorted by warships, which made easy targets for predators, were suspended in favor of licensing systems for trading ships. The annual fairs, like Portobello’s, a favored magnet for marauders, faded. What emerged was a much more decentered, network-based system of commercial exchange, which was not so easily raided, but also less easily regulated.

This took place earlier in Portugal’s empire, which was, in any event, never as resolutely centralized as Spain’s. In both, governance adapted to an emerging autonomous and dispersed commercial system. It was also less easily targeted for revenue extraction for colonial and imperial government. To some extent the administrative reforms were meant to give new centralizing powers, whether this was the formation of monopoly trading companies in the north of Brazil, or the creation of powerful Intendants in Spanish America, who were supposed to reinvigorate the flow of resources to the center.

Across the colonies, viceregal habits ceded to a multitude of new legal districts and officers, further pluralizing the layers of public power. Scarcely patrolled frontiers were militarized and fortifications built, while militias were trained, comprised of plebeian colonial populations, often free blacks and mulattos. Meanwhile, to pacify unruly grey zones, “treaties” were signed with Indian borderlanders, even by those powers like Spain unaccustomed to this legal convention. Each empire set about to delimit and defend the territorial reach of their domains, and within each to promote commerce, more investment in mining, settlement of frontiers, and the surge in traffic in African slaves to create a substratum of laborers upon whose shoulders the fate of empires would rest (Weber, 2005; Fisher, 1985; Pedreira, 2000; Maxwell, 1995; Stein S. & Stein B., 2003).

There were resistances, both in the metropolises and the peripheries. In Lisbon, the Marquis de Pombal had always faced some formidable detractors, especially among the interests who were squeezed out by his preference for a new breed of merchant and investor. So, when his patron, King José I, died in 1777, the minister was soon exposed to his many critics. He was deposed. This did not scupper reform, but slowed it down.

The reforms also provoked unrest in the colonies, albeit not as much because incumbent interests adapted to the new opportunities presented by commercial incentives. Still, hikes in taxes did signify a departure from the older colonial pacts, which had left so much colonial extraction outside the purview of collectors. The foiled Tiradentes revolt in Minas Gerais (1789) was one such episode, though it is worth adding that it was more of an exception to prove a rule about the ways in which Brazil adapted itself to new policies. Spain faced analogous, though more alarming, reactions. In Madrid, bread riots brought an end to experiments in free grain trade. In the Americas there was even more unrest. In the 1780s, the Túpac Amaru revolt in the Central Andes, *Comunero* uprisings further north, as well as seditious activity across New Spain, indicated the ways in which many local peoples, sometimes aligned with disgruntled officials, resented the extractive burdens and centralizing efforts. The resistance was enough to get officials to back off some of their reformist zeal and restore elements of a colonial pact (Maxwell, 1973: 23-28, 67-71; McFarlane, 1983; Van Young, 1986).

But some of the reforms intensified, especially in domains that motivated greater commerce as a way to spur the creation of more rents that could then be available for taxation. In Brazil, this meant dismantling some of the powers of Pombal's commercial monopolies and letting local Juntas do Comércio, ruled by trading magnates, regulate and promote local trade. Old Boards of Inspection lost some of their authority. Merchant capitalists, especially in Rio de Janeiro, prospered as never before, and their rents were redeployed into the credit systems that tied the Brazilian staple-producing hinterlands to Atlantic commerce.

As with the deregulation of trade, this was a more gradual and less disruptive process in the Portuguese Atlantic than in Spain's dominions. There, the opening of trade was much more sudden with the flurry of *comercio libre* decrees and formation of merchant guilds in many of the port cities of the empire. The objective was to replace an older model that sought to direct as much as possible through the metropole to benefit merchant capital of Spain's *entrepôt*, Cádiz, with a model that promoted greater traffic between all Spanish, and Spanish-American ports as a way to enhance infra-imperial trade and its rents as a whole (Garcia Florentino, 1993; Fisher, 1985).

Bolstering the fortunes of merchant capital ushered in a dramatic change in the social landscape on the frontiers of the Iberian colonies. The boom in trade inducted labor to the "wastelands" and mines from northern New Spain to the Pampas. For this

reason the late eighteenth century has sometimes been depicted as a second Conquest, not military but commercial, a kind of “market revolution” that spread trading capillaries to the backlands, though it did not exactly rely on voluntary “market” means to brace labor to the land. Far from it; across the colonies officials and merchant capital relied on a range of coercive techniques, from debt servitude to outright bondage, to enlist indigenous peoples into the market for wares and workers.

From textile factories (*obrajes*) in Ecuador to tea plantations in Paraguay, native peoples were procured –with varying devices relying mainly on provisions of commodities and credit to create webs of dependent populations–, for the production of commodities. The combination of greater investments from the pools of merchant capital into mining, with the release of workers from Indian villages, lay behind the expansion of specie production in New Spain and the Andes, which pumped silver into the trading networks and revenue pockets of the Iberian Atlantic.

In some spots, the boom began to exhaust itself: in Potosí the mother lodes were getting tapped out by 1805 and food supplies for displaced villagers were running scarce and getting expensive. In other agrarian regions of Mexico, there is growing evidence that here too there was overheating, rising food prices, and increasing scarcities. In a word, there was a limit to this model of market revolution since it so rarely involved any fundamental transformation in techniques of production and productivity; but it was only being reached in a few, albeit sometimes important, provinces (Garner, 1988; Mantecón, 2001; Tandeter, 1981).

Where the reform-led expansion of commodity production in the Iberian empires expanded with fewer restraints was on the agrarian frontiers sustained by slave labor, and emboldened by the heightened traffic in African captives. Though we have become accustomed to thinking about the abolition of the slave trade as one of the signature components of “the age of revolutions,” it is clear that in this domain –and in so many others– a new politics of liberty coincided with, and in some senses was a response to, an expansion of bonded labor. Throughout the “age of revolution,” the traffic in African captives rose, and did not fall.

Indeed, it spiked after the insurrection spread across St. Domingue and the heightened abolitionist campaigning. It was stoked by reform within the Iberian empires, which sluiced more precious metals into the commercial networks of the South Atlantic. A decisive feature was the legal opening of the slave trade between Iberian *entrepôts*. By the 1770s, Madrid’s Council of the Indies was receiving pleas from



merchants and officials from the colonies calling upon the government to free up the slave trade. Cartagena, noted one petition, was struggling “for lack of slaves.” The government responded by ending the practice of the old *asiento* system, which allocated the contract to import slaves to Spanish ports to a single firm (and the control of which had led to the commercial feud between France and England and the outbreak of war earlier in the century). By 1789, Madrid had issued a series of decrees allowing individual merchants to participate in the traffic, followed by exemptions on duties and then a series of concessions allowing foreign merchants to unload their cargoes of captives. Brazilian merchants had enjoyed a more liberal system for decades, and by the 1780s commanded fleets of *tumbeiros* to ship their captives from Angola to South America and the Caribbean (Adelman, 2006: 65-73).<sup>1</sup>

A South Atlantic system consolidated what one Brazilian historian has called the “Atlântico Fluminense,” which pivoted around the powerful merchant class of Rio de Janeiro, and the webwork of slave trading that radiated from it, tying Lima to Luanda. Consider the following numbers: from 1781 to 1790, 754.000 Africans were imported to the Americas, of which 319.000 were destined for Saint Domingue, which meant that 434.000 were spread across the rest of the hemisphere. The following decade saw a dip to 687.000 captives shipped, but only 66.000 bound for Saint Domingue (leaving 621.000 for the rest of the Americas to exploit). And from 1801 to 1810, no slaves went to Saint Domingue, but 609.000 went to the rest of the hemisphere. After 1808, when the sealanes were cut off for legal the legal trade in slaves, shipments flowed to French and Iberian ports (Eltis, 1987: 247).

The result was an increasingly autonomous and lucrative business that expanded the pool of commercial rents into which imperial authorities could dip for revenues, and a puissant class of merchant capitalists in the colonies to whom monarchs and ministers could turn for loans and loyalties. An internal report to the Spanish government concluded that, by the turn of the eighteenth century, “the opulence of America, whose influence in the Commerce and Navigation among the European nations [is great]...could not exist without the slave trade.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Estado, Américas, 86A, 14, Dictámen leído en Consejo pleno con asistencia de su Gobernador.

<sup>2</sup> Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Indiferente General, 2826, August 8, 1802. The literature on the effects of the slave trade is now vast. See Gelman, 1998 and Castro Faria, 1998.



Motivated by a combination of colonial pressures from merchants and landowners seeking commercial rents and officials searching for revenues, reforms had decidedly ambiguous effects. Rapid change helped integrate the parts of the empires closer together even as the provinces of the empire grew more heterogeneous. Heterogeneous integration also had effects on the inner balances; some degree of administrative centralization coincided with the decentering of the empire's social structures. Outposts in each empire acquired endogenous powerful elites, bordering on regional aristocracies tied to merchant classes in the major ports.

The result, in sum, enabled empires to establish greater territorial footprints, with agents and enforcers reaching the fringes of the systems and operating within networks flowing with credit from an archipelago of mercantile centers. Within each of these, we can see how the relations within a ruling imperial coalition thereby recomposed. Still, for all the complexity of the reforms' effects, which pulled the empires together and apart, the Iberian Atlantic was hardly stuck in sclerotic ways, unable to adapt to changes in the world market or advent of new business practices; this was not a case of immunity to modernization which required it to be imposed from without.

The 1790s altered the delicate balance without overturning it. The outbreak of the Revolutionary Wars, especially Spain's with France from 1793 to 1795, and then more crippling with England from 1796 to 1802, and then again from 1804 to 1808 after the failure of the "Peace" of Amiens, intensified the pressures on the Iberian empires, especially Spain. Warships ravaged the imperial sealanes, especially for cargos destined for European ports. Less affected were the coastal routes of the South Atlantic system, and the booming trade between Africa and South America. Indeed, trade flourished within the empires, though not necessarily (unless there was a pause in the fighting) between the metropoles and their possessions.

The result was a commercial blow to merchant capitalists of Spain and Portugal which was important, because when the fighting would finally settle down at the end of the bellicose cycle in 1814, battered peninsular merchant capitalists were determined to claw back their access to commercial rents, even if it meant alienating the increasingly autonomous merchants of the outposts. As with the distribution of imperial rents, so with imperial revenues; the metropoles faced growing fiscal crises as defense costs spiked but revenues from trade dwindled, while in the colonies, there was a similar rise in expenditures, but treasury income also rose, though not always at the same pace.

From the 1790s, the metropolises leaned ever more heavily on the colonies for remittances; the Indies became the single largest source of income for the imperial treasuries, but subject to wild shifts and vulnerabilities to attacks along the sealanes. The result was a turn to greater borrowing, which grew increasingly coercive as warfare ravaged public accounts. This was a story about a double dependency of imperial sovereignty: the centers of empires on their peripheries, and the state upon merchant capital to buoy it through years of inter-imperial warfare (Barbier, 1980; Garner, 1993).

Double dependency was on the minds of political economists, for those concerned with entwined relationship between private rents and public revenues. Manuel Belgrano, a lawyer with the merchants' guild of Buenos Aires and learned in physiocratic texts, was concerned that the state was growing overly dependent on the movement of goods to sustain it; its taxes and regulations threatened to weaken the foundation of opulence. He wanted freer trade to ensure access to markets for colonial producers who could then provide the social bases for a wealthy sovereign.

His ideas echoed from another corner of South America: José Ignacio de Pombo worried that excessive taxes and regulations might breed corruption and bad manners. In 1807, he warned that "it is very important that the government, to avoid this terrible affliction, with respect both to customs and public morals, as well as the public treasury, as well as to honorable citizens that rely upon legitimate commerce." The concern about the state's dependency on merchant capital, and merchants on colonial staples involved an acknowledgement of the new spatial relationships within empires in the age of revolutions. The Brazilian political economist, José Joaquim da Cunha Azeredo Coutinho, noted that "the metropole is...like a mother who must give the colonies, like her sons, all the good treatment and help necessary to defend and ensure their lives and welfare." For Portugal to be a great power in the world, it needed wealthy colonies. "It is therefore necessary that the interests of the metropole become linked to those of the colonies, and that these be treated without rivalry. For when all the subjects are richer, the sovereign will be even more so."<sup>3</sup>

The portrait above defies the common image of backwards and brittle systems cracking under the pressure of global competition and confrontation. These were not empires doomed to collapse. Nor were they cracking from within, as colonial subjects

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<sup>3</sup> Belgrano, Manuel (1954). "Memoria-3" in *Escritos económicos*. Buenos Aires: La Cultura Económica, pp. 99; Pombo, José Ignacio de (1965). "Informe de Don José Ignacio de Pombo del Consulado de Cartagena sobre asuntos económicos y fiscales", in Ortíz (1965: 157); Cunha Azeredo Coutinho (1992: 91-102).

and their enlightened *letrados* struggled for freedom from old ways to realize proto-nationalist aspirations. Indeed, the dominant language of political economy was not rights talk, but market talk. This did not mean that the increasing mobility of property did not provoke unease about corruption and degeneration of bonds between subjects and sovereigns. There was. But this anxiety has to be put in both a global context of instability wrought by war and the commercial integration of the Atlantic world, not the unique feature of Iberian sclerosis.

Property, colonial reformers argued, respected by subjects and sovereign alike, was the basis of public wealth and private opulence, a healthy and well-mannered system that did not need to break with the past for its virtuous combination to work. The overwhelming tenor of debate about public affairs was steeped in loyalism, nothing approaching the intellectual or social conditions of revolution within the Spanish or Portuguese empires. Indeed, global pressures emboldened efforts to accommodate (or re-articulate, to use an older vintage of social theory) inherited structures of production and trade into a new political economy of empire, and a new balance between merchant capital and the state (Pocock, 1985; Root, 1994).

We still face the inevitable question: If empires were not fated to collapse, what did account for their breakup without explaining revolutions as the consequence of happenstance or mere accident? The answer lies in the ways in which global conflagration provoked local contestation, and the slide from negotiations over how to handle a mounting imperial crisis to a civil war, and from civil war to revolution.

It is not just the causality that is in question – how global forces shaped local ones, but also the sequence that explains what is so revolutionary about this conjuncture. We are more often accustomed to thinking that revolutions in thought or practice detonated crises of the old regimes; the story that unfolds here suggests very different sequelae with a variety of outcomes depending on the course of the civil wars within empires, civil wars that would in turn reverberate through the 1820s as constitutionalists took up the challenge of building successors to Iberian empires. The changes in sovereignty, the demise of older systems and the emergence of successors, was a process that has often eluded triumphalist nationalist narratives, or those which insisted that old regimes – among them, empires – were doomed because they were outmoded.

The problems were increasingly clear in the 1790s, for the more insightful imperial analysts of the time worried about the sustainability of their regimes under

duress. Should the global situation deteriorate, some worried, extreme measures had to be considered. One, the brainchild of the influential minister to the Court in Lisbon, Rodrigo de Souza Coutinho, who had handled the Treasury's growing debts with some considerable skill, involved a recognition that Brazil was as important to the future of the imperial monarchy as the metropole. Should the latter run into a serious crisis, the monarchy might have to consider relocating the center of the empire to a new world capital, Rio de Janeiro. This was, at it turned out, a prophetic emergency plan.

Most observers hoped the contest between empires would wane, and the physiocratic-inspired policies be allowed to have their felicitous effects of recombining property and politics in a way to put the empires on healthy foundations. What they did not anticipate was the effects on empires as the confrontation in Europe intensified after 1805. When the crisis finally did break out, it inspired the Spanish reformer, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, to remark that the break up of the Spanish empire was a civil war contained within and unleashed by a broader, global one (Maxwell, 1973).<sup>4</sup>

Governments in Lisbon and Madrid faced unenviable choices as Britain and France poised to square off once more, involving the empires not only of the Atlantic, but reaching east to the territorial empires of St Petersburg and Istanbul. Within each of the Iberian capitals there was a major debate about what to do, once it became clear that Napoleon had designs on the peninsula and the possessions beyond. Some wanted alignment with London, others with Paris, and another faction that urged neutrality.

The last faded away after 1804; by 1807 the alignments leaned one way when Napoleon's Iberian designs were fully unveiled. For the Portuguese it was a more straightforward matter, given the longstanding alignment with England; besides it was in no position to defend its sealanes if the Royal Navy were to take aim at them. Still, an important circle of pro-French ministers argued that French armies would invade Portugal. This was a minority faction, but strong enough to keep the Braganza Court dithering up to the last minute.

The paralysis in Madrid was worse, compounded by in-fighting at the very top, which culminated in Ferdinand VII's seizure of the throne from his father and the fall of his disrepute ministry. Indeed, the cracking at the top of Spain's government created the opportunity the French ruler sought. He saw a chance to take both countries and lay claim to their possessions overseas, thereby striking a mortal blow to Anglo-Atlantic

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<sup>4</sup> Silva Lisboa, José da (1804). *Principios de Economia Política*. Lisboa: n.p., pp. 112-116; Jovellanos cited in Alvarez Junco (2001: 120-121).

power. Sending his armies across the Pyrenees in late 1807, he set off a crisis of sovereignty at the very core of the Iberian systems. The policy decisions varied, with decisive structural consequences. The Braganza court dusted off an old emergency plan drawn up by Souza Coutinho: it fled in a massive fleet escorted by the Royal Navy, to relocate in Rio de Janeiro.

“Americanizing” the monarchy spared it the question of what bound the colonies to *ancien régime* sovereignty. In Spain, despite some entreaties to do the same, Ferdinand was captured by the French, and a makeshift government fled southwards to Andalusia, seeking refuge from French troops, to be closer to the port of Cádiz lest an escape be unavoidable. This government would therefore struggle to preserve its enfeebled centrality in an empire that had no effective centre (Hamnett, 1985; Alexandre, 1993).

What all parties agreed upon in the aftermath of the French invasion is that the loss of the centers did not imply the end of empire. The question, at least for the ruling classes and officials, was how to preserve it, especially in the face of the new Napoleonic regime’s reforms, which included the promise of a constitution, equality for colonial subjects, the abolition of the Inquisition, and freedom of the press, just the kind of decrees that appealed to Spain’s and the colonies’ reformers.

Indeed, many Spanish and Portuguese “liberals” found French siren calls and reforms very appealing. In a sense, 1808 was the axial year of an axial age; it was not mere coincidence that the spread of abolitionism coincided with the diffusion of constitutionalism as unstable and vulnerable regimes at war sought to prop themselves with new appeals to legitimacy. The Iberian Atlantic took part in this shift through a series of improvised practices that focused on new means to embolden the loyalty of imperial subjects to their sovereign, not least because the drag-out war on the peninsula became as costly as it was brutal. Someone had to pay, and both Spain and Portugal pleaded that the colonies and their merchants underwrite the struggle. The *quid pro quo* was a change in rulership, not rulers, by devising new practices of representation.

Since the break was more decisive in Spain, with the government in shock, the alteration in the rules of the game was more abrupt. The Inquisition was abolished, censorship lifted from the press, and when Napoleon’s agents sought to encourage Spain’s colonies to declare fealty to the new government in Madrid under his brother Joseph Bonaparte by promising colonial subjects basic equality, elections, and a constitution, the fleeing Spanish government in Andalusia responded in kind: it

promised to convoke a parliament to discuss making a new constitutional monarchy. The insistence that a new legal regime would undergird the state, and the assurance that colonies would enjoy basic representation in an imperial arrangement signified a break from ancient practices in order to preserve the regime as a whole.

For the Americanized Portuguese government, it was enough that the crown, court, and ministry were now based in Rio de Janeiro and could step up the cult of regalism in the colonies which had the additional advantage of allowing influential colonial subjects access to the corridors of power. There was less need for a *de jure* change in the rules in order to preserve *de facto* integration. But the significance of public opinion, and in Spanish America of elections, was crucial, and in some areas sprung to life with vertiginous energy. In Buenos Aires, Caracas, and Santa Fé de Bogotá, the printing presses were the engines of public debate; in Lima, Mexico, and Rio de Janeiro, under the eyes of more cautious royal authorities, the press was more polite and constrained (Guerra & Lempérière, 1998; Uribe-Uran, 2000; Schultz, 2001).

If public opinion was one pillar of legitimacy, formal mechanisms of representation provided others. 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 motive here was “liberal” in the sense that self-described metropolitan liberals thought that the monarchies would be stronger, and governments more stable, with modern law backing them up. And the only way to accomplish this was to invite elected deputies to deliberate.

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 obtained in Portugal, later. Electoral life 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 equality of all subjects of the empire. Metropolitan delegates contrived ways to diminish the strength of colonial delegations, which did little to endear Lisbon and Madrid to colonial outposts. 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. The innovations could not contain the effects of the spread of world war, which began to split the seams of Iberian empires (Hamnett, 1985; Rodríguez, 1998).<sup>5</sup>

There was a second source of friction. Improvising also created resistances. Some potentates disliked the political opening altogether, and in their efforts to damp down the enthusiasm of public opinion and deliberative political life, they thwarted officials' decrees.

This was most severe in Mexico in 1808; powerful peninsular merchants and aristocrats were shocked at the Viceroy's turn to the capital's municipal council, the *Cabildo*, for consultation on how to handle the collapse of the metropole. The result was a riptide of unrest, culminating in the Hidalgo Revolt, which spread quickly through the countryside and nearly engulfed the capital.

Something analogous happened in the Andes, where in Quito a new junta governed in the name of the people, and the Peruvian Viceroy sent his armies to crush the pretenders outright. Around the empire, the openings coincided therefore with an upsurge in reaction and closures, which provoked one Granadan publicist, Camilo Torres to issue a famous "Memorial de Agravios," which catalogued the abuses committed by officials who refused to live by the letter of new laws and their spirits and thus threatened the moral fabric of nation in defense of old privileges. He proclaimed that Americans were not "strangers within the Spanish nation," but "descendants of those who spilled their blood to acquire new dominions for the Spanish crown."

Nor was the violence restricted to the Spanish. Unrest came to a head the south and north of Brazil, for while the Americanization of the crown had brought it closer to its colonial subjects, it also had the effect of bracing the capital more closely with its distant provinces, like Rio Grande do Sul and northern Pernambuco, which disliked the new centralizing arrangements. The friction provoked armed unrest, and in the case of Pernambuco, a secessionist movement (not from "Portugal" but from Rio de Janeiro, it is worth emphasizing).

Localized violence had the effect of stigmatizing the very instruments that had been devised to revitalize the empires. For reactionaries, it was evidence of why these changes in representation were so threatening. For those who pushed to expand the scope of colonial voice within empire, violence doused their optimism. And many

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<sup>5</sup> *El Argos Americano*, 18 noviembre de 1811.



fence-sitters grew alarmed as the liberal, gentlemanly improvisations began to fail. The infra-imperial bargaining and friction intensified as governments leaned on merchants for revenues and loan to fund their wars.

The double dependency –of metropolises on possessions, and states on merchants– came under increasing strain as the fiscal pressures mounted. One emollient was to give to local merchants more rights to trade with neutral ports. But this in turn led to more quarreling among merchants classes themselves, especially between monopolists (often, but not always, Spaniards) and staple exporters (often, but not always, creoles).

In short: What this meant was great friction at the top of the ruling class of the empires, unraveling the ties of dependency between merchants and monarchs (Costeloe, 1981; Adelman, 2006).

There is one important feature of this crisis that deserves underscoring. While the institutional fabric of the empires decomposed, they did not fall apart when their centers were at their weakest. If the crisis were to have kindled growing secessionist disgruntlement, why not break away when Lisbon and Madrid were at their most anemic (and occupied)? Portuguese and Spanish armies and guerrillas, supported by a British expeditionary force, did gradually drive the French out of the peninsula in a grueling war; colonial armies put down rebels and insurgents who rose up against peninsular reactionaries. Only the fissiparous River Plate provinces had successfully defected by 1814, though still without having declared independence. In that year, Ferdinand returned to power in Madrid to assert control over his fragile empire. Loyalism appeared triumphant; the colonial pact appeared to have survived – battered, but basically in place. The crisis did not force the destruction of the empires.

Paradoxically, however, the restoration did. It was then, when the restored regime tried to restore the *status quo ante*, that frail systems began to go up in flames; the counter-revolution, led by Ferdinand and a monarchy whose power was much less than its wielder believed, begat the revolution.

What needs to be clear at this point is that revolutions did not find their origins among brewing anti-colonial sentiments waiting to seize the opportunity to break free in the name of the nation when the empires were weakest. In the passage between escalating international war between empires and its internalization within them, it was not so much separation from empire that was at stake, but how to reconstitute it on new foundations, even by giving it a new center, or making it more polycentric.

The debate ignited by this process led to internal discord and bloodletting over how to reassemble the stricken parts of empire into new wholes in a conjuncture of rapidly changing political ground rules. Alternatives came to the fore: declarations of village or provincial autonomy, millenarian kingdoms, home rule within empire, and defense of autocracy. They all jostled in a delicate disequilibrium. Under the carapace of decomposing empires what emerged was not the idea of a singular nation born of oppression, but a plethora of ideas about sovereignty that followed the fracturing of the political spaces once outlined by empires. For the time being, this plethora could be encompassed within empires because they lacked territorial centers.

If there was little to predict the inevitable demise of the Iberian empires, why did they crumble just as the post-revolutionary regimes under the Concert of Europe pacted to desist from the kinds of escalating frictions of the previous century? Surely, this would have been the moment to reinvent the Iberian empires, as monarchs and ministers in St Petersburg, Istanbul, London, and Vienna were doing to their respective empires. But this is not what transpired in the Iberian Atlantic. It was precisely the drive to restore that blew the fragile emporia to pieces, and why the developments of the passages that preceded the restoration created legacies that were too important to reverse.

Here we also return to the importance of slavery and the slave trade in the process; expanding slave frontiers and deepening the slave trade had been crucial for the remaking of both the Portuguese and Spanish empires from the 1790s and the creation of autonomous, but integrated economic spaces in the Iberian Atlantic. But the decomposition after 1814 brought the politics of slavery and race into the war to the death over who was going to rule at home (Mayer, 1981).

The spotlight now was on how the loyalist fragments within the peninsula and scattered across the colonies, which had managed to squelch most of the plebian unrest and more radical calls for self-rule, would handle the challenge of imperial reconstruction. Instead of a single response, there were several strategies and policies. Part of what we want to explain is the divergent outcomes from a single, entangled, crisis.

At one end was Brazil, where the mercantile elite in alliance with the ennobled slavocracy had given new ballast to the Braganza dynasty. Rio de Janeiro had become a kind of tropical Versailles. Royalist pageantry and the dispensation of noble titles to rich colonists was the symbolic cover for a recalibration of sovereignty, defined above

all by the decision in 1815 to make Brazil a “Kingdom” in its own right, to accompany Portugal and Algarves. This was no longer, therefore, a “Portuguese” empire, but a Luso-Atlantic one, a formulation that Souza Coutinho had recognized was a fact before it was recognized by royal decree. The shift inspired the empire’s jurists, legislators and political economists to celebrate the sagacity of the monarch. There was no one more euphoric than Edmund Burke’s Portuguese translator, José da Silva Lisboa, soon to be ennobled as the Viscount of Cairú for his efforts to give intellectual and legal principles to the new regime. He celebrated the King’s promotion of open trade: echoing Montesquieu’s idea of *doux commerce*, he noted that “where there is commerce there is *doçura* (softness) of customs, and where there is *doçura* of customs there is commerce.” The slave trade boomed, exports prospered, and British capitalists lined up behind the modified regime.

But not everyone shared this enthusiasm. There was a major uprising in Pernambuco against Rio de Janeiro’s new powers, and the conflict in the southern borderlands also accentuated localist feelings. And then there was the cost of Portuguese reconstruction after the French occupation. Combined, reconstruction and simmering civil conflict left the government hobbled with massive debts and undermined the new pact of dependency between merchants and monarchs (Schultz, 2001).<sup>6</sup>

The same forces were at work in Spanish Atlantic. But their confluence was incendiary. Ferdinand, bolstered by metropolitan merchants eager to reclaim defunct privileges, was determined to reinstate Spain’s centrality in an empire that had, in the meantime, re-aggregated its heterogeneity. The king launched a counter-revolution to recenter the empire by tearing up the shortlived Constitution of 1812 and its electoral affiliations. He reimaged himself as a benevolent absolutist, spreading a new cult of his regalism to offer a rival legitimacy to the one feebly upheld by the Constitution. He sent instructions to his most reactionary officers to restore a fictive absolutism, dissolving the Cortes, and ordering the mass arrest of liberal reformers at home and in the colonies. Where he ran into fierce resistance and insurgents, he dispatched tens of thousands of troops now released from the peninsular campaign. The largest army to cross the Atlantic set sail for Venezuela and Nueva Granada under General Pablo Morillo to “pacify” the colonies. Fence-sitters were frightened. And plebian forces that had

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<sup>6</sup> Silva Lisboa, José da (1810). *Refutação das declamações contra o commercio inglez extrahida de escritores eminentes*. Rio de Janeiro: n.p., p. IV.

become champions of local autonomy and the abolition of slavery were outraged. Henry Wellesley, the British ambassador sent a confidential memorandum to Lord Castlereagh warning that the returning king threatened to shatter the “nation” which had finally rid itself of French occupiers: “The King will be in difficulties if he rejects the Constitution.” The words were prophetic, though not necessarily because the charter had endeared itself to citizens but because they were not prepared to slide back into vassaldom, especially if citizenship had promised to deliver them from feudal or colonial-extractive burdens (Blanchard, 2006; Lasso, 2007; Guardino, 2005).

Madrid’s model of forced reunification backfired. Militarized restoration cost money, and Ferdinand resorted to coercive measures to squeeze revenues from merchants around the empire. The old loyalist coalition, held delicately together with the promise of a measure of home rule and regal loyalism, was smashed. The effect was to embolden a new coalition to include many who had once preferred home-rule within empire and its Constitution, to opt for outright secession. Whereas Simón Bolívar had all but given up on his cause by 1815, Spanish revanchism gave him a new lease on life.

As these coalitions came together, and Ferdinand’s armies struck out against guerrillas, insurgencies spread; Indians, slaves and plebian populations mobilized into “revolutionary” forces. Secessionists embraced the abolitionist cause to enlist footsoldiers among the ranks of colonial subjects upon which the wealth of the Indies was produced. Plantation belts and mining provinces went into a major social crisis. Spanish armies became embattled occupying forces. “Liberating armies” evolved from secessionist phalanxes to swelling abolishing regiments that demolished the Indian and slave social structures that had sustained colonial extraction.

Mulattos like Manuel Piar and mestizos like José Antonio Páez emerged as the popular leaders of plebian armies, a far cry from the gentlemanly urbanites who proclaimed home rule within empire a decade earlier. José Artigas, proclaimed in 1815 that all “Free Blacks, Sambos of the Same Class, Indians, and Poor Creoles” were entitled to their own land at the expense of the *estancieros*. The specter of a cross-class and inter-racial alliance in favor of a social revolution terrified the planters of neighboring Brazil, who clamored for Portuguese armies to return to the Banda Oriental to preserve order. Bolívar himself, scion of a slavocrat family, went beyond the promise of freedom for slaves who joined his side; as he fought, he promised freedom for all slaves. To the assemblymen at Angostura in 1819 he pleaded for them to lend moral credentials to the cause by putting the abolition of slavery into the charter of

“Colombia’s” new regime. “You know,” he told his readers, “that one cannot be simultaneously free and enslaved except by violating at one and the same time that natural law, the political laws, and the civil laws....I beg the confirmation of absolute freedom for the slaves, just as I would beg for my life and the life of the republic”.<sup>7</sup>

Mobilization on this scale and kind accentuated local divisions, and in many provinces deepened the civil conflict. It also forced the Spanish armies (and to some extent Portuguese troops operating in the south of Brazil) to evolve into counter-insurgent forces, which further crippled fiscally limping states. But if there were missteps, imperial monarchs took them. Across the colonies, especially in South America where the fighting was most bitter, metropolitan centralism seemed to strip Spanish Americans of what they felt they had won in preceding years, and which was seen as an acknowledgement of their loyalty to the crown when it needed their fealty and fortunes most.

One by one, provinces began to secede and declare outright independence, thereby escalating the armed confrontation. By 1820, a pernicious cycle was on, turning the double dependency into forces that brought the empires down upon the heads of their rulers. The strategy of military reunion of empire kicked the legs out from the legitimating work of public opinion and representation, and thus shifted the work of integration to the armies which governments could scarcely support, not least because colonial rents were vanishing. The cycle of civil war and violence – the machinery of imperial decomposition– therefore brought down the remnant state institutions.

It was only slightly paradoxical that the final blow came from within the restorationist army of Spain itself, when in January 1820, officers gathered in Cádiz for an expedition to suppress secessionists in the River Plate, rose up against Ferdinand’s government (they were hungry, unpaid, and suffering from sicknesses waiting in the port). The revolt in the army brought regime to its knees fifteen years after the process began of recombining empire after the Battle of Trafalgar. The waves of declarations of independence in the Americas came at the end, and did not cause, the revolutions.

Spain’s internal discord immediately metastasized to its neighbor, where similar tensions between Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro had been brewing. Garrisons in the south of Brazil seethed with resentment for their campaigns appeared to be fruitless; many defected. Meanwhile, in the north, in Bahia particularly, discontent in the ranks broke

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<sup>7</sup> Bolívar, Simón (2001). “The Angostura Address,” (1<sup>o</sup> edition 1819) in Bushnell (2001: 52).

into the open with mutinies. This was not a comforting context for big sugar planters in a province where slave uprisings were endemic. But as in Spain, it was in the metropole that the fragility of the regime finally broke open. Portuguese liberals called for their own constitutional assembly; conservatives resisted. But the one thing they could agree upon was that the metropole should reclaim its place in the empire. In this they were also encouraged by Portuguese merchants who felt –understandably– deprived of their protected access to Brazilian markets thanks to the Open Ports decree. None of this earned much Brazilian endearment, whose aristocracy saw fewer and fewer returns for their support of formal ties to Lisbon. So, when the King was forced to return to Lisbon in 1821 to restore some order, and the constitutional assembly which had been convoked turned into an occasion for Peninsular deputies to heap scorn on Brazilian counterparts (as colonials, as racially inferior fraternizers with Africans, and as generally less enlightened), the recentralizing drive motivated a secessionist groundswell. Freedom from Portugal, noted the *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro*, would ensure “the bases of the kingdom’s future greatness and prosperity, and free it from all elements of disorder and anarchy.”<sup>8</sup>

The decomposition of Iberian empires, and the age of revolutions of which they were part, have often been seen as the unfolding of the inevitable, the outcomes of compound pressures of modernization that swept aside empire, monarchy, and aristocracy ineluctably, especially if there were markets to exploit and new identities to foster; outside forces dragged Iberian empires into the modern age and in order to modernize, destroyed them. Obviously, outside forces were important to any account of large-scale history; at the heart of the global crisis was the disequilibrium of competing empires.

But what has been proposed here is a trans-scalar approach that integrates the exogenous story of global forces with an “endogenous” complement, an approach which accentuates much neglected “push” factors that explain how collective actors changed their preferences – or didn’t. These are overlooked in global history because they are often treated as local residuals which explain why some societies or large numbers of individuals did not quite keep up with the pace of modernization. This essay has argued that these factors, especially the bargaining within elites over rents and revenues, and then the conflicts and the militarization of politics that arose when the

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<sup>8</sup> *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro*, August 6, 1822.

fundamentals of sovereignty were pushed to the thresholds of their existence, posed basic questions about the shape of public power.

But what is important to appreciate in retracing the steps is how the agents involved were seldom seeking radical alternatives, the staple *telos* for revolutionary narratives. It was the passages and the processes that changed the preferences for many people because they activated disenchantments with an older order as a condition for considering alternatives, and with this, open challenges not just to the political order, but the social order which it legitimated, one premised on structured inequality and coerced forms of labor (Hirschman, 2002: 4-5).

But for a long time, in this passage, the question of how to reassemble the fragments of former colonies was a latent one as long as the main attention of politics and the struggle were the defense or the toppling, of the *ancien régime* to create a more rule-bound, polycentric, even constitutionalized empire. Independence was the effect, not the cause, of the decomposition of the *ancien régime*, and the passage beforehand brought to life a series of intermediate positions: from loyalty to the *status quo*, autonomy with voice within empire, equality within empire. And finally exit. But even the exit option was often motivated by a fear of further dissolution.

Several declarations announced more than just secession, they also announced the creation of new empires, like Iturbide's in Mexico, or Pedro's "Grito de Ipiranga" which proclaimed that Brazil was a nation because of its imperial credentials. What is important is that efforts to fill the vacuum created by Napoleon's invasion of 1807 yielded to a range of alternatives, including among them the Americanization of the idyll of empire and monarchy, onto which liberal precepts could be grafted (Chiaromonte, 1994: 108-111; Murilho de Carvalho, 1996).

It was up to constitutionalists of the 1820s to find credos and clauses to reconcile alternatives, or at least to invent a durable legal framework for deciding how to make public choices. But after years of civil war and mass mobilization, reconstructing a ruling coalition was daunting. The social hierarchies that once sustained them were falling apart, especially once military commanders armed slave and plebeian populations. And the commercial and credit networks organized around the slave and specie trade collapsed.

By contrast, with the ballast of a planter-merchant alliance, buoyed by an expanding slave trade, and spared hyperinflation, Brazilian conservative pragmatists were better poised to adapt an evolving constitutional monarchy. These were



counterpoints and comparisons in the process and outcome of a global crisis that shook commercial empires. From the multiple origins of change came multiple outcomes, suggesting that the growing interconnectedness of the world's parts was contoured by competing options for sovereignty. It was from these public choices –and the increasing violence that surrounded them– that we can trace the traumatic origins of modern politics in the Iberian Atlantic.

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