

Notes on 18th Century Latin American Precursors to Independence

1600 – 1810

I. The 17th and 18th Centuries: General Considerations

Viewing Latin America from a Eurocentric and an Anglo-American perspective (i.e., from within a course on Latin American humanities in an American institution of higher education), it should be recalled that from 1492 to 1607 there were no English or French (or any other) colonies in the Americas. This was due both to the late start that other European countries got establishing far-flung empires and to the fact that Spain was isolated from the rest of Europe. Spain's focus internally on the Iberian Peninsula and in its American colonies was to protect its religious isolation and its cultural "purity" or superiority (Spanish point of view); that is, Spain's unique cultural identity. Even though there were no non-Iberian (= Spanish and Portuguese) American colonies, the English and French did have a constant presence in the Western Hemisphere: pirates! Pirates from France and England were a constant threat to Spanish ships—especially the annual treasure ships that sailed through the Florida Straits—and coastal cities throughout the Spanish and Portuguese viceroyalties. The most famous of these pirates was Sir Francis Drake, who was a hero in England and a criminal in Iberia and the Americas. He was so well known that parents throughout the Americas would discipline their children with the verbal threat that "Drake (*el Draque*) would get them."

In the 18th century, the Americas were a major focus of conflicts and wars between various European countries, most notably Spain and England. For example, in what is called the War of Jenkins' Ear in the United States (1739) and the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) in Europe, this war was fought in the Spanish West Indies over control of the slave trade. Seven Spanish colonies joined forces to repulse the European invasion. (As a side note, when George Washington's brother Lawrence Washington returned from his unsuccessful service in the Caribbean under British Admiral Vernon, George's brother named their estate Mt. Vernon.) During this century, England was on the offensive and Spain and its colonies were on the defensive. The English empire was rising and the Spanish empire was in a long, slow process of decline. English anti-Spanish propaganda grew exponentially. Among the events the English used most in their war propaganda were Pizarro's atrocities in Peru, the Duke of Alba slaughtering Protestants in the Netherlands, and Menéndez de Avilés massacring French Protestants in Matanzas Bay, Florida. This English propaganda is known as the Black Legend. Of note in this regard is the masterwork of Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Breve relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. Interestingly and, perhaps, understandably (from the Latin American perspective), the English colonies in North America were not well known in the Spanish-speaking world prior to 1776.

Prior to that year, for example none of the following American colonial works were even translated into Spanish: John Smith's *Description of New England* (1616), William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1620-1647), and John Winthrop's *Journal* (1630-1649; publication, 1790). The opposite holds for English-speaking knowledge of the Spanish-speaking world. Columbus, Cortés, Las Casas, Acosta, Vespucci, and Bernal Díaz. As a kind of balance for the negative view promulgated by the Black Legend, all of the great Spanish writers (Cervantes, Lope de Vega, etc.) were very well known and liked in England, both mother country and colonies. Furthermore, English intellectuals dreamed of carving utopias out of the Spanish domains in the Americas. Cotton Mather, for example, proposed the establishment of a religious utopia in Mexico where Americans would create a "spiritual renaissance". Others dreamed of New Spain as a New Jerusalem in the Puritan tradition. It should be noted that evangelical English-speaking Americans continued to send many missionaries into the Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking Americas in the 19th, 20th, and into the 21st centuries. As a result Protestantism has grown significantly throughout Latin America.

II. Conditions and Reasons for Latin American Independence Movements

The American War of Independence (1776-1783) became the model for independence movements throughout Spanish America and French America (Saint-Domingue / Haiti). The idea and reality of an independent republic swept throughout the Latin American intelligentsia. Given the centuries-long enmity between Spain and England, Spain supported the American patriots during the Revolutionary War by attacking the Floridas in order to help drive the British from North America. Even the Spanish liberals in Spain who opposed Napoleon's invasion of Spain (1808) wrote a constitution in 1812 modelled one Americans adopted in 1789. In 1783, one of Latin America's most notable precursors to independence, the Venezuelan Francisco de Miranda (1750-1816), visited the United States in order to study the American political model and ideas. Just as 18th American intellectuals had been influenced by the liberal enlightenment ideas of French thinkers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, d'Alembert, and Diderot, Latin Americans, too, had been influenced by the ideas of the rights of man and opposition to the notion of the divine right of kings. However, since the French Revolution of 1789 was much more violent than the American Revolution, and since Latin American intellectuals tended to be much more conservative and more traditional in their habits and thinking than their French counterparts, Latin Americans looked to the United States for a model rather than to France.

At the same time that the Spanish wanted the British out of the Americas, so, too, of course, the British wanted to defeat the Spanish and French empires around the

world. Therefore, the English supported Miranda and other precursors of Spanish-American independence, and, wanting the French out of North America, the English fought the Seven Years War (so-called in Europe, 1756-1763)—which was known as the French and Indian War (1754-1763) in North America—thereby defeating the French in the Canadian region of New France (la Nouvelle-France: Québec and l'Acadie). Later, France lost the rest of their North American colonies in New France by means of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The following year they lost Saint-Domingue (the Haitian half of the Island of Hispaniola) to the slave patriots led by Toussaint Louverture. It should be noted, however, that America's founding Fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson did not favor independence for Spanish America because they saw the threat to the U.S. of British hegemony in the rest of the Americas and because the young American republicans already foresaw their own expansion westward into French and Spanish territories. At first, Spanish Americans harbored hope for aid from the U.S., but soon they were bitterly disappointed when no aid was forthcoming. Nevertheless, after the success of the American War of Independence, Latin Americans continued to look to the U.S. as a model and inspiration. For example, the Great Liberator of Spanish America, Simón Bolívar () saw many good patterns in the U.S.A., but he wanted to avoid blind imitation of his Anglo neighbors to the north. The official American contact with Spanish America was made by Joel Poinsett, who was a Jeffersonian from North Carolina. He made a rather Quixotic odyssey to "save" the Spanish American continent. He visited especially Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Santiago, Chile. After his trip he advocated American annexation of Spanish America. Poinsett was the first American ambassador to Mexico after this country achieved its independence in 1821, but he was forced to leave because of his aggressive and offensive approach to Mexican officials. Poinsett spoke Spanish fluently, and he is remembered as a keen observer of Spanish America. He did not visit Portuguese America (Brazil). Poinsett's relations with his Latin American counterparts is emblematic of one significant point of friction between the two major cultural spheres in the Americas: religion.

The works of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were quickly translated into Spanish. Books and pamphlets concerning the United States were prohibited by Spain from entering Spanish America, but they filtered their way in in any event. For example, Paine's Rights of Man was translated by a Venezuelan in 1810, and the U.S. Constitution was published in Spanish translation in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1811. The liberal Spanish cabinet minister, the Conde de Aranda, published his translation about Benjamin Franklin as *Vida del Dr. Benjamín Franklin sacada de documentos auténticos* in 1798, and David Ramsay's Life of George Washington (1807) was also translated quickly into Spanish.

III. Precursors to Latin American Independence Movements

Francisco de Miranda first came to the United States with the official permission of liberal ministers in Spain. When Miranda spoke out for independence from Spain, he was considered an enemy in the mother country. Many more intellectuals in the Spanish colonies sought and were given political refuge in the United States starting in the 1790s. These political refugees went primarily to New Orleans, Charleston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Charleston had been a safe haven for Spanish Jews (Sephardim) for over a century. Near New Orleans in 1803 Jean Lafitte (1776-1854) declared independence from Spain on the swampy bayou Island of Barataria by flying the flag of Cartagena, Colombia. This was the first Latin American location to proclaim independence from Spain. Later they fought heroically with Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans against the British. Later Lafitte supported the Mexican independence movement (1810-1821). The most important of these early centers of planning for Latin American independence was Philadelphia where a liberal Spaniard, Manuel Torres, acted as the key liaison between Latin American revolutionaries and American supporters. Torres came to Philadelphia from New Granada (Colombia) in 1797. He was the most successful of the campaigners in the United States for Latin American independence from Spain.

- A. Tupac Amaru (1742-1780): For a brief description about this independence precursor, click on the following image of him:



- B. Toussaint Louverture (1743-1804) : For a brief description about this independence precursor, click on the following image of him:



- C. Francisco de Miranda (1750-1816) : For a brief description about this independence precursor, click on the following image of him:

