

Peculiarities of the Latin American Independence Revolutions: A Comparative Study with the American Revolution

Yidi Zhang^{1,a,*}, Guanjin Du^{2,b}, Jize Han^{3,c}, Yiming Zhao^{4,d}

¹*Department of Hispanic Philology, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 10085, China*

²*New Channel, Beijing, 100000, China*

³*Shenzhen Academy of International Educations, Shenzhen, 518052, China*

⁴*Georgetown Preparatory School, Rockville, 20852, United States*

a. z15168819661@gmail.com, b. duguanjin1104@gmail.com, c. 13715157979@163.com,

d. notfdr1@gmail.com

**correspondence author*

Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the Latin American independence revolutions from a social and ideological perspective to contribute to revising the conventional wisdom of Latin American revolutionary history. The method chosen is a comparison between the aforementioned revolutions and the American Revolution, helping to demonstrate how, far from being a simple deviation or a failure, the Latin American independence revolutions had their own traits. The paper tries to answer mainly three questions: how Latin America and America received the enlightenment idea, how those ideas affected their revolutionary process, and how both regions rebuilt and restructured after the revolution.

Keywords: History, Revolution, America, Latin America

1. Introduction

"The independence wars were, in short, the making of the United States and the ruin of much of the rest of the Americas [1]." This quotation, from Fernandez-Armesto, who is one of the famous authors dedicated to hemispheric histories of the Americas, is representative of a classical point of view on the revolutions in the Americas, which describes the Latin American Revolutions as a deviation from the traditional revolutionary model based on the French and North American experiences or as a total failure without changing political system. However, this paper aims to prove that the Latin American Revolutions are still noteworthy from both the perspective of Society and Ideology through comparison with the American Revolution of 1776.

This paper chooses to do a comparative study between these two revolutions for primarily three reasons. The first and the most obvious is that they occurred in the same hemisphere. The second is that they started at a similar time, which was somewhere around the 17th to 18th century. Thirdly, they both were colonies, answering to an empire on the other side of the Atlantic.

While there are many similarities, most current academic research pays more attention to each independently. Against this background, the aim of this paper is as follows: Through comparative analysis, this paper will further explore the value of the Latin American independence movements

and its long-term effect on political and social structure based on the current literature. This is conducted through a comparison with the American Revolution in terms of their social structure, ideological differences, and how they led to differences both within and after the period of each revolution. Some of the main manifestations will be presented by answering questions such as how they received the enlightenment idea, how those ideas affected their revolutionary process, and how both regions rebuilt and restructured after the revolution.

Before going further, there's one thing to be clarified: as this paper refers to Latin American revolutions, it relates to the independence revolutions in the Spanish colonial Empire starting in 1808, which triggered the creation of numerous republics by 1830. These developments were very different from each other but still constituted a unity [2].

2. Literature Review

In the literature review section, this article will observe the research development on the Latin American independence revolution in chronological order, based on new research findings to find out how the dominant paradigm in the academic world was shaped by the Latin American political and social dynamics in a certain period. To start answering this vast range of questions, this paper categorizes the relative papers into three parts: the late 19th to early 20th, the middle of 20th, and the 1980s till recent years.

During the late 19th and early 20th century, there appeared a rise of nationalism, which led to an interest in celebrating the independence movements and the heroes who led them, painting the years of revolutions as a period of heroism and cultural awakening, emphasizing cultural solidarity and anti-colonial sentiment in order to promote a sense of nationality. Such as "Our America", the essay written by José Martí in 1891, in this essay he asserted that throughout the revolutionary process, the different peoples stood united, heroically leading this collective resistance, and successfully resisted the Spanish oppressors [3]. It calls for the cultural and intellectual unity of Latin America and the Caribbean in the face of European and U.S. imperialism.

However, in the 1960s, the entrance of a Marxist paradigm challenged this popular view. The Marxist view asserts that the Latin American Revolutions were emblematic of a class struggle and not simply a popular independence movement. The Creoles that led the movement were not representative of the entire society but only the landed class and the interests of the bourgeois. They used the name of revolution to protect their privileges and economic interests, not to liberate all of society. Therefore, the Marxist worldview opposed the previous view and provided a more multifaceted explanation for the revolutions. For instance, in George Reid Andrews' 1985 work "Spanish American Independence: A Structural Analysis", he concluded that one could see the antirevolutionary nature of these so-called "revolutions" and Independence movements in the maintenance of colonial social structures in these nations [4]. After all, the movement was led by the colonial elites in an effort to protect their privileges and suppress both the riotous lower classes and the threat of reform brought on by the Bourbon monarchy. In that sense, according to John Charles Chasteen, many independence leaders manipulated the religiosity and monarchism of the masses by espousing loyalty to the deposed king, Ferdinand VII [5].

From 1980 to recent years, democratization in Latin American countries has become a mainstay. This trend also led to the academic interest of finding the democratic potential in the Latin American independence revolutions. During that period of time, this field of study focused on popular political subjectivity and the validity of colonial sovereignty. For instance, Sinclair Thomson asserted that early before the invasion of Napoleon in 1807, the increasing political crisis already made the validity and sovereignty of the Hispanic-American Empire questionable; the growing participation of people from lower social classes in politics further challenged traditional power structures and the norms of colonial political culture [6].

In recent years, scholars have re-examined the complexity of the Age of Revolution in the Atlantic world from multiple regional perspectives. Bassi Ernesto and Prado Fabrício highlighted the impact of external interactions on Latin American independence, saying that the external interactions mainly refer to the trade, migration, and cultural communication between Europe, Africa, and America. These interactions led to cultural, economic, and political changes and, in that way, significantly impacted Latin America's independence [7]. Moreover, the trade net and new-born diplomatic relations established between Latin America, Great Britain, Caribbean colonies, Portuguese Empire, and North America benefited the Latin American revolutionaries, making it possible for them to resist, escape, return, insist, and finally beat the colonists.

This paper intends to point out the blank space in the academic field of Latin American independence revolutions from three perspectives:

Most of the academic research pays attention to Latin American revolutions independently, comparative studies are more challenging to find.

In terms of the small number of works with a comparative perspective, the views of the Latin American independence revolutions can generally be found in two categories: They either describe the revolution as a deviation from the traditional revolutionary model based on the French and North American experiences, or as a total failure without changing the political system.

The ongoing change in the academic world shows that the different comprehension in this field of study rests on other answers to reconstruct the political vocabulary and on dissimilar understandings of the actors, processes, and results of the Latin American independence revolutions.

In conclusion, this paper reinforces the idea that the study of Latin American revolutions needs to be revised to delimit, tense, and tangle. However, the reflections on the Latin American revolutions in this paper will serve as an alarm to avoid distorting the past based on future projects in constructing the history of certain political languages.

3. Revolutionary Progress: Complexity and Novelty

The differences in social structure between the United States and Latin America proved to be the root of a significant difference between the two revolutions. In the United States, where everyone who wasn't a slave was basically in the same class under colonial rule and with wealth disparity not particularly apparent, a part of the colonial population was unconvinced by Enlightenment rhetoric or otherwise unwilling to give up their old life and allegiance to the Crown; These people formed a faction loyal to the British and their King, called the "Loyalists." However, British forces pressed more profoundly into American territory as the revolution progressed. They began antagonizing the locals, leading to more and more Loyalists turning their back on the British Crown and joining the American faction fighting for independence, the Patriots.

In Latin America, on the other hand, social classes are broadly divided into three classes. The highest are whites from Europe, the lowest are local aborigines, and the middle are "native whites," also known as Creoles. The Creoles are a mixed race of local Aboriginal and white people. Although Aboriginal whites and Europeans are legally equal, they are discriminated against because of their culture. Socially, Europeans excluded them from the high institutions of church and state. Restricted economically, all industrial and commercial activities that compete with the sovereign state are prohibited, such as plantation, industry, and banking. As George Reid Andrews says, "the conflicts within the colonies provided subaltern groups, including slaves, with an opportunity to influence the outcomes of independence and the early formation of national states in "the first great wave of social and political reform in Latin American history [8]." The lower classes remained united in their struggle against Spanish rule for three reasons: dissatisfaction with the Peninsulas, animosity towards the French-installed King of Spain, and the mixing of races within these non-peninsular classes. The local population always had some form of distrust concerning the Peninsulas; After all, they were

mostly there to extract wealth from the local colonists and natives. Also, in 1808, events on the main continent, namely, Napoleon appointing Joseph I as King of Spain's colonies, sparked unanimous vitriol in the colonies, where people of all social classes saw the new King as an inheritor of the heretical French Revolution. Finally, Intermarrying and the mixing of European and Indigenous blood brought about new ethnic classes within the lower castes, forming new classes like mestizos and mulattoes, and creating an indigenous connection that deepened the unity between Creoles and the people of the other lower classes. Relations of blood and conflicts of culture produced for the Creoles their own culture. These Creoles began developing their own identity by disseminating Enlightenment Ideals throughout Latin America. This identity development, consciousness of their kind, and hatred toward both the Peninsular and the new Spanish ruler drove the Creoles and local population to begin their quest for independence.

3.1. Enlightenment Ideas: Freedom and Independence

The embrace of different socio-political systems in both the British Colonies and Spanish colonies should be understood in line with its ideological genesis and trajectory. While both Latin America and the British Colonies received similar enlightenment ideas of individual equality and liberty from thinkers such as Locke, Smith, Raynal, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, Latin America also received inspiration from American and French revolutionary ideas of freedom and independence.

In the case of the United States, the ideological communication between Europe and British colonies never ceased, which can explain the origin of American revolutionaries' aspirations. For instance, the North Americans' fiscal demands found their roots in the French Fronde rebellion against royal absolutism and taxes. Furthermore, in the Declaration of Independence of the British colonies in Philadelphia and their claim to be considered by other nations as "free and independent States," for the first time, freedom and independence, the requirements for a person to be considered emancipated according to civil law, have found their way into constitutional law [1].

In the 1760s, also known as the preparatory stage of Latin American independence wars, some enlightened Latin Americans took an interest in looking more into the figures of Anglo-American thinkers, such as Benjamin Franklin. This fact can be examined with regard to the rapidly increasing number of documents engaged with North American ideas that went through the strict inquisition by the Catholic Church during the 1770s [2]. Despite the censorship, the seeds of Latin American Revolution ideas were planted back in the time of independence wars of British colonies; the early publications of the North American Continental Congresses of Philadelphia in 1774/75 were already widely received. When the United States succeeded in leaving the British Empire, the ideological entanglement between North America and Latin America quickly escalated since the successful American Revolution inspired many Latin American countries to seek their own independence from European colonial powers. While the Creole elites were digesting these North American fresh ideas of liberty, democracy, and self-determination piecemeal, their thinking underwent a remarkably swift change from only following the European ensembles and taking them as a base to mixing them into their specific interests in Latin America.

A similar case occurred with the French revolution: The Latin Americans also blended the emerging enlightenment ideas from the French with their own specific concerns. For example, Colombian thinker Antonio Nariño was inspired by the outbreak of the French Revolution. He then privately printed his Spanish translation of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and began circulating it widely in 1794. However, this act led him to permanent exile, a ten-year prison sentence in Africa, and the confiscation of all his property. Latin Americans created new political solutions to match new social effects and contemporary micro societies [2].

Latin America received diverse thoughts and synthesized them into a unique variant of Enlightenment thought. This can be seen in the speeches of Simon Bolivar, who declared in his 1805

Juramento del Monte Aventino [9], "Civilization, which has blown in from the East, has here shown all its facets, has demonstrated all its elements; but as for resolving the great problem of human freedom, it seems that the subject has been forgotten and that this mystery will become clear only in the New World." He believed that although the Enlightenment had its roots in Europe, and even with the North American Enlightenment philosophy taking form earlier, it's clear that the Latin American thinkers used time and experience to further refine upon Enlightenment ideology and form their variant for their own countries. He suggests that Latin America may hold the key to achieving true human freedom, which he sees as a mystery that will become clear only in the New World, referring to Latin America.

It is clear that Latin America took in a wide and eclectic array of ideas from both Europe and post-revolution America. However, the enriched ideas didn't transform into the result of refined democracies like the United States. After the Latin American independence wars, the founding constitutions echoed the enlightened rhetoric and sometimes, indeed, copied the very words of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Still, they had no opportunity to register the same effects. Take Mexico as an example, the first Mexican republic, which was established in 1823, showed early signs of exhaustion mainly due to having adopted the form from the North American constitution, but the contents from the French body of 1791, bastardized by the Constitution of Cádiz of 1812 [10]. In that sense, the main obstacle for the coherent establishment of a liberal republic was to be located in the Mexican constitutional experiment, which led not only to political but also to social instability.

3.2. Final Reprise: Reflection and Restoration

Differing from the American Revolution, the Latin American Revolution never succeeded in establishing a stable democratic system. Depending on the field of expertise and the analytical perspective each historian adopts, the word "revolution" may seem questionable when applied indiscriminately to each one of them.

Firstly, Mexico and the U.S. differed in terms of pre-existing colonial systems and how each recovered the power vacuum that resulted from the removal of their respective Colonial Power. The primary motivation for the American Revolution was casting off Britain's parliamentary system that only privileged a select few. Without undergoing an "old regime" like France, the Americans were quick in setting up their government, having built on the representative democracies of the original colonies, like the House of Burgesses in Virginia, which in turn was built on ideas of natural law and consent of the governed. These values, as well as the stable society previously mentioned, led to a graceful shift to a republican government, which, despite flaws, would grant the United States political stability for the next half a century, allowing them to start developing their economy nation-building effectively. Speaking of the flaws of this democracy, the American Revolution was primarily a war fought by the American colonists, who were mainly middle class or higher, to create their democratic system free from Britain's rule. Enslaved people and people experiencing poverty were not significant beneficiaries.

In Latin America, on the other hand, the social structure would be a lot more reminiscent of the centralized governments of medieval times, with rigid caste systems and a subservient Church. This lack of popular representation and democratic experience would be augmented by brutal censorship of Enlightenment Ideas by the Church, leading Latin American post-independence nations to struggle with the transition to representative government. Despite the creation of the constitution in the name of democracy in order to organize the federal and state power, the instability of the institutions is undeniable. This constitution tried implanting a political system that could not suit the nation's tradition. As a result, the happiness of independence and the high expectations about a prosperous republic nation vanished when the civil wars burst out.

The role of the military in both colonial and revolutionary contexts bears differences that led to different outcomes, too. For instance, in the Latin American context, the military was originally only present to enforce Peninsular rule over the rest of the population and served only to the benefit of those from Spain. This stands in contrast to the North American colonial militia, which mainly was formed for the defense of the people and generally came from the same class as the majority of the population, inheriting the same ideas of liberty and popular rule, which they held firm to even after the revolutionary war. The Latin American armies, even if ideas of national identity inspired them, failed to embrace the enlightenment ideals of popular sovereignty fully; as a result, after the military achieved their goal of an independent nation, they began being motivated by self-benefit, establishing juntas to give themselves more power over the populace.

4. Conclusion

The Latin American revolutions have the defining features that make them different from contemporary revolutions in their social and political structure, employment of enlightenment ideas, and course of action once the revolutionary events pass. Moreover, these perspectives have causal relations: thinking about how ideas disseminate makes it inevitable to reconstruct the spectrum of oppression. To identify it, to know it, in order to carefully dismantle it in all its ramifications.

From the perspective of intellectual history, this paper contends that the Latin American revolutions are similar to the Revolutions of 1848, as both, while failing to enact social or political progress, established new ideas. The Latin American revolutions helped to establish a sense of national identity and consciousness in the various countries that gained independence. In contrast, the Revolutions of 1848 helped to promote ideas such as liberalism, democracy, and nationalism throughout Europe. These ideas would go on to shape political and social movements in both regions in the years and decades that followed.

Moreover, this paper also points out a new dimension of future research: we now have rich investigations about the politics of independence, but research remains to be done on the ideas of the era. These ideas refer not only to the ideas of educated elites but also to the wide range of people who took part in overthrowing colonial rule [11]. Just like Miller argues in her book, the nations of post-independence Latin America are better understood as "communities of shared knowledge." Miller contends that the ideas are not only about types of knowledge that were the preserve of the educated minorities. Their shared roots connected even the humblest Latin Americans to common ideas about beauty, truth, and morality [12].

References

- [1] Fernández-Armesto, F. (2003) *The Americas: A Hemispheric History*. Modern Library, The United States of America. pp. 126.
- [2] Kaltmeier, Olaf, Josef Raab, Alice Nash, Mike Foley, Stefan Rinke, and Mario Rufer. (2019) *The Routledge Handbook to the History and Society of the Americas*. Routledge, London.
- [3] López-Civeira, Francista. (2019) "The Concept of Nuestra América [Our America] in José Martí." *Temas De Nuestra América*, 35(65): 57–70.
- [4] George Reid, A. (1985) "Spanish American Independence." *Latin American Perspectives*, 12(1): 105–132.
- [5] Schmidt-Nowara, C. (2010) "Review of POLITICS AND IDEAS IN LATIN AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE" *Latin American Research Review*, 45(2): 228–235.
- [6] Thomson, Sinclair. (2023) "On the Origins of Latin American Independence: A Reappraisal of Colonial Crisis, Popular Politics, and Atlantic Revolution in the Eighteenth Century." In: *The Cambridge Companion to Latin American Independence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. pp. 21-53.
- [7] Bassi, Ernesto, and Fabrício Prado. (2023) *Foreign Interaction and the Independence of Latin America: Local Dynamics, Atlantic Processes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 79–103.
- [8] George Reid, A. (2004) *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- [9] Simón, B. (2019) "*Discurso pronunciado por Simón Bolívar ante el Congreso de Venezuela en Angostura, 15 de febrero de 1819.*" In: *Actas del Congreso Coherencia*, 16, 397-424.
- [10] Ward, C. (1987) "Review of *The Mexican Republic: The First Decade, 1823–1832*, by Stanley C. Green. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 19(2): 474–75.
- [11] Schmidt-Nowara, C. "Politics and Ideas in Latin American Independence." *Latin American Research Review* 45, no. 2 (2010): 228–35.
- [12] Rock, D. (2021) "*Nicola Miller, Republics of Knowledge: Nations of the Future in Latin America.*" *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 53(2): 406–8.