CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

PROTEST AND RESISTANCE AGAINST COLONIAL RULE IN IBERIAN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Spain found itself frequently at war with Great Britain and at odds with its erstwhile partner, France. It lost territory in Europe and the Americas and began to see its global empire crumble. Under the rule of the Bourbon Kings Ferdinand VI (1746–1759), Charles III (1759–1788), and Charles IV (1789–1803), the crown implemented a series of reforms domestically and abroad, many initiated in the prior half century, that sought to centralise power and shore up Spain’s administration and defence. They ranged from long-term efforts to modernise the bureaucracy to emergency war taxes. These measures prompted a variety of reactions, largely negative, in Spanish America.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Spanish America witnessed growing agitation and subversion. The discontent took many forms: riots, rebellions, conspiracies, mutinies, open cabildos (municipal councils) or cabildos abiertos, and more. Not all regions witnessed these disturbances, as some remained calm and manageable in the eyes of the Spanish until the beginning of the wars of independence. Furthermore, not all the protest or even most of it sought independence from Spain. Many of the revolts punished an official deemed cruel or craven and demanded rights presumably granted under Spanish rule. What most characterises these social movements are their heterogeneity in terms of plan, actions, leadership, and membership. Nonetheless, taken together, they express a growing opposition to the Bourbon Reforms and, towards the nineteenth century, Spanish rule in the Americas.

Even more vulnerable to European power politics, Portugal sought to maintain its unequal alliance with Great Britain without exacerbating tensions with Spain and France. England’s commercial ascendancy in Atlantic trade and Spain’s territorial rivalry in South America presented simultaneous challenges. With its Asian sea-borne empire reduced to a remnant, the Portuguese Crown had already redirected its attention to the Americas, a shift completed during Brazil’s gold- and diamond-mining boom in the first half of the century. The towering figure of Portuguese
absolutism was Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, named marquis of Pombal while serving King José I (1750–1777) as chief minister. Like Spain’s Bourbon reformers, Pombal strove to regenerate the metropolitan economy by tightening administrative and fiscal control over Portuguese America. These reforms provoked resentment similar to, although less disruptive than, the reaction in Spanish America.

Elites born in Brazil did not diverge as sharply as their Spanish American counterparts from European elites. No major urban plebeian riot attacked royal officials and property, as in Quito. No cross-class tax rebellion sparked clashes with government troops, as in New Granada. No massive rural uprising of native peoples shook the foundations of royal authority, as in Peru and Mexico. Nor did the colony’s dependence on the coerced labour of peoples of African descent, who were far more numerous than in Spanish America, result in widespread bloodshed of the sort that congealed into Haitian independence. Despite this absence of organised mass dissent, Brazil achieved independence in 1822 as if on schedule, just a year after Mexico, the same year as Gran Colombia, and two years before Peru. The break with Portugal clarified that the transatlantic consensus that curtailed the most destabilising forms of social and political unrest ultimately had its limits in binding colony to metropolis. Analysis of anticolonial agitation in Portuguese America must therefore contend with the colony’s apparent quiescence.

The Americas featured awe-inspiring social and geographic diversity in the period of study. In addition to the core indigenous population, inhabitants of Spanish

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Image 29.1  Mexican guerrilla supporters, from Theubet de Beauchamp, *Trajes civiles y militares y de los pobladores de México entre 1810 y 1827*

Source: Real Biblioteca, Madrid, Spain, Sig: Grab: 261. © Patrimonio Nacional
America descended from Asia, Africa, and Europe, and spoke dozens of languages. Across the hemisphere every type of ecosystem could be found, from bone-dry desert to dizzying mountain peaks. Even if the analysis limits itself to social protest in the countryside, the population and labour arrangements varied enormously. Any analysis of rural colonial Spanish America has to consider missions, semi-autonomous indigenous communities, haciendas, small estates, mixed rural villages, free slave communities, plantations, and much more. Labour regimes included slavery, sharecropping, “free” labour, labour drafts, migratory systems, and, in any single region, combinations of these. Mining cannot be left out of any survey of the colonial economy and neither can the presence of the Catholic Church, which forged deep roots in many areas where the colonial state barely reached.

Geographic, demographic, and economic diversity similarly conditioned changing responses to Portuguese rule. Portugal’s vast American colony had evolved into distinct regions, tenuously tied to one another, each with its unique natural environment, history, and relationship with the imperial centre. The immense Amazon basin, sparsely populated by native peoples and their mestizo descendants, attracted comparatively few Portuguese settlers. Wild cacao and other forest products accounted for its primary exports. Southeast of the Amazon delta, Maranhão successfully developed cotton and rice production after mid-century. Increasing numbers of African slaves supplemented the region’s mestizo peasantry. The fertile coastal strip where sugar plantations clustered around the port cities of Recife in Pernambuco and Salvador in Bahia remained the colony’s most productive agricultural region. Africans and their children born into American captivity had long since eclipsed native peoples as the primary workforce.

Displacing Salvador as the seat of the viceregal government in 1763, the entrepôt of Rio de Janeiro expanded rapidly over the eighteenth century. It owed its growth and economic diversification to the discovery of gold and diamonds in the southeastern interior. Minas Gerais boasted the richest of the alluvial mines and, by the final quarter of the century, the largest regional population. Enslaved and free persons of African descent accounted for nearly 80% of its inhabitants. Finally, Brazil’s far south, more focused than most regions on domestic markets, became a livestock-raising area, supplying mules, hides, and salted beef, along with wheat. Like the far north and west, its proximity to Spanish America made it the object of royal concerns about smuggling and security. In short, regional differences left certain areas more densely inhabited than others, unevenly integrated into the Atlantic economy, and variably favoured or imperilled by changes in specific royal policies. The crown viewed such geographic, economic, and political fragmentation as advantageous, never deviating, as one scholar notes, from the “essential object” of keeping its captaincies “divided, isolated, and dependent” (Barman 1988, 39).

Given this variability, it is not surprising that the relationship between the changes emanating from Iberia—the Bourbon and Pombaline Reforms—and growing discontent in the Americas has long vexed historians. Undoubtedly, these administrative, fiscal, and military reforms prompted dissatisfaction and nudged some towards questioning Iberian rule and even a search for alternatives. Yet historians have shown the pitfalls of mechanical arguments that posit the reforms and the revolts as cause and effect—the relationship is much more complicated. For example, some regions that were centres of the implementation of the reforms did not rise up against them.
On the other hand, protests emerged that had little to do with the reforms. Part of the challenge lies in the fact that the reforms affected administrative and economic realms and thus altered both politics and economics in distinctive local and regional contexts. The most decisive commonality, across regions and empires alike, was the wariness of American-born elites. They hesitated to risk their privileged positions by pressing claims against colonial rule to the point of provoking instability. There were, however, exceptions, particularly in the early nineteenth century.

**SPANISH AMERICA**

While taxes rose (and thus prompted discontent), the Spanish also changed how taxes were collected, who served in the military, who ran city councils, and much more. Displeasure at the changes (never understood at the time as the “Bourbon Reforms”) could be targeted at the tax collector but also at an incoming Spanish authority or the king himself. Moreover, dissatisfaction with the reforms was only a partial cause—not only can other grievances be found, but ideological issues (what platform was used, what alternative invoked) need to be taken into consideration. While most Spanish Americans, from the plebe to the aristocracy, felt that taxes were on the rise, many also believed that the Spanish were encroaching on their political rights. The imposition of an increasing number of Spanish-born authorities infuriated many. Nonetheless, very few of the uprisings or revolts sought to break with Spain. Instead, they typically targeted a single official or practice and rose up in the name of their community and even Spain.

This brings us to a question that has long marked studies of eighteenth-century rebellions: their relationship to independence in the early nineteenth. Various generations of historians have shown that a revolt in rural Mexico in 1760, a riot in Arequipa in the 1780s, or other social movements were not early signs or “precursors” of the wars of independence. The rioters or rebels were almost certainly not fighting in the name of independence from Spain (they were perhaps, instead, fighting in the abstract name of the King of Spain) and they had vastly different platforms and goals than rebels in the 1810s and 1820s. The world changed radically in these years: Atlantic Revolutions in the United States, France, and Haiti and overwhelming transformation in Europe with Napoleon and his Iberian Invasion (1807–1812). Furthermore, political culture evolved in Spanish America as well. While analyses of the wars of independence in Spanish America disagree about whether the focus should be on Spain itself (Napoleon and the decline of the Bourbons) or in the Americas (growing discontent and an expanding anti-imperial ideological arsenal), the best historians have looked at both sides of the Atlantic Ocean to explore how politics changed throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. Revolts and rebellions were both a reflection and cause of these changes.

The relationship between eighteenth-century social movements and the Bourbon Reforms and the wars of independence are not the only questions that motivate historians. The role of the lower classes has become another leitmotiv. While few scholars dismiss the role of Indians, slaves, free blacks, *mestizos*, and others of the lower orders as significant participants in social movements, they continue to disagree about these groups’ standing in the uprisings and their ideological depth. The
question of whether the lower classes fought due to coercion, as a reaction to change and/or abuse, or deeper political motives will not go away.

Subversion took many forms. Slaves banded together to improve their conditions or even to gain some form of freedom. As political tensions increased in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, they also aligned with political groups (Blackburn 2011). Individuals also struggled to improve their lot by less collective efforts, improvising different methods to make work more bearable and dominance less absolute. In this regard, the concept of resistance highlights a variety of tactics that, although often (but not always) marginal to collective action or social movements, undermined the powers that be, particularly locally. And finally, religion proved an important component of many subversive movements, some of them seeking a radical rupture from the status quo (Castro Gutiérrez 1996; Di Meglio 2012; Van Young 1986).

The corporate nature of Iberian rule complicated political relations and protests. Throughout the period, the Bourbons sought to rein in the Catholic Church, assuming some of its responsibilities, limiting its vast autonomy, and even expelling the Jesuit order in 1767, following a Portuguese decision to do the same in 1759. Priests and nuns would play a role in political disturbances in the period and the question of religion and the status of the Church played out in fascinating ways. Indigenous people also witnessed the weakening of their autonomy, as the Bourbons sought to impose outsiders as authorities, increase taxes, and permit the encroachment of communal land. Taxes and autonomy, more than land, proved crucial in rural protests.

Nonetheless, patterns emerge. William Taylor found that the vast majority of eighteenth-century village uprisings were “spontaneous, short-lived outbursts by members of a single community in reaction to threats from outside; they were ‘popular’ uprisings in which virtually the entire community acted collectively and usually without identifiable leadership” (Taylor 1979, 115). They felt closer to the revolt rather than rebellion side of the spectrum.

In most cases, villagers attacked outsiders (usually state authorities or priests) who imposed new or increased taxes or other impositions on them. They also confronted them, often quite violently, if these outsiders threatened a village’s autonomy, specifically the historic right to select authorities, to oversee daily business, and to maintain local culture. Taylor also underlined the argument made by other historians that population growth prompted political tensions between subject towns and the head towns or cabeceras, often sparking short-term violence. Unlike events in many of the same areas of Mexico in the early nineteenth century or in the Andes in the 1780s, these revolts did not spread into multi-village or regional uprisings that threatened the colonial state. They remained local, but as Taylor shows, they were at least initially quite violent, with highly charged actions and rhetoric, indicative of the deep tensions in rural Mexico.

Scarlett O’Phelan Godoy found a similar pattern in eighteenth-century revolts in the Andes (Peru and Bolivia). She uncovered 140 local uprisings concentrated in three “conjunctures” that targeted both civil and religious authorities for abusive behaviour such as overcharging taxes or making demands on free labour or not respecting local autonomy. Although overwhelming rural, they were not solely indigenous uprisings as mestizos and creoles had important leadership roles in many.
These cases seemed to follow the Mexican pattern, though pursuing with greater frequency and hostility new fiscal policies imposed by the Bourbons, particularly after 1777. This difference can be explained by the greater reliance in Peru on the Indian head tax and other exactions by the Peruvian Viceroyalty. In order to shore up viceregal finances, the “Bourbon Reformers” had to greatly increase pressure on the indigenous population (O’Phelan Godoy 1988). The parallels between Mexico and Peru ended in 1780, however, with the massive Andean uprisings known as the Tupac Amaru and the Katarista Rebellions.

The Tupac Amaru Rebellion raged across the Andes from 1780–1783. Centred in southern Peru, from Cuzco to Lake Titicaca, it also allied with the Katarista uprisings in Upper Peru (Chacras, soon-to-be Bolivia). In addition, revolts inspired by Tupac Amaru took place in what became Argentina, Chile, and Colombia. José Gabriel Condorcanqui was a kuraka or ethnic intermediary in three small towns 60 miles south of Cuzco and a merchant who worked the Cuzco to Potosí circuit. Well-educated and bilingual (Spanish and Quechua), he claimed lineage from the Incas, thus the Tupac Amaru (e.g., Tupa or Túpac, Amaro) name. His wife, Micaela Bastidas, was an important commander in the uprising, overseeing the rebel base in Pamapamarca and logistics. The rebellion began in November 1780 when Tupac Amaru seized and executed a local authority, the corregidor Antonio Arriaga. Tupac Amaru organised his indigenous followers and attacked other corregidors, ransacked haciendas, and razed the hated obrajes, or textile mills. He claimed to be fighting in the name of the King of Spain.

He and Micaela sought a multi-ethnic and multiclass alliance, recruiting not only Indians but also mestizos, blacks, creoles, and “good” Spaniards. Tupac Amaru returned from the Lake Titicaca region in late 1780 to lay siege to the city of Cuzco, Peru’s second largest city and still considered by many to be the “Inca capital”. Although he surrounded Cuzco with tens of thousands of troops, the rebels could not take the city. The royalists received important reinforcements from Lima in early January. After three months of intense fighting, they captured Tupac Amaru, Micaela Bastidas, and much of their inner circle in April 1781, executing them in a gruesome public ritual in Cuzco’s central plaza on May 17. Led by Tupac Amaru’s cousin, Diego Cristóbal Tupac Amaru, their son Mariano, and another relative, the rebellion continued for two years, centred in the area around Lake Titicaca. The rebellion became more of a caste or total war as neither side took prisoners. The exhausted rebel leaders signed an armistice in early 1783, but hardline royalists broke the treaty and executed Diego Cristóbal on 19 July 1783, in even more horrific fashion than Tupac Amaru and Micaela Bastidas. Up to 100,000 died in the massive uprising (Serulnikov 2013; Walker 2014).

Two primary answers emerge to the puzzling question of why this mass revolt erupted decades before the wars of independence and major insurgency across the continent, particularly in Mexico. First, the level of state extraction of resources was higher in the Andes than in Mexico. The Peruvian viceregal state depended more on the head tax and the infamous labour draft, the mita, than in Mexico, which had a larger mestizo population and a significantly more dynamic economy. To fulfil demands imposed by the crown (and to fill their own pockets), Church and state authorities had to lean more on the indigenous population in the Andes (Coatsworth 1988; O’Phelan Godoy 1988). Economics, however, were only one side of the coin.
Andean people had developed different strains of Inca utopianism in the eighteenth century, the belief that a return to Inca rule would bring greater equality and social peace. José Gabriel Condorcanqui stressed his Inca lineage and used this as well as other elements in patching together an anticolonial ideology that sought to bring different social groups together. Not only were economic or fiscal tensions greater in the Andes than in Mexico, but a cohesive discourse that prompted indigenous unity, notions of local sovereignty, and opposition to the Spanish had taken hold in the decades prior to the mass Andean uprisings (Flores Galindo 2010; Thomson 2003).

Spanish American cities also witnessed an increase in political mobilisation in the latter half of the eighteenth century, leading up to the full-scale crisis sparked by the Napoleonic Invasion of Iberia in 1807. Despite great variation in timing, organisation, and social base (every city and perhaps even town has a different history), certain contrasts with the rural uprisings can be seen. The urban confrontations often protested political and administrative changes, particularly the efforts to limit the power of creoles and other American-born, as well as tax increases. They also featured internal class tensions that almost invariably weakened the movement. Throughout the Americas, creole critics of the Spanish would support street demonstrations but then watch warily as the lower classes became more belligerent and presented their own agendas. These divisions would mark not only rebellion and resistance in the late colonial period, but also the long wars of independence.

Residents of Quito took to the streets massively in 1765 to protest the crown’s efforts to impose a monopoly on aguardiente (cane alcohol) and to take control of the alcabala sales tax. Both reforms weighed heavily on a broad selection of Quito society, including producers, sellers, and consumers of the ever-popular aguardiente. Authorities sought to inflict the alcabala on a wider sector of urban society, including the lower classes. Crowds filled Quito’s Santa Barbara Plaza on 22 May and 24 June, with the latter event turning into a full-scale riot. The vehemence and potential violence of the lower classes intimidated many creole and middle-class protesters, sparking a divide that would characterise the pre-independence social disturbances. Despite this division, however, royalists backtracked on both plans and protesters received an amnesty and largely saw their demands fulfilled (McFarlane 1989; Andrien 1995).

The Upper Peruvian city of La Plata (today’s Sucre) witnessed a series of disturbances from the 1780s into the wars of independence. Throughout 1781, rumours spread about an anti-tax mutiny, anonymous broadsides attacked authorities, and numerous open cabildos were held. As Sergio Serulnikov has deftly shown, these (and non-events as much was based on unfounded rumours) indicated the possible unity of the upper and lower classes against those associated with Spain and its administration. Although fraught with tension and discord, vertical or multiclass alliances were by no means impossible. Decades later, after the Napoleonic Invasion of Iberia in 1807 and the crisis in Spain, the city’s lower classes showed a heightened interest in politics and the firm belief that they deserved to be active participants and not mere followers. La Plata demonstrates how the practice of politics in Spanish America evolved over the decades and did not merely follow or react to events in Europe (Serulnikov 2012).

The case of La Plata and many others underlines that participation in the urban uprisings was not limited to the middle and upper classes. The lower classes or the
plebeians contributed, their incentives and role changing over time. While historians previously assumed that the lower classes participated due to their patrons’ encouragement or coercion, studies in recent decades have shown that in the cities as well as the countryside the masses had their own motivations or inspiration. This line of inquiry has revealed how the lower classes shaped urban protest and how this political mobilization changed over time.

Groups that fought to maintain Spanish control recruited widely. While upper-class support for the royalist causes seemed logical, particularly if the rebels promised or enacted radical reform, the lower classes also could throw their support behind royalists. This could be the result, as it has traditionally been understood, of coercion, payment, or ignorance. In other words, the lower classes were forced to do it or did it for money, with little understanding about the political dynamics and implications of the fighting. However, the case of Indians and slaves who backed royalist forces in northern South America, what became Colombia, from 1780 to 1825 questions this simplistic interpretation. This support did not emerge out of ignorance or coercion but instead years of negotiation and fighting, in which the royalists ultimately offered greater benefits than the different waves of insurgents. In some cases, royalists offered freedom to slaves while the patriot armies failed to do so (Echeverri 2016).

In the eighteenth century, slaves most commonly struggled against oppression through plantation insurrections (involving slaves and non-slaves) and maroonage rather than full-scale insurrections. Mass rebellions proved nearly impossible, as slave-owners had crucial advantages: monopoly on weapons, regional security systems that pursued runaways and rabble-rousers, and an insidious labour system that divided slaves on various fronts (above all field and house and American- and African-born) as well as slaves and free people of colour. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) had petrified beneficiaries of the slave system, encouraging them to heighten repression and to collaborate across the Caribbean and the Atlantic. Nonetheless, slaves resisted in numerous ways, many of them off the archival record. They ruined machinery, pilfered supplies, ridiculed the plantation owner, and employed countless other tactics that weakened what seemed like a rigidly secure exploitation system. The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba showed that categories such as mutinies, conspiracies, rebellions, and resistance overlapped and are not mutually exclusive. It also showed that solidarity between slaves and free people of colour was possible.

Since the late eighteenth century, Cuba’s slave-based sugar economy had expanded rapidly due to the 1789 Spanish decree that facilitated the slave trade, the Haitian Revolution that had ultimately crippled Haiti’s previously vast sugar production, and the burgeoning European sweet tooth. In March 1812, slaves and free people of colour attacked numerous plantations near Puerto Príncipe (today’s Camagüey), in some cases burning down the fields and the mills and killing whites. At the same time, free blacks aligned with slaves, creoles, and others to conspire against the Spanish in Havana, small towns, and the countryside. José Antonio Aponte, the apparent leader, was a free black artisan and militia member who envisioned in a set of drawings lost to history a Cuba free of Spanish rule and slavery. A former member of the black militia of Yoruba descent, Aponte invoked symbols of freedom that included Ethiopia, Haiti, and the United States (George Washington). Authorities
repressed the uprisings brutally. Aponte and his accomplices, for example, were hanged and beheaded, their body parts displayed as a gruesome warning of the cost of subversion. The Aponte Rebellion indicated both the deep disgruntlement with slavery and Spanish rule in Cuba and the tremendous obstacles to slave insurrection (Childs 2006).

**PORTUGUESE AMERICA**

An expansive conception of protest and resistance is required to identify emerging tensions between Portugal and its American colony, particularly when comparing the more turbulent Spanish America. Brazil provides fertile ground for rethinking standard measures of such discontentment. Its history reveals subtleties of the colonial experience less evident in places riven by open tumult. The decades preceding independence witnessed traditionalist retrenchment alongside modernising thrusts. Individual opportunism competed for primacy with nascent group consciousness. Despite a willingness to criticise royal government and even plan its overthrow, reformists and potential revolutionaries commonly continued to consider themselves Portuguese even when born in Brazil. At the same time, their local allegiances outweighed proto-nationalist yearnings. These tendencies intermingled as economic and racial divisions produced contrasting diagnoses of social ills and limited commonality of purpose. So profound and durable were the social hierarchies, moreover, that scholars often failed, as with the Spanish American context, to recognise the full significance of the challenge to the colonial status quo mounted by marginalised peoples of indigenous and African descent.

Unlike in Spanish America, Brazilian-born elites who participated in acts of insubordination against Portuguese rule did not commonly refer to themselves as creoles, eschewing the term’s implied differentiation from Europeans. Their Portuguese critics sometimes used the pejorative *mazombo* to disparage them as non-Europeans, especially those born in the northeast. The Brazilian-born occasionally employed descriptors such as *filho de Minas* (son of Minas Gerais) or *natural da Amé rica* (American-born). The term *crioulo* described an individual of African descent born in the colony.

No sustained, large-scale uprising against Portuguese rule materialised prior to the independence struggle. However, two foiled plots, two unproven conspiracies, and one short-lived insurrection sharpened concerns about the loyalty of Brazilian vassals amid the revolutionary upheaval arching over the wider Atlantic world. All five episodes occurred in urban settings in the dynamic colonial core bounded by Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro in the southeast and Bahia and Pernambuco in the northeast, home to more than two-thirds of Brazil’s population, which reached two million by century’s end, excluding independent Indians. Prompting draconian repression in all but the two cases in which proof was lacking, they left no doubt that to scheme against the crown was to place property and life at risk.

The anticolonial sentiments expressed in these “conspiracies”, as royal authorities preferred to describe them, were rooted in a decades-long transformation in Brazil’s position vis-à-vis Portugal and the Atlantic system. In his drive to increase state revenues, Pombal created new monopolies to bolster trade with the Amazon, Maranhão, and Pernambuco; transferred the capital to Rio de Janeiro; enhanced the
viceroy’s power over captaincy governors; and consolidated control over frontiers and borderlands. He crafted particularly severe fiscal reforms for the mining region, sharply increasing the tax burden on local notables, a jarring policy considering gold production waned rapidly after 1760. More so than the Bourbon Reforms, Pombal’s regalist and nationalist agenda allowed for flexibility alongside ruthlessness. If absolutist measures fell flat or provoked excessive opposition, he sometimes adjusted or even relented. Partly in the interest of fostering consent, partly out of necessity, given Portugal’s tiny governing class and Brazil’s vast territory, he did not systematically dismiss Brazilian-born elites from high-ranking military and administrative posts as the Bourbons did in Spanish America. Despite his fall from power upon the king’s death in 1777, many of his initiatives formed the basis of even stricter mercantilist policies maintained into the 1790s by Queen Maria I (1777–1816) and her overseas secretary Martinho de Melo e Castro (1770–1795). Neither the queen nor her minister possessed Pombal’s shrewdness regarding the value of colonial co-optation and cooperation.

A primary target of Pombal and his successors’ efforts to raise revenues, the captaincy of Minas Gerais was also the site of the first collective expression of anticolonial ire in which republican sentiments emerged. Under Pombal captaincy officials investigated a number of localised verbal and written attacks against the monarch, but none rose to the level of calling for a break with Portugal. The need for vigilance seemed obvious. From the early decades of the gold rush, the fortune-seekers congregated in the fractious mining camps of the mountainous interior asserted their autonomy, including a willingness to react violently against tax levies and other royal impositions (Catão 2007; Figueiredo 1999). In the late 1780s, Melo e Castro devised harsh new fiscal policies, convinced that colonial negligence, smuggling, and fraud explained collapsing revenues from gold and diamond production. Local dissenters, among them some of the region’s foremost intellectuals, clergy, administrators, and jurists, plotted to take up arms against the crown and declare an independent republic in early 1789. Alerted by several informants, the governor imprisoned the separatists before they could put their plan into action.

The subsequent trial, conducted in Rio de Janeiro, took place in the shadow of the French Revolution, which redoubled Lisbon’s determination to impose exemplary punishment. More than a dozen plotters received death sentences, their sentences commuted to prison terms and exile in all but one case. The exception, Joaquim José da Silva Xavier, was a dentist and former dragoon officer of modest means known by his nickname Tiradentes (tooth-puller). Assuming full responsibility for the movement, a preposterous claim, he was hanged then drawn and quartered. His limbs and torso were placed on pikes along the royal road to the capital of the mining zone, Vila Rica, where his head was displayed in the main square. His home was razed, and his lands salted so that they would never again be productive.

Known as the Inconfidência Mineira (Minas Conspiracy), this intrigue long captivated historians seeking the roots of Brazilian independence. Contemporary scholars have proven more sceptical. They note that behind its activist core stood a group of self-interested wealthy backers, mostly born in Portugal, who owed huge debts to the crown and stood to profit from a tax rebellion. The Brazilian-born participants never seriously planned to extend their revolt beyond Minas Gerais. Their narrow conception of a republic did not presuppose a representative
democracy and allowed for a possible restoration of monarchical rule if the queen or an heir to the throne were to relocate to Brazil. The absence of a university in the colony meant that many of the genteel conspirators had completed their education at Portugal’s University of Coimbra, where they immersed themselves in Enlightenment texts forbidden in Brazil. Their educations distinguished them, upon their return, as members of a small, overwhelmingly white male minority of literate colonists. Some maintained personal libraries stocked with censored tracts decrying Europe’s ancien régime (Villalta 2007). Stirred also by the American Revolution, they admired Thomas Jefferson and other founders of the United States not only because they freed themselves from British rule, but because they did so without abolishing slavery.

Their concerns reflected fears, shared by regional oligarchs throughout Brazil, that any push for political independence could unleash social upheaval and provoke a race war, dislodging them from their privileged positions. The slave uprising that transformed the wealthy sugar colony of Saint Domingue into Haiti, reports of which reached Brazil as the plotters stood trial, only deepened such anxiety and its attendant conservatism. Despite these limitations, the episode stands apart from earlier actions. “The planned revolt did not materialize”, observes one of its leading historians,

but this could not conceal the fact that an important segment of the social group that the metropolitan government needed to trust to exercise its power at a local level—in one of the most important, populous, wealthy, and strategically well-situated Brazilian captaincies—had the daring to think that it could live without Portugal.

(H Maxwell 2001, 408)

Historians debate whether the resolutely public execution of Tiradentes slowed or exacerbated opposition to Portuguese rule. They also question the degree to which it set the stage for subsequent incidents in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. From the vantage point of a later era, the cases seemed sequential, a series of tremors presaging and building toward national independence. Yet each event emerged from local circumstances, involved different social configurations, and drew on specific combinations of ideas. Each occurred at a time when affiliation to p á tria—the region in which one was born and lived—rather than to an imagined nation or to one’s status as American-born, determined communal identities. In royal and viceregal chambers, however, worrisome parallels could not be missed even if their cumulative outcome could not be known (Barman 1988; Villalta and Becho 2007; Furtado 2014).

Just two years after sentencing the Minas conspirators, the viceroy jailed leading members of the disbanded Literary Society of Rio de Janeiro and others, European- and Brazilian-born alike. He accused them of engaging in subversive discussions concerning the French Revolution, the Church, and the cause of liberty. In the course of this inquiry and a related Inquisition investigation concerning alleged blasphemy, the city’s High Court uncovered networks of city residents apparently exchanging antimonarchical and anticlerical sentiments. Eleven defendants spent more than two years in prison before they were released for lack of proof of concrete plans to defy
the government, led by the future João VI (1816–1826), his mother struck down by mental illness. Given the heavy-handed tactics used to track down and interrogate 120 individuals questioned in the two cases—among them rentiers, merchants, artisans, lawyers, doctors, clergy, and government functionaries, including a handful of pardos (men of colour)—it is difficult to separate official fears from popular opinion, fact from rumour, candid testimony from fabrications meant to divert blame. Nevertheless, it seems clear that certain circles resident in the port city—notably individuals who were neither especially wealthy nor desperately poor—had begun to level routine criticism at the crown and Church during the 1790s. The limits of such criticism are just as evident. The ready reintegration into urban society of the accused at the conclusion of the inquiry suggests the power of the combined forces of repression and co-optation to declaw dissent (Higgs 1984).

Significantly greater social diversity and more radical objectives characterised what became known as the “Tailor’s Conspiracy” in Salvador in 1798. This plot again was quashed before it advanced beyond the planning and recruitment stages. The conspirators made their presence known by posting anonymous handbills advocating revolution. They called for the founding of a Bahian republic in which all men would be equal, regardless of colour or class, some foreseeing an end to slavery. As the plotters sought adherents to their cause, they were denounced to authorities. Drawing primarily on Brazilian-born middle and lower-class plotters, most of whom were men of colour, this movement defied the social and racial order of a city ruled by a white minority. Of the dozens arrested, most were self-employed artisans, including many tailors. Others were soldiers. More than a dozen were slaves or former slaves. Five were women.

The conspiracy occurred in a port city well informed about events in revolutionary France and its rebellious Caribbean colony. A period of economic growth, after decades of decline, brought prosperity to some sugar mill owners and especially to Portuguese-born traders, but not to the urban population as a whole, which suffered inflationary prices and shortages of basic foodstuffs. The free coloured population appears to have expanded faster than any other sector during this period, contributing to white anxieties. Such growth resulted from long-term miscegenation and increasing manumission rates, especially of women and children, often through self-purchase. While a degree of economic mobility characterised free men and women of colour in the urban sector, most remained poor. Caste laws barred coloured individuals from high posts in captaincy or municipal bureaucracies, the military, or the Church. Resentment caused by this discriminatory treatment stood out in testimony gathered by High Court officials prosecuting the Bahian plotters.

The court proceedings framed the episode as a conspiracy of a handful of impoverished, coloured malcontents and played on fears of a possible slave uprising. Under interrogation, the tailor Manuel Faustino described a plan to set a building ablaze to create confusion. An artillery regiment with sympathisers would then seize the city’s remaining garrisons. If the captaincy governor could not be convinced to assume the presidency of an independent Bahian republic, he would be killed, although violence was to be minimised. Faustino and three others, all of them poor mulattos, were made scapegoats for the larger plot. Like Tiradentes, they were sent to the scaffold and quartered. A number of others suffered exile, prison terms, or floggings. Minimal punishment fell on any men of means, even though the evidence
— Protest and resistance —

pointed to their collaboration in making free trade one of the movement’s demands. The extent to which the military was involved presented further cause for concern. By underscoring the city’s all-too-obvious racial hierarchy as the basis of discontent, authorities found a convenient, simplifying explanation for the sedition. The governor and court in this way cautioned wealthy whites, whether born in the colony or the kingdom, of dire consequences if they failed to remain united. The lesson resonated. More than two decades later, when the planter class joined the independence cause, they orchestrated a break with Portugal that rejected the egalitarian precedent of the Tailors’ Conspiracy (Ramos 1976; Kraay 2001).

Two more events took place in Pernambuco that historians consider when assessing disgruntled colonists in the years before independence. The first, known as the Suaçunas Conspiracy, occurred in 1801 in the port city of Olinda. The region was then benefitting from an expansion of sugar production, its traditional source of wealth, along with a boom in cotton exports tied to British textile manufacturing. Named for a sugar plantation where a few notables were alleged to have discussed revolutionary ideas, including founding a republic, the affair produced a secret investigation but no convictions. Scholars once saw seeds of nationalism, but they now consider such an interpretation teleological, shaped by what was to happen decades later. Local rivalries and tensions pit reformists, rather than revolutionaries, against those whose identification with traditional values and royal policies remained unshaken. Such tensions characterised Portugal no less than Brazil at the turn of the nineteenth century. They did not necessarily indicate a growing divide between colony and metropole (Neves 1999).

The second event, the Revolt of 1817, was far more disruptive, the only outpouring of dissent in which rebels managed to establish a provisional government, albeit for a brief two months. A decade earlier the Portuguese Crown, in flight from Napoleon’s Iberian invasion, had crossed the Atlantic to begin a 13-year sojourn in Rio de Janeiro. The presence in the colony of the queen, Prince Regent João, and their retinue of ministers and courtiers tended to mollify Brazilian elites, especially in the southeast, even as their Spanish American counterparts took decisive steps toward independence. No crisis of monarchical legitimacy occurred in Brazil as it did in Spanish America when Napoleon placed his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne. From his arrival in the colony, the prince regent liberally dispensed privileges, favours, and sinecures to cultivate allies among local elites. The opening of Brazilian ports to trade with friendly nations (namely England) in 1808, the elevation of Brazil to the status of a kingdom equal to Portugal in 1815, and the tropical acclamation of the prince as João VI upon his mother’s death in 1816, placed the very distinction between colony and metropolis in question. To the degree this distinction most mattered, it did so in reverse, leaving Portugal dependent on Brazil, not only economically, which had long been the case, but politically and administratively.

In the southeast, local merchants, landholders, and literati focused on the benefits of making Rio de Janeiro the empire’s new centre of gravity; however, for oligarchs in distant Pernambuco and other northeastern captaincies, these changes provoked resentment stemming from the conviction that they were being excluded, their needs subordinated to those of a new centralising power. It was in this context that accusations of seditious gatherings, directed at a handful of Recife’s native sons, led to an initial round of arrests. The fatal shooting of a military commander when he
attempted one of the arrests prompted the governor to seek protection in a fortress, clearing the path for a local junta to seize control. The rebels declared a republic, limited geographically to the captaincy. They wrote a draft constitution based on French precedents that left slavery in place, encouraged neighbouring captaincies to join the rebellion as separate polities, and sought support from the US and England, which was not forthcoming. To win troops to their cause, they increased military salaries, but they could not withstand a naval blockade and ground assault by royal forces. Internal dissent and difficulties recruiting partisans—both among traditionalists suspicious of republicanism and among the popular classes—also doomed the movement. The political autonomy and economic liberalism espoused by well-to-do whites stopped well short of the relief from oppression sought by the poor, slaves, and free persons of colour, whom they derided as cabras or half-castes. With its authority re-established, the crown tried the conspirators, jailing more than 150, among them bureaucrats, military officers, sugar and cotton planters, professionals, merchants, and clergy, many of whom were members of Masonic lodges. Some 20 convicted of leading the plot were executed (Costa 1975; Barman 1988).

If the perceived threat of social revolution by Brazil’s marginalised, non-white majority restrained most American-born elites from attacking Portuguese hegemony, the general inattention to native peoples and slaves in the literature on anticolonial discontent seems deeply problematic. Scholars typically acknowledge the racist fears harboured by officials and planters, and they bemoan the difficulties of documenting the political consciousness of illiterate masses. Studies of slave resistance have multiplied, and historians belatedly have recognised the sustained determination of native peoples late in the colonial period to retain their lands and shape their own histories. Yet these impediments to unchecked Portuguese domination are rarely considered in their own right as constituting significant anticolonial opposition in the decades preceding independence.

Compared to Spanish America, indigenous populations were much smaller, and they included no great sedentary agriculturalists like the Aztecs or Incas. To meet labour demands, therefore, African slave imports were much larger. Even late in the colonial period, both native raids on frontier settlements and slave resistance usually focused on local grievances, not the politics of empire. For most Indians and slaves, it mattered little whether their oppressors were American- or Portuguese-born. Internal divisions, moreover, hindered Indians and peoples of colour, even more than whites, from taking collective action. Native peoples were separated by great distances, linguistic and ethnic fragmentation, and their degree of interchange or conflict with colonial society. Peoples of African descent likewise came from diverse ethnic origins and differed according to whether they were African- or Brazilian-born, black or mulatto, Christian or Muslim, enslaved or free. 

Such differences notwithstanding, the combined challenge presented by these populations to the crown’s unfettered control far exceeded that of the late-colonial elite conspiracies, whether measured in lives lost, property damaged, production diminished, or profits denied. Great swaths of territory remained in the hands of unconquered, seminomadic peoples. While many sought accommodation with colonial authorities, others fought fiercely against settler incursions. From north to south the Mundurucú, Mura, Kayapó, Xavante, Bororo, Guaikurú, and Kaingang were only the most notorious of the indigenous groups impeding expansion into
remote territory after 1750. More centrally located—in the coastal forests bounded by Bahia, Minas Gerais, and Rio de Janeiro—autonomous groups including the Botocudo, Puri, and Pataxó frequently outwitted military patrols dispatched against them, leading the prince regent to declare a war of conquest in 1808 as one of his first acts upon arriving in the colony.

To the degree that indigenous armed defiance can be said to have constituted rebellion against centrally imposed crown policy, the culprit was the Diretório dos Índios, or Indian Directory legislation, promulgated in 1757, aimed first at Amazonian Indians, then extended to the rest of the colony. Although formally abolished in 1798, its principles continued to guide interactions in many regions. While reasserting earlier laws declaring Indians juridically free, the decree subjected those living in mission villages to the rule of lay directors appointed by captaincy governors. Those maintaining their nomadic ways were pressed to accept sedentary life. Indians were to be Christianised, “civilised”, and taught the essential skills of trade and agriculture. Marriages with colonists and use of the Portuguese language were encouraged to promote assimilation. Such policies inevitably disrupted native practices, prompting reactions ranging from negotiated compliance to violent opposition.

Slave resistance, meanwhile, remained the constant it had always been. So pervasive was the fear of insurrection that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between white paranoia and concrete plans by captives. Authorities investigated slave conspiracies, for example, in Minas Gerais in 1756, São Paulo in 1809, and Pernambuco in 1814. In Bahia more than half a dozen plots and open revolts occurred between 1807 and 1818. Fighting what historians have deemed a “war” against slavery, the Bahian rebels envisioned an end to their bondage informed less by the French and Haitian revolutions than by African ethnic and religious foundations, including Islam. At times under the appearance of Catholic piety, the spirit of rebellion coalesced in lay brotherhoods associated with urban churches. Flight, however, often proved more practicable than open rebellion. More than 150 runaway slave communities, most of them small and short-lived, have been identified in eighteenth-century Minas Gerais alone. Between 1810 and 1830, police registers listed more than 5,000 recaptured fugitives in Rio de Janeiro. Again, African precedents mattered, as runaway communities adopted modes of social and military organisation found in Angola and other regions of origin (Schwartz 1985, 468–488; Reis 1995–1996; Silva 2001b; Klein and Luna 2010, 199–200).

The abolitionist currents that gradually took hold in the Atlantic world exerted an early inspiration for these stirrings. When Pombal banned the slave trade to peninsular Portugal in 1761 and then ordered the phased ending of slavery itself in 1773, some Brazilian slaves and free people of colour hoped the measures would extend to the colony. In the early years of the nineteenth century, coloured militiamen in Rio de Janeiro made officials nervous by wearing pendants bearing the portrait of the Haitian leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In every region slaves, both male and female, struggled, often against impossible odds, to affirm cultural traditions, familial and religious bonds, and even limited legal protections vis-à-vis personal property, self-purchase contracts, and physical punishment so excessive it might result in death (Silva 2001a; Schwartz 1985; Klein and Luna 2010). The slave trade would not end until 1850; slavery itself, not until 1888. But taken as a whole, such activity proved
extremely costly to individual colonists and the state, requiring the maintenance of corps of bounty hunters, militia, and regular troops, as blacks and mulattos asserted more expansive conceptions of liberty than most whites at the time could ponder.

Not to factor this endemic pressure from below into the strains on the colonial system in the years before independence seems short-sighted at a minimum. When João VI returned to Lisbon in 1821, leaving his son Pedro behind, with much of Spanish America already declaring independence, the separation from Portugal that regional oligarchs quickly came to embrace left the existing social hierarchy all but intact. The always partial, contradictory character of anticolonial resistance again became evident the following year, when Pedro, elevated as monarch, assumed the throne of an independent Brazil. The new nation would be ruled by a scion of the same Bragança dynasty that remained on the throne of Portugal.

CONCLUSION

Although the diversity of demographic, geographic, and historical circumstances tempers any sweeping conclusions about mounting resistance to colonial rule across the multiple regions of Spanish and Portuguese America during the half-century that preceded independence, parallels are readily apparent. Both Iberian empires struggled to maintain their bearings in the face of rising northern European hegemony and the spread of revolutionary ideas and economic liberalism. They sought to control the arrival of the set of ideas that became known as the Enlightenment, censoring French texts and controlling the distribution of publications. On the other hand, they fostered or permitted scientific expeditions, intellectual societies, and a growing number of publications. A fascinating combination of intellectual currents, both new and old, animated the protests and uprisings summarised here (Brading 1991; Rosas Lauro 2006). In both cases, metropolitan reformers imposed new administrative and fiscal measures that upset the colonial status quo, even more so in Spanish America than in Brazil. The resulting discontent did not always open gaping rifts, because traditionalist currents determined to preserve the colonial compact almost everywhere coincided with and offset liberalising tendencies.

In both Spanish and Portuguese America, a fast-growing population of non-elites, mostly peoples of colour, pressed their claims unequally distributed resources and unfairly apportioned opportunities for well-being and social advancement. Consequences differed, however, not least because the vast proportion of labourers in Spanish America were of native descent, while in Brazil they were of African origins and widely enslaved. This piece of the puzzle remains one of the most challenging for historians. Emphasising modernising American-born elites, scholars traditionally ignored the masses in analyses of increasing colonial restiveness during the decades before independence. No longer satisfied with such a limited vision, they now seek ways to understand the individual and collective consciousness of largely illiterate masses. As a consequence, elites are now seen as more united in their conservatism and their open fear of social revolution than in their willingness to ponder separating from their metropolitan masters.
As the final collapse of the colonial system neared, a profound divergence in transatlantic trajectories opened up when the two monarchies suffered the effects of Napoleon’s Iberian invasion. The toppling of Spain’s Bourbons and the flight to Brazil of Portugal’s Braganças made distinctive reactions inevitable, with regal legitimacy undermined more rapidly and violently in Spanish America. This difference proved decisive in the post-1808 prelude to independence and in the years following separation, the subject of the next chapter.

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