CHAPTER THIRTY

WAR AND REVOLUTION IN THE IBERIAN ATLANTIC

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INTRODUCTION

After exterminating swaths of native peoples of the Americas, Iberian rulers and their allies created elaborate, stratified, loosely integrated, societies dependent on extensive coerced labour. Yet, they were remarkably stable, better known for their loyalty to monarchy than rebelliousness. When order did break down, as it did in spectacular fashion in the 1780s in the Andes, the fight was over venal governors, not bad monarchical government.

By the 1810, however, Pax Iberica was no more. Flames of violence had spread far and wide. Within a few years, entire regions, like Venezuela and the Banda Oriental, were depopulated. Colonial estates lay ruined. Countrysides were mobilised in fratricidal civil war. Many of the mines and silver trails were flooded, destroyed, the labour systems that buoyed them shattered. Three centuries after conquest and incorporation, European control had collapsed. Even where colonial elites managed to avoid the maw of civil war, as in Brazil, there was carnage and turmoil. The monarchy and territorial integrity of the colony hung on by their teeth while slave sedition spread in the northeast and warfare in the southern borderlands forced the court to bulk up their armies and go into debt. Their costs became important drivers of the dissolution of formal ties between Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro and strained Rio’s ties to Brazilian provinces. Violence remade the Iberian Atlantic.

This presents us with a paradox on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Never had the Iberian colonies been so economically buoyant, populated, with growing cities, thriving estates, and confident merchant capitalists. The fledgling press, much of it hitched to the printers of the merchant guilds, exuded loyalty to the crown. Whereas external threats and warfare—as Linda Colley (1992) has famously shown in the case of the British empire—tended to embolden political subjects to their wardens, the effect in the Iberian Atlantic dissolved the bonds of deference. Why?

Of the many explanations, this chapter focuses on one: how the transition to a militarised social and political order on the eve of the dissolution of the Spanish and Portuguese empires turned relatively combat-free colonial societies into warzones
before they broke away from Lisbon and Madrid. It argues that the Iberian Atlantic became a theatre for the circulation of revolutionary impulses and the mobilisation of societies for war on a mass scale fuelled by a wider, global, war. It did so because rival imperial belligerents fastened their sights on Spain and Portugal’s relationships to the Americas. This global war over colonial spoils folded inwards, setting off civil wars within empires. In turn, these civil wars put more pressure on Iberian Ancien Régimes to change—and eventually set off a cascade of secessions. This chapter accents the global, systemic, disequilibrium that swept up the Iberian empires, which led to the militarisation of politics up and down the late imperial chains. Imperial decomposition was the effect, and not cause, of a set of prior institutional transformations rooted in the way that modern military forces became instruments of power and of state-making, marking a sharp shift away from patrician rule to constitutionalism. In short, it was not declarations of independence that set off the violence. In this sense, war presaged debates about sovereignty and not the other way around.

While war and revolution had effects on the Iberian Atlantic at several scales at once, from imperial governance to local social conflicts, they were fused by a blow to the Ancien Régimes: Napoleon’s invasion of Spain and Portugal in 1807, which ricocheted across the empires. The crisis of the Ancien Régimes began at their cores. Capitals (whether Madrid, or Lisbon, or viceregal Mexico City or Lima) struggled to preserve monarchy as the ballast of the empires; in so doing, governments contrived new methods of mobilisation and released new sources of strife. This meant that even after Napoleon’s defeat and the restoration of monarchy in 1814, growing conflict in colonial fringes placed unprecedented demands on monarchs and ministers, boxing them into policies that escalated the conflict—and made any thought of returning to a reconditioned pax Iberica increasingly impossible. In contrast to the post-Napoleonic restoration of aristocratic, non-constitutional, rule in Europe, there was no turning back the clock in the Iberian Atlantic.

HISTORIANS AND THEIR LABYRINTH

War and revolution have loomed large in the making of the Iberian Atlantic. This is true above all for the period known as the age of revolution, which has been understood as an era of possibility and as a cataclysm at one and the same time, of lofty proclamations about the principles of states and primal bloodshed over who spoke for their members. Notions of fraternal citizenship coexisted with—some might say fed off—the increasingly ritualised clashes between feuding cousins of the Iberian empires. Observers were fond of evoking the breakdown and breakup of Spanish rule as creating “anarchy” or its threat, the spectre of dissolving norms and rules into an orgy of wanton bloodshed. If the Portuguese-Atlantic is spared this narrative of failure and inevitable violence, it is only because it was seen never to have emerged from an ancient, patrimonial, mould; there was no downward spiral because—goes the familiar story—there was no concerted pressure to change.

There has been a fundamental ambiguity sown into how historians have grappled with the role of violence in the remaking of states in the Iberian Atlantic. Warfare and revolution were central to the birth of Iberian nations and the historians who assumed the mantle of creating foundational narratives for fledgling countries. They provided the dramatic elements of the first epics of patriotic nation-writing and
nation-building. And yet, political violence was often seen as the scourge—warfare and revolutionary struggle brought down the pillars of the Ancien Régimes, or threatened to; political violence was necessary to pull down the old orders but it also thwarted the efforts to build new, constitutional, orders and played into the hands of personalist caudillos and tyrants who made political careers out of abilities to field armies and operate as spoilers. If the Brazilian counterpoint got idealised for conservatives, it was because the monarchy and ruling bloc managed to contain the furies of war and revolution. But this often meant that Brazil lacked emblematic, self-sacrificing icons and heroes for later patriotic narratives, the stuff of nation-building, triumphal mythography.

There is not much left of this patriotic hand-wringing nowadays—at least not among academic historians. The view among historians is that the crisis of the old imperial orders sired the idea of national successors; the idea of Mexico, Brazil, or Spain emerged as a result of imperial decomposition instead of causing it. What is more, the breakdown of empire was the result of a crisis of the Ancien Régimes at the heart of empires, not in colonial efforts to break away. For instance, François-Xavier Guerra and Jaime Rodríguez O. emphasised the shocks to the old system coming from the Napoleonic invasion of 1807, which smashed the institutional bulwarks of the monarchy which—until then—had served remarkably well as defences of legitimacy (Guerra 1992; Rodríguez O. 1998). For Guerra, precocious expressions of modern political life—such as public opinion—were thrust upon the Hispanic monarchy from without, upsetting its organic chemistry. To Rodríguez, French aggression shattered the basic harmony of the regime. They differed in some basic ways; to Guerra, the intrusions were necessarily destabilising and set in motion the course of revolution, while Rodríguez accented a plausible compromise to rescue the Hispanic nation in the form of the Cádiz Constitution of 1812—which was spoiled by “extremists” in the colonies and in Spain who could not reconcile themselves to a more inclusionary imperial system.

There was an additional, modern, “shock” to Iberian systems that frequently got overlooked in the revisionist turn, but which the patriotic narrative once emphasised: the shock of escalating warfare and revolutionary violence. This chapter turns the spotlight back to a key theme of the patriotic narrative. But instead of presuming that violence was the expression of nations and nationalist pioneers coming into being through self-sacrifice and martyrdom, this chapter emphasises the political and institutional dimensions of violence which spawned a plethora of political practices and identities, many of them transcending and destabilising the drive to national self-determination and cohesion. Seen in this light, we can treat the origins of alternative forms of political communities—and the struggle over which would prevail—free of the normative deadweight of failed nations or fractured states.

GLOBAL WAR

It is important to begin the analysis at a scale above the imperial structures that were thrown into crisis. The global conflagration, fuelled by intensified rivalries of a European imperial inter-state system, did less to dislodge the appeal of empire than to shatter the foundations of legitimacy that held them together, exemplified by the majesty of royal power that enjoyed supreme authority within imperial territories.
What global war did was produce a fiscal crisis of empire and the molecular decomposition of political authority. The demise of the *dignitas* of the monarch and his power to exempt himself from the very rules of state he was expected to enforce translated into a full-blown crisis of sovereignty. A time-honoured response to emergencies, the power of rulers to invoke a “state of exception” that subordinates the wills and rights of subjects in order to enforce state authority, ceased to work. Even more: the efforts of rulers to uphold sovereignty by recourse to this method backfired and brought the sovereign to his knees (in Spain) or to flee (in Portugal). In this convolution, a space opened up that enabled subjects to imagine anew the principles and practices of state power (Adelman 2006; Agamben 1998).

The crisis of the monarchies took place against large-scale efforts to give them new ballast. In the wake of the Treaties of Westphalia (1648), which firmly up the denominational lines in western Europe and settled some basic boundaries, European empires turned their rivalries more and more overseas, to the Atlantic and Indian ocean contests for spoils and colonies. 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 colonisation to supplant the spoils of conquest (Adelman 2006, 36). This led to a spiral of mercantilist wars, more treaties to manage the quarrel over possessions, especially in the New World, and outward concerns with territorial possessions and colonisation—no longer restricting imperial designs on commercial or predatory policy. This added pressure on the imperial pioneers, Spain and Portugal, as the targets for the newcomers. They also ramped up the rivalry between them, especially over the coveted River Plate gateway. In 1776, Charles III ordered an assault on Portuguese positions with a substantial fleet, 12 battalions of infantry and 12 companies of cavalry. The result handed Sacramento to new viceregal authorities in Buenos Aires, but also sowed the seeds for ongoing strife in future years.

Transatlantic competition and escalating mercantilist warfare motivated a round of deep imperial reform—with the aim of creating economic and fiscal structures that would withstand empires in an age of greater competition over markets, territories, and eventually the loyalty of subjects. Various described as the Bourbon (for Spain) or Pombaline (for Portugal) reforms, they had multiple means to pursue a 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. José de Gálvez, Minister of the Indies, proclaimed the military reforms because “the defence of the King’s rights is united to the defence of their property, their families, their patria, and their happiness” (McFarlane 2014, 16; Fradera 2005; Elliott 2006).

By tethering defence and loyalty, the reforms had important implications for political life within the empire. And this would contour the mechanisms of breakdown and breakup. The pressures of interlocking rivalries, especially after the humiliation of the Seven Years War, and the fall of Havana and Manila to the British navy, compelled Spanish reformers to devise new means to enforce laws with the hope of generating revenues to defend the realm. Lumbering convoys were suspended in favour of licensing systems for trading ships. Viceregal habits ceded space to a multitude of new legal districts and officers, further pluralising the spatial layers
of public authority. And scarcely patrolled frontiers were militarised, fortifications built, and militias trained, comprised of plebeian colonial populations, often free blacks and mulattos. Of course, the motivation for change was defensive, a reaction and response to the compound pressures of rivalry with other empires and with each other. But the effect was palpable and was meant to be palpable: to widen and deepen royal authority throughout the realm, and to couple territorial power to the concept of royal justice for a *populus Christianus* in the remaking of Spanish sovereignty. In Portugal, the rising costs of imperial defence pushed the monarchy into the waiting arms of British forces to act as wards, which meant in practice that Lisbon would follow London’s dictates and let local militias bear even more of the responsibility for colonial defences—which created a lasting legacy of fusing local rural powerholders with local commanding officers. The two monarchies diverged; if Spain sought to centralise its defences and governance, Portugal de-centralised (Fisher 1985; Kraay 2001; Stein and Stein 2003; Weber 2005). The struggle to preserve a central fabric in the Spanish realm would lead to popular mobilisation, increasing civil war, and finally an end to monarchy and the *Ancien Régime*, while in the Portuguese realm, the transatlantic ties finally snapped in the 1820s, but Brazil remained intact, slavery expanded, and monarchy became ever more important to the regime’s legitimacy on both sides of the Atlantic.

In different ways, these measures, especially the new fiscal demands, risked tarnishing the king’s character *anglicus*. Reconstituting the regimes provoked a riptide of opposition, less to the principles and more to the practices of new imperial sovereignty, both within the metropoles and more ominously in the colonies. To be sure, this was not unique to Iberian dominions, as British North American colonists revealed in the 1770s. 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 and deposed. This did not scupper reform, but simply slowed it down. The reforms also provoked unrest in the colonies, albeit not as much because incumbent interests easily 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 (early 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. The Túpac Amaru revolt in the Peru, Comunero uprisings further north, and seditious activity across New Spain testified to local opposition to fiscal demands and commercial privileges. Still, a resilient political theology of sovereignty remained an indispensable feature that legitimated the quest for revenues; it largely fell to local caciques and political brokers, like Mateo García Pumacahua in Cuzco—and their gendarmes—to restore order. Indeed, since so many of the “rebellions” arose under the banner of a *populus Christianus*, defending it against corrupt officials and venal merchants, it was easy for authorities to claim they were on the side of the rebels—in spirit, if not always in deed (McFarlane 1983).

The king’s envoys could thus shroud themselves in his angel wings. It was when the king had his wings clipped that the extractive machine of the *Ancien Régime* lurched into a legitimacy crisis of imperial proportions. To rush to this endpoint,
however, skips some crucial steps in the passage to crisis. Indeed, the pace and process of reform did not let up; popular local resistances merely redirected the focus of reform. As the eighteenth century unfolded, all Atlantic empires contrived measures to combine more thoroughly labour with natural resources. This intensified after the fiscal stalemate of the 1770s; thereafter, reformers impressed upon the crown the necessity of expanding the regime’s commercial rents to its merchant classes as a precondition for enlisting more revenues flowing into imperial coffers. To the defence of the territorial reach of their domains were added greater efforts to promote the traffic in African slaves and the release of Indians from their villages to create a sub-stratum of labourers upon whose shoulders the fate of trading empires would rest. 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. A renewed pact was in the making, of merchants and monarchs, allied to partition the spoils of an extractive economy and plough resources into the business of sacralising authority. The effectiveness of the rents-for-revenues arrangement—the exchange of loyalty to crown authorities in return for protection of merchant trading rackets—gave the empire a buoyancy that came in handy when times got very tough (Adelman 2006; Gelman 1998; Marichal 1999).

**WORLD IN REVOLUTION**

The outbreak of the French Revolution intensified the changes under way. As it spread outwards into a struggle over the future of monarchy in Europe and empire across the Atlantic, it pushed the Portuguese government to the mercies of the British and caught Spain in a vice between a revolutionary neighbour and the British navy overseas. Wars, especially Spain’s with France from 1793 to 1795, and then morecrippingly 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. Charles IV’s favourite advisor, Manuel de Godoy, had to flip flop between opposing and aligning with the French. Unable to intimidate neighbouring revolutionary armies and Napoleonic successors, Madrid was forced into crippling wars with Britain. The one solace for the Portuguese Crown was not having to face a direct threat from France over land. 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 skill, involved a recognition that Brazil was as important to the future of the imperial monarchy as the metropole. If the court were to run into a serious crisis, the monarchy should consider relocating the centre of the empire to a New World capital, Rio de Janeiro. Similar plans were considered in Madrid but were quickly squelched (Silva Lisboa 1804; Maxwell 1973).

Global war produced contradictory effects. As warships prowled the sea lanes eyeing Spanish cargos destined for European ports, the globalisation of the conflict
crippled Iberian merchant houses who were already under pressure to bankroll defences at home. Furthermore, metropolitan merchants also had to endure colonial merchants’ demands for rights to trade with neutral partners. While peninsular trade often suffered, American commerce surged in new directions. The slave trade, for instance, boomed. 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 sought to claw back their commercial rents, even if it meant alienating the increasingly autonomous merchants in colonial outposts. As with the distribution of imperial rents, so with imperial revenues; the metropoles faced growing fiscal crises as defence 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 metropoles 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 sea lanes. 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 centres of empires on their peripheries, and the state upon merchant capital to buoy it through years of inter-imperial warfare (Barbier 1980; Garner 1993).

Warfare and revolution also had the effect of redoubling anxieties. Especially the grand fear of slave insurrection in the wake of the uprisings on Saint Domingue, rumours of slave unrest in Bahia, and squelched sedition in Venezuela and Nueva Granada led rulers and ruled to pull back from any revolutionary temptations lest they lead to “race war.” “I confess”, wrote the Venezuelan creole Francisco de Miranda in 1798,

> that much though I desire the independence and liberty of the New World, I fear anarchy and revolution even more. God forbid that other countries suffer the same fate as Saint Domingue … better they should remain another century under the barbarous and senseless oppression of Spain.

(Pagden 1990, 12)

Adaptations to global war had important effects on the internal balancing of empire. Dependency on the fringes gave to local brokers an important role in maintaining the equipoise within empire that was being ravaged by conflict between them. Increasingly, the primary sites in the governance of colonial affairs were merchant guilds and municipal councils. Viceroys and high courts still weighed in, but there was a notable devolution of authority to the delegated authorities of colonial ruling blocs and their assemblies of local potentates (Paquette 2007). Governance and extraction became more complex, sovereignty more hybrid and fluid. The Spanish empire was hardly a feeble or brittle regime lying in wait for the last blow to bring it down (Lynch 1985; Brading 1983).

One of the implications of the summary above is that we cannot point to increasingly outdated notions of sovereignty as the source of the problem, as if imperial
sovereignty were contained within a mould out of which it could not change or adapt. The breakdowns did not occur as prophesised (by Abbé Raynal, Adam Smith, and other figures of the Enlightenment), as an affliction that would sweep the older empires of Spain and Portugal away for being relics of a by-gone era. These empires were not doomed to collapse; nor were they cracking from within. Still, there was plenty of anxiety, stoked by a global context of instability and uncertainty. For the time being, at least, the prevailing discourse of public affairs was steeped in loyalism. Indeed, global pressures emboldened efforts to accommodate within inherited allegiances and ideas of imperial political economy of empire a new balance between merchants and monarchs (Pocock 1985; Root 1994).

The problem was that the dynamics of the French Revolution could not be contained. They could not be contained because they unfolded within an empire—that remained intact even after the execution of the French king and queen in 1793. Napoleon was committed not to restore the Ancien Régime but the empire that it had created. He sent troops to Saint Domingue to put down the slave revolt. That did not go well, and after his defeat there in 1804, he set his sights on alternatives. In the wake of Britain’s botched efforts to invade the River Plate in 1806, once Russia got knocked out at the Battle of Friedland (secret clauses of the Treaty of Tilsit gave France a free hand to take over Iberia while St Petersburg would get what it wanted from the Ottomans), and cued by some reformers in Madrid and a few in Lisbon (the so-called afrancesados), Napoleon turned on the Iberian peninsula, hoping to strap it to his wider ambitions to export the revolution. In October 1807, he manoeuvred the unpopular and increasingly desperate Godoy into an agreement (the Treaty of Fontainebleau) to allow French troops to cross Spain en route to Portugal to prevent the Braganza court in Lisbon from throwing its fate to the British. In return, the Luso-Atlantic gains would be partitioned between the victors. It was a gambit that failed. Instead, Napoleon’s armies marched on Lisbon, though not in time to prevent the royal family, treasury, retinue, and library from being escorted by British warships out of the harbour and on to Rio de Janeiro to set up a new capital, and a new world monarchy, in Brazil. Napoleon also immediately pivoted on internal affairs in Spain, deposed and gaoled Charles IV and his son, Fernando VII, and replaced them with his brother Joseph, who promised to bring peace and constitutionalism to the Spanish empire. The result was to shock the pillars of sovereignty in the Spanish and Portuguese empires and export Europe’s conflagration.

REvolutions in Sovereignty

The Spanish reformer, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, observed that the breakup of the Spanish empire was a civil war contained within and unleashed by a broader, global conflagration (cit. Alvarez Junco 2001, 121). What sealed the fate of Spain’s empire was not the rigidity of sovereignty, nor the refusal to deal with local claims, nor the inability to find new means to embolden loyalty to king and country. It was the inability to escape the maw of “total war” as it spread to far reaches of the Atlantic world. The difference about total war, a fundamental change in the nature of organised armed conflict as an all-encompassing struggle of annihilation, was that victory was no longer limited to contested borderlands in the fringes, but over how regimes would be ruled at home and abroad. David Bell cites Clausewitz:
the war of the present is a war of all against all. It is not the King who wars on a
king, not an army which wars on an army, but a people which wars on another,
and the king and the army are contained in the people.

The future of monarchy itself, the integrative emblem of imperial sovereignty,
was at stake; and as the stakes rose, the conflict between systems escalated—and
in the end folded the violence between empires into carnage within them (Bell
2007, 241).

In effect, global imperial war turned inwards into a revolutionary war that took
on increasingly lethal, and fratricidal, features. Napoleon also brought on local, guer-
rilla, insurgencies, which afflicted his cause in what he called his “Spanish ulcer”.
Immortalised by the doomed uprisings of the second of May 1808—which spawned
Francisco Goya’s haunting portrait of French firing squads shooting civilians—the
war grew ever more brutal. By 1810, large pockets of Spain had turned into killing
fields. When the French Marshal Suchet cleared Upper Aragon of guerrillas, he
seized the local insurgent, known as Pesoduro, to make an emblem of the futility of
resistance. French soldiers cut off his hands while Pesoduro was still alive and nailed
them for public viewing, then they dragged him, bleeding, to a scaffold. The rope
broke three times, and only on the fourth try did the French manage not to cockup
the execution and kill their captive. Pesoduro’s death presaged a style of warfare that
would fan out across the Spanish empire and in some cases spill into the Portuguese
(Tone 1994, 126).

What exported the local carnage was the monarchy’s double dependency on mer-
chant capitalists at home and local power brokers in the fringes to bankroll the
regimes’ defences. Under conditions of total war, fiscal demands rose while commer-
cial orientations splintered. Peninsular merchants resented concessions to open trade
in the colonies, while merchants in the colonies made these concessions the quid
for their fiscal pro. In the Portuguese empire, the problem was less acute because
peninsular merchants already had to accept their junior partnership to Brazilian
and British magnates; besides, the war at home and conflicts in Brazil paled beside
the mobilisations across the Spanish empire. In effect, Iberian colonies were thrown
open as markets to “friendly” or “neutral” trading partners. The Portuguese were the
first to announce this as a principle for the new imperial political economy; Souza
Countinho, while still aboard the flotilla crossing the Atlantic en route from Lisbon,
drafted an “Open Ports” decree which the Prince João VI announced to great fanfare
when he disembarked him, bleeding, to a scaffold. That it was the ruler who announced the degree
would make it hard for merchants back home to disobey. In Spanish American ports,
the openings were more halting; there was greater resistance because the agents of
peninsular houses feared that this would be the death knell to Cádiz (with good
reason). Meanwhile, the struggling Spanish government, retreated to Cádiz, couldn’t
easily open colonial ports without alienating the merchants in the peninsular port
upon whom the government was increasingly dependent for loans to sustain itself.
What this meant was great friction at the top of the ruling class of the empires,
unravelling the ties of dependency between merchants and monarchs. But as some
colonies proclaimed their autonomy within empire in the absence of a ruling king,
the interests of colonial and peninsular merchants diverged; the imperial ruling class
It is important to note, however, that the growing weakness of state structures after 1808 did not provoke secessionist movements when it would have been easiest for colonies to “exit”. Indeed, for more years than the patriotic historiography is comfortable admitting, colonial and metropolitan ruling classes wrangled over the crisis as rival claims over “loyalty”. However, warfare, and the need to squeeze resources from sources across the empires did compel a radical shift in the conduct of public affairs—pushing Ancien Régimes to new modes of representation to legitimate fiscal claims and exactions. It is for this reason that, in provinces of empire that most spiralled into war (in the River Plate, Venezuela, and Nueva Granada), the shock of modern politics most upended old, patrician, practices that sustained the old, colonial, pact. It also explains why, as in Brazil, the shock of war and modern politics were less dramatic, more easily absorbed within fabric of the old order. The politics of discussion, debate, and in some quarters confrontation about managing the crisis, yielded to changes in sovereignty because they created room for people to disagree about their ideas and their interests about the future. In the prolonged improvisation after 1808, old coordinates gave way; the principles and practices of rulership were compelled to change before the actual rulers themselves.

A search for new means to legitimate the old order ensued. Striking at the cores of the Spanish empire, French armies forced ruling cliques on both sides of the Atlantic to improvise to rescue the empire. These improvisations were hardly home-spun inventions. Nor were they random. Indeed, there has been an unsettled debate over whether the first instincts of interim rulers were to remit to ancient Natural Law in the case of emergency—which supposed that in the absence of the kind, sovereignty reverted to an ancient concept of “the people”. Most historians would now concede that there some feudal precedent may have been on the minds of some. But overwhelmingly it was the example of other regimes’ search for legitimacy, premised on practices of public representation, that provided the models (Rodríguez 1998; Chiaramonte 1994).

The first shock was the transformation in “voice”, a transformation, it was hoped, that would embolden the love of subjects for the monarch, even if he was out of the picture. Subjects had to accept as legitimate those who spoke on his behalf. The printing press burst to life to broadcast the loyalist cause. Instructions flowed forth to lift restrictions (in Mexico, Lima, Buenos Aires and elsewhere) or allowed printers to operate where they did not yet exist (Caracas, Chile, and elsewhere) to re-sacralise monarchy and restore confidence in ministers. While Fernando languished in French captivity, the interim government in Spain fled the pursuing French armies to Andalusia. From there, it abolished the inquisition and declared an end to censorship. The printing press, once treated with suspicion, became a key instrument in the campaign to promote colonial loyalty to the king and Spain—and resistance to French and France’s promises. The Venezuelan journalist and jurist, Miguel José Sanz, argued that public opinion was indeed the only true force capable of containing political passions and ensuring that good laws got passed. Good laws, after all, are the only ones that patriots can love. “The state and political force of law is the result of this opinion”, he noted in late 1810 (Sanz 1988, 89).

With time, however, the very instrument that was unfettered to legitimate the Spanish government gave way to more and more lurid accounts of colonial administrators’ misdemeanours and eventually a means to broadcast bad news
from the metropole. Perhaps the most notorious was Camilo Torres’ *Memorial de Agravios* which catalogued grievances against imperial authorities after they suppressed an uprising in Quito calling for more radical reforms. He insisted that Americans were not “strangers within the Spanish nation”, but sons, “descendants of those who spilled their blood to acquire new dominions for the Spanish Crown”. Instead of gratitude and recognition, Americans were now getting the opposite. After denouncing the Spanish governor, Torres trumpeted “equality, sacred right of equality; justice that rests on you and gives what belongs to each of us, may you inspire European Spain with these sentiments of Spanish America” (Torres 1977, 29). Governments and governors had to cope with the birth of public opinions; this meant contending with dissent with inquisitorial zeal or indifference was likely to produce much more than mere consent of the governed. To be sure, public opinions were free in degrees: it was more open in some corners, like Buenos Aires and Bogotá, but was muzzled in Mexico and in Peru, where Viceroy José Fernando de Abascal greeted the new liberal degrees with dismay. But even these holdouts against public opinion opened up (Guerra and Lempérière 1988; Uribe-Urán 2000; Guedea 2000; Peralta Ruiz 2002; Silva 1988).

What followed cannot be simplified or reduced to “revolutionary” or “counter-revolutionary” mobilisation. Calls for independence were scarce. It is true, Paraguay bolted, and Caracas and Cartagena considered following suit; there were also republicans in New Spain, especially following the parish priest, Father José Manuel Morelos. Mostly, republicans got crushed. Paraguay aside, the call for outright independence did not resolve itself with secession.

For the most part, a feud erupted over how best to cope with the crisis of the empire, using new means to legitimate it in order to revive it. There were areas where early triumphs of autonomism and even secessionism took the political reins but crumbled under the weight of internal dissent and opposition from loyalist circles who loathed the liberating decrees—as well as the taxes and the turmoil. This was clear all along the northern belt of South America. Caracas’ “liberators” soon faced opposition from loyalists in Maracaibo. The magnates of the city, who liked home rule, inspired the wrath of plebeian *llaneros* who bridled at the aristocratic contempt that many creoles, like Francisco de Miranda and Simón Bolívar, felt for the rustic folk in the countryside, where, among other things, men from the Canary Islands, or provincial Asturians—like José Tomás Boves—had assimilated into the fabric of rural life. An earthquake in March 1812 brought all the roiling tensions to the capital: the bishops thundered that this was God’s gesture of opprobrium against the liberal pretenders who were building their Tower of Babel where once the edifice of loyalty and Christian belief stood proud. Venezuela became a bleeding ground. So, did the north coast of Nueva Granada, where the ports of Cartagena and Santa Marta—outposts of autonomism and loyalism respectively—glared at each other across the slave belt that seethed with runaways, armed bands of *libertos*, and where Bolívar offered his revolutionary services after the Caracas regime collapsed in the rubble of its seismic justice. There were a few cases of survival. For instance, home-rulers within empire on one shore of the River Plate got the upper hand and kept it. They immediately found themselves embroiled in conflicts with loyalists all around—from the Andes to the Banda Oriental, with Brazilian armies bolstering royalism from the north. The provinces of Paraguay and Buenos Aires were lonely
outposts of secession that had not folded back into the Spanish regime by 1814, and Buenos Aires did not declare independence per se until 1816.

The crisis over the meaning of membership in empire cascaded into new domains of public life, especially the nascent electoral activity and public opinion. In so doing, it ushered new social actors on to the political stage. These included hitherto marginalised sectors of freed subjects of African descent and increasing numbers of slaves seized the opportunity to break the chains of bondage. It also included members of Indian communities who seized their opportunity to expand the range of voice. For both, the summons for subjects of the crown to choose their deputies to constitutional assemblies provoked a debate—and a fight—over who got the right to play the new political game. Across the region, direct elections became mechanisms for legitimating new orders and the means to choose representatives to constitutional conventions to draft them. Ballot-casting (or hand-raising) rituals were often the first time communities celebrated public events that were not organised directly by the Church (Ternavasio 1995; Drake 2009).

The invention of a rights-bearing citizen had profound effects on older understandings of race and ethnicity and reveal how a universal rhetoric of liberalism erased the formal ascriptions and restrictions of caste conjugated within the old regime’s ornate, particularising practices of social membership according to bloodline and place in a social hierarchy. Beyond capital cities, the official meaning of Indian referred to membership in a particular landholding community governed by the colonial Repú blica de Indios and the traditional place of the Church. But rather than throw off tradition, Indians poised themselves simultaneously as miserable, endowed with ancient rights and as citizens with liberal ones.

A generation of Indians began to make effective political careers out of juggling several legal claims and political identities. Even in the smallest hamlets, little “repúblicas” sprang to life—and it would be from these wellsprings that indigenous political leaders would emerge to shape future republics. In some cases, liberalism activated a shift in local indigenous rule. Andean kurakas or ethnic chiefs with inherited rights claimed by noble lineage made way for rotating authorities and arriviste leaders, many of whom cut their teeth as veterans fighting on both sides of the independence wars. Far from ancient aristocrats, these men were rough around the edges, muleteers, petty hacendados, and cattle rustlers. To outsiders, it seemed as if village politics had been thrown into turmoil and the provincial space shattered into microcosmic communities after generations of control from above. For villagers, convening the people spawned new practices of local citizenship that gave the fledgling order elements of much-needed legitimacy. At the same time, as warfare deepened, it mobilised indigenous communities to fight on all sides. Some communities aligned with royalists, seeking to defend or restore an ancient colonial pact. In some cases, and in increasing numbers, they tilted to the side of revolutionaries. It was in this way that warfare moved up and down the scales of the polity, from the formation of imperial armies in Spain and Portugal, to local villages riven by rival loyalties.

A similar dynamic also mobilised Afro-Latin Americans, especially in areas where the feuding got increasingly militarised. In Brazil, for instance, the conflict was contained; insurrections in Bahia and in the southern Platine provinces got snuffed out. The Republic of Pernambuco got crushed. Before they had any chance
of unleashing widespread mobilisation of slaves, Brazilian elites managed to patch their differences—in part because of a shared grand peur of a Haitian-style crisis. In many Spanish American provinces, meanwhile, mixed-race peoples, free blacks, and emancipated slaves rallied to more radical ideas of emancipation and even questioning fealty to monarchs and empire if they would not embrace more equal concepts of citizenship. Rebel leaders like José de Artigas in the Banda Oriental, or the mulatto Manuel Piar in Venezuela, promised freedom outright to any slave who joined their armies. It was for this reason that Simón Bolívar eventually embraced, after many defeats, the abolitionist cause in 1814. Even the royalist general, Pablo Morillo, saw the same light five years later as the empire was finally cracking up—but by that time, his was a concession that was too little, too late (Blanchard 2008; Lasso 2007).

Everywhere, the splintering and feuding took its toll. Campaigns to liberate Upper Peru from royalists who obeyed Abascal in Lima destroyed the colonial labour recruitment systems for the silver mines. In Mexico, the massive uprising led by Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla also disrupted the old colonial economic structures and forced the viceroy to field large armies to put down the rebels—with an ever-tighter budget.

In spite of the splintering, the upheavals after 1808 left loyalists and their armies in control of most of the core Iberian possessions. This was hardly the fall from power that so many Enlightened prognosticators would have predicted for Spain. On the other hand, nor was this prolonged status—seven years of limbo—buoyed by a shared sense of basic norms and political practices. Voice and representation did not fill the void of a hobbled sovereign but gave rise to a spectrum of civil conflicts within the international one. Some swept autonomists into local feuds. Some contained the friction within the vessel of an Ancien Régime controlled by astutely pragmatic, if staunchly conservative, viceroys. Abascal, having crushed insurgencies from Ecuador to the Altiplano, became the architect of viceregal continuity in Lima; only a few surviving republiquetas remained, clinging to legal ideas of equality and freedom from ancient tithes. General Félix María Calleja accomplished the same in New Spain after his armies crushed Hidalgo’s and Morelos’ forces. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, the king himself kept a lid on rumblings on the northeast and southern borderlands.

There may have been a breakdown, but not a breakup. The empires shook, but they did not fall apart when their centres were at their weakest. Portuguese and Spanish armies and guerrillas, supported by a British expeditionary force, drove the French out of the peninsula in a gruelling war; colonial armies put down rebels and insurgents. Only the fissiparous River Plate provinces had successfully defected by 1814, though still without having declared independence (Paraguay being the only provincial exception—and there is some debate about whether Asunción’s break away was directed more against Buenos Aires than against Madrid). In that year, Ferdinand returned to power in Spain, determined to reassert control over his fragile empire.

It was then, when the restored regime tried to restore the status quo ante, that frail systems began to go up in flames; Fernando’s counter-revolution begat a revolution and took the violence to new depths.
FROM CIVIL WAR TO REVOLUTION

In June 1814, at a critical gateway to Caracas, the royalist forces under José Tomás Boves clashed with and crushed the crumbling republican armies. The warlord Boves took special delight in slaughtering his opponents and public desecration of their corpses. After the battle, he took morbid delight with his victory, mixing the festive with the funereal: he dined with a captured commander Col. Diego Jalón, then publicly humiliated him before his fellow captives, ordered 200 lashes, then they all watched him be executed; his head shared the fate of others at the end of a pike for all to see (Pérez Tenreiro n.d., 91–92; McFarlane 2014, 126–129).

No side monopolised the escalating ritualisation of violence. Boves’ atrocities echoed Bolívar’s own infamous declaration a year earlier to wage a guerra a muerte campaign to consolidate Venezuela’s freedom. In fact, his promise to exterminate the region of Spaniards and Canary Islanders exemplified the new logic of total war. He offered rewards for Spanish severed heads, and promotions to soldiers who had executed peninsulares. In Mexico, José Vicente Gómez began, around late 1812, to castrate his Spanish captives; indeed, assassinations had become routine as hatred simmered below the surface of the restored viceroyalty. The turn from gentlemanly debate to bloody score-settling was perhaps best captured by one of its apostles: Mariano Moreno. As the Secretary of the First Junta in Buenos Aires, he issued a blueprint of revolution in which he wrote that “moderation is a weakness when a system is adopted in circumstances that do not require it. Never in a revolution has moderation and tolerance been adopted with success.” In a gruesome passage outlining the practicalities of securing the revolution, he advocated “cutting heads, spilling blood and sacrificing at all costs, even when it means adopting means that look like the customs of cannibals and Caribs” (Moreno 1915, 307; Adelman 2010).

What happened? The implosion of the Spanish empire grew more lethal as it reverberated from the metropole where it began. In so doing, the principles of sovereignty that enforced exploitation and legitimated social inequality yielded to a vacuum—and the vacuum divided and separated groups of people into rival camps whose disagreements cascaded into localised civil war, understood as “armed combat within the boundaries of a recognised sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of hostilities”, occasioned by a break in legal authority, the fragmentation of juridical spaces, and intensified by efforts to restore an old order. It is important to underscore that animosities produced group divides; the divides and differences followed the conflict and carnage. The stepped-up conflict shaped political choices over who was the enemy, and how to rid it in an effort to restore, or create anew, a model of sovereignty. So, even where loyalism prevailed or triumphed, there was nonetheless a spectre of a crisis of sovereignty—the consequence of accumulated years of global warfare and the shock of the French invasion (Kalyvas 2006).

But that is only the first step; after all, civil wars can be, and often were, contained within local boundaries. What happened after 1814 was that, in an effort to impose order, the restored king promised to “pacify” his unruly provinces in the Americas. Ferdinand VII wanted nothing to do with compromises or legalised improvisations. Unaware of just how precarious the legitimacy of the crown was, he wanted to restore the image of the Christian Rex, with all his glory—and might. Despite several
counsellors arguing that the political conflict could be resolved with mediation and conciliation, Fernando was determined to avenge the monarchy and exterminate the critics. In part, he was driven by pride after the humiliation of French captivity. In part, he was prodded by Spanish merchants, bruised by war at home, the loss of American markets, and the destruction of their trading privileges, to restore their old grip on Atlantic commerce. They promised to finance the king’s pacification campaign in return for the restoration of their old monopolies. Thus it was that both sides of the merchant-monarch pact sought to roll the clock back. This turned local feuds into a full-blown revolution.

The intensification of civil war, especially after 1814, “endogenised” the crisis of sovereignty, meaning that it deepened the rifts, made them un-reconcilable, increasingly divorced from the original causes of discord, and the butchery made all sides retreat to near-extirpationist sides. Politics had become a matter of life or death—not just justice or rulership. Total war was not something restricted to the battlefields of revolutionary Europe but determined the fate of cousins within the Spanish realm itself, relatives now “reimagined” as enemies. Ten years earlier there were proclamations of fealty organised around coalitions forged by the apportioning of rents and revenues. This was all gone.

Fernando 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 plebeian forces that had become champions of local autonomy and the abolition of slavery were outraged. Morillo was forced to drive a scorched earth campaign across vast swaths of territory; his lieutenants resorted to atrocity to drive Venezuelans and Nueva Granadans back into the fold—which had the effect not only of emboldening opponents to Spanish restoration but demolishing the economy upon which imperial merchants had hoped to make renewed fortunes. 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 (Fraser 2008, 469; Blanchard 2006; Lasso 2007; Guardino 2005).

If he wanted to impress his character angelicus, one of Fernando’s preferred methods was the justice of an avenging angel. When Pumacahua, the loyalist cacique from the Peruvian highlands, heard that the constitution had been abrogated and that old colonial tithes might be restored, he cast off his allegiances to the crown. Here was a sign that the monarch was willing to sever his commitments to the ancient colonial pact, which many numbers of Indian loyalists in the highlands fought to defend against republican and creole forces. But their condition for subaltern loyalty was a reformed colonial pact sanctified under the 1812 Constitution; Pumacahua’s loyalty to that charter made him an enemy of the king. For this, he
was hunted down and became one of the “revolution’s” names on a growing list of martyrs. By 1816, one of the few republiquetas to survive the savagery of Spanish repression was Ayopaya, whose guerrillas, based in the towering highland hamlets of Palca, Machaca, and Inquisu, menaced the roads—and silver caravans—around La Paz, Cochabamba, and Oruro (Adelman 2010; Arnade 1957). Violence of this sort and scale had the paradoxical effect of revitalising secessionist coalitions to include many who embraced home-rule or autonomy within empire or the Constitution of 1812. Whereas Bolívar had all but given up on his cause by 1815, Spanish revanchism gave him a new lease on life, for it spurred many corners, classes, and castes of colonial society to resist turning the clock back. Now the civil war intensified, and in doing so accelerated the mobilisation and militarisation of Indians, slaves, and plebeian populations. By 1820, Ferdinand’s ambitions were not just losing him loyalists in the colonies: unrest shot through the very pillar of authority upon which he most rested. The army, exhausted from years of fighting, unpaid, on foul rations, had had enough. When the discontent finally broke out in military revolts in the peninsula itself (specifically among troops gathered in Cádiz for a second punitive expedition, this time bound for the River Plate), the logic of restoring the Ancien Régime collapsed, bringing down the power of the monarchy in the metropole. There was no mysticum left of the king’s body. There was little to remain loyal to. The armies of empire folded up their tents, joined secessionists or went home. It is at this point that “declarations of independence” spread as responses to the shakeup of empire at the core; if in 1807 Napoleon issued the first blow to the image of royal authority, by 1820 the blows were self-inflicted (Anna 1983; Woodward 1968).

It is worth contrasting Fernando’s strategy of restoration to the policies taken in Rio de Janeiro—to reinforce the point that the fate of the Spanish Atlantic was not foreordained. In Brazil, mercantile elites had joined forces with the ennobled slavocracy to give new ballast to the Braganza dynasty which, in fleeing to the New World, had “Americanised” itself—and became more visible to colonial subjects. 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 recognised was a fact before a 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 Ancien Régime (Silva Lisboa 1810, iv; Schultz 2001).

But not everyone shared this New World royalism with the same enthusiasm. The proximity of the monarchy, and the burdens of war back in Portugal, as well as chronic fighting against rebellious forces in the south, foisted much of the fiscal
burdens of continuity on Brazilians. Some provinces felt more aggrieved at being strapped tightly to Rio de Janeiro than the old, looser, bonds to Lisbon. 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 co-dependency between merchants and monarchs. 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 into the open with mutinies. This was not a comforting context for big sugar planters in a province where slave uprisings were endemic. In the end, though, the strongest opposition to a New World monarchy came from the old metropole, Portugal, where liberals clamoured for a constitution to limit governance from Brazil and merchants seethed over their loss of old privileges. It was to prevent Portuguese secession that João made his fateful decision to return to Lisbon to preserve the strained bonds between “two kingdoms” (Barman 1988, 43–55).

CONCLUSION

An important shift in the nature of conflict over sovereignty had taken place. The effort to strengthen a delicate sovereignty by force blew what was left of its legitimacy and shattered the unstable compromises of previous years. Civil war within empire took the place of global wars between empires as the source of disequilibrium. The sequence is important to underscore because it addresses how the invention of politics, from the printing press to the public desecration of bodies, created a vacuum, and the vacuum created possibilities that were hitherto unimaginable—virtuous and horrible. Secessions were responses to crises of sovereignty, produced first by international and subsequently by civil war. They were not home-grown exit options maturing within empire and associated with a “self-evident” different model of national sovereignty, announcing themselves into existence when the oppressions of empire grew too onerous or the opportunities to secede too tempting to dismiss. Indeed, disequilibrium within empire wrought by warfare toppled incumbent regimes long before successors could fill the void. This is important because declarations of “independence” in the name of nations yielded to the very same propensities to breakup as the empire they rejected. As the Spanish empire imploded on itself, incipient understandings of sovereignty inheriting the same complex traits of regionalism, racialised labour systems, and models of representation improvised during the struggle to shore up empire.

Warfare did more than make enemies out of cousins and add butchery to the arsenal of politics in Spanish America. It also overturned the social order that once provided the spinal column for old colonial worlds. As the forced labour systems became ravaged and plebeian folk flocked to armies and guerrilla forces on all sides (half the foot-soldiers of liberating armies were manumitted slaves), the plurality of notions of sovereignty was hard to contain in a single mould—whether national or imperial. Subaltern actors, from Indian villagers of Oaxaca to the free blacks of Cartagena, asserted their own views of government, adding to the disequilibria that
pushed former colonial peoples further from the possibility of any restored empire. They also nurtured popular conceptions of sovereignty.

But popular did not necessarily imply national. There were plenty of plebeian declarations of fealty to the old regime—too many to presume a primordial horizontal break between the ruled and rulers declared in the name of popular nationhood. Slaves sought freedoms under regal justice; Indians fought to defend traditional immunities from civil law under viceregal banners. And they often fought each other across ideological lines as the war decomposed into civil strife.

One last stage of this process needs to be mentioned. As the tensions and violence turned inward, and warfare and politics became more and more “irregular” (in the sense that partisanship became more bellicose, and armed conflict lacked front lines), the geographic fundamentals that had been packed into the adapted notions of imperial sovereignty—that is, jurisdiction over territorial spaces up to definable limits—fractured deeply. It was not just the Spanish empire that broke up. So did the legal spaces that once governed the outposts in the New World. Viceroyalties and captaincies-general, once the bounded units of governance, fought among themselves and within each other over the cartography of sovereignty. So, with the collapse of the social hierarchy dominated by merchant elites and colonial governors, there was also a crumbling of the territoriality of sovereignty. Should the successors to imperial formations be made of self-defining provinces, confederations, autonomous villages of Indians, or runaway slaves, or centralised nation-states ruled from capital cities? When constitutional delegates gathered over the course of the 1820s—truly, the Iberian Atlantic’s decade of constitutionalism—it was precisely this variety of models and concepts that had to be reconciled in new arrangements.

In the end, there was little of the past that could be redeemed, no shared memory of a set of virtuous practices or understandings to which the delegates could turn as precedent. This would have been hard to invent in the best of times. But the violence of civil war did little to create a sustainable memory or shared principles organised around the myth of an ancient pactum subjectionis to which citizens could return like a legal promised land. And what did survive after 1814 was quickly eclipsed by Ferdinand’s decision to adopt the persona of a character angelicus with an avenging streak. War and the brutality eviscerated much of the invented tradition of metropolitan constitutionalism premised on an equally invented tradition of a pact between sovereigns and subjects from feudal days (Hamnett 1977; Chiaramonte 2000).

With no redeemable past to which lawmakers could refer to frame postcolonial politics or the geographic boundaries of polities, it is no wonder that, when Restrepo took time away from his ministerial duties at Bolívar’s aide, he would compose a major part of his epic around a rekindled Black Legend. First, the Spanish had done little to tutor American subjects in the art of responsible governance. Then, when they had the chance, they despoiled it when moderate self-rule did issue floundering roots. This kind of tyranny justified regicide. And regicide, so went Restrepo’s lament, unleashed the furies of vengeance bent on destroying what they disliked without a well-defined, never mind shared, sense of what they did like.

This was, to conclude, an unpromising context in which constitutionalists set about their business of creating something new. Amid polarised factions, militarised societies, economies brought low by the taxations and dislocations of war, and bereft of models—from their own past, or from the examples of others (in this regard, the
influence of North American constitutionalism has been altogether exaggerated)—lawmakers had their work cut out for them.

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