

# WHAT'S IN A REVOLUTION?

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**Under the Flags of Freedom: Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America.** By Peter Blanchard. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 242. \$26.95 paper. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780822959922.

**Simón Bolívar: Essays on the Life and Legacy of the Liberator.** Edited by David Bushnell and Lester D. Langley. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008. Pp. xiv + 207. \$75.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780742556195.

**Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions.** By Jane G. Landers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. ix + 340. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780674035911.

**Simón Bolívar: Venezuelan Rebel, American Revolutionary.** By Lester D. Langley. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009. Pp. xxiii + 130. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780742537521.

**Las repúblicas de aire: Utopía y desencanto en la revolución de Hispanoamérica.** By Rafael Rojas. Madrid: Taurus, 2009. Pp. 424. €19.50 paper. ISBN: 9788430607815.

In recent years, historians of Latin America have been summoned to reflect on the significance of events that occurred two centuries before. It is not the first time that the so-called revolutions for independence have been the pretext for such clarion calls. A century ago, most Spanish American capital cities were festooned with parades, monuments, public festivities, and commemorations of independence. These events were meant to mark a process that supposedly began in 1810 and was brought to fruition by elites a century later. Celebrations of the past were occasions to congratulate rulers of the present, and sometimes they drew shameless genealogies between the liberators of 1810 and the presidents of 1910.

Nowadays the mood is different. For one, there is a less triumphal public spirit among elites, many of whom care less and less about the health of the polis. The populace, for its part, reciprocates with disinterest. It is fair to say that little will remain of the celebrations of 2010 when all the fuss is over. Unlike the monumental legacies of 1910, we will have to content ourselves with YouTube videos of the risible lecture on Spanish American history by Argentina's president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, a speech delivered in sweltering heat on April 19, 2010, to Venezuela's National Assembly, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Daniel Ortega, and others to announce a "second independence" moment.

But if the public legacies of 2010 pale beside those of 1910, the same is not true of the historiographic production centered on the revolutions of independence. A

century ago, the history profession was at best coming into its own. Now, however, journals, academies, and publishing houses are pouring out a vast amount of work, most of it the result of several generations of professional scholarship. Indeed, the field is vast and diverse, so much so that many subfields of historical work no longer touch on one another's debates or findings.

It is not just the scale of scholarship that has changed. Nor is this change in scale alone responsible for a degree of internal fragmentation. The hullabaloo a century ago was all about the trials and eventual triumph of nation building. The rulers of 1910 trumpeted their success (at least in their eyes) in finally achieving integrated nations, thus putting an end to chronic civil strife. Now the nation-state has much less purchase on the historical imagination, one of the reasons President Kirchner's sermon appears so anachronistic. But the cause of nationalism has been pushed to the sidelines of analysis, especially by historians. The rights of subaltern peoples, transatlantic political vocabulary, the survival of imperial identities, and the triumph of localism and federalism—to name but a few of the subjects on which historians have fixated—dominate the field. The birth of the nation, or its failure for revisionists, is no longer the central theme.

The revolutions of 1810, as it turns out, saw the birth of many identities, movements, and political formations besides the nation. The result is that, if these revolutions once had a colligative significance organized around the nation, the new turn sees them to be about the proliferation of subjects and questions. This is all to the good, because it attributes manifold meanings to these revolutions, meanings that fixation on the national question once obscured or sidelined. Indeed, this is what was so revolutionary about the conjuncture of 1810: it opened possibilities for social actors to imagine the future in different ways, ways that were such a departure from the colonial mold, without necessarily pointing to the national mold as an automatic successor.

The books reviewed in these pages exemplify this fracturing of the national subject of the revolutions of 1810. They illustrate the many ways in which these revolutions are viewed and the multiple significances that they had in their own time but that were later obscured. Yet they also reveal another instance of fragmentation: namely, that historians of one subfield seldom refer to adjacent subfields in speaking of the same revolution. So, although all these books deal with the revolutionary era, the degree to which one is separate from another is remarkable: they follow entirely different currents. When the group of books is read as a whole, however, convergences and overlaps do stand out.

Some of the books under review hark back to recognizable, some might say traditional, preoccupations with the role of political leaders in the revolutions. This was, in fact, the central focus from the beginnings of Spanish American historiography, when Juan Manuel Restrepo made Simón Bolívar the figure into which all the drama of nation making would be inscribed, flaws and promises alike. Not surprisingly, Bolívar remains the focus of attention for many historians. This review examines two recent installments of this perennial fascination (Bushnell and Langley; Langley). But Bolívar's shadow also looms over the other books under review, which goes to show how protean the figure of the Liberator has become. Two of these books examine the role of slaves on both sides—royalist and

rebel—of the revolutions (Blanchard; Landers). In a sense, they turn the pyramid over to look at the revolutions from the bottom up. If claims to rights, and even equality, motivated slaves to take up arms in defense of their freedoms, the final book under consideration examines what exactly those freedoms meant (Rojas). Rojas pushes away from the agency of actors from the bottom or top of the social hierarchy to present a careful study of the political discourse of republicanism, so as to examine the meaning of the words that had so much power to mobilize.

Taken as a whole, the books under review redouble the impression that national identity and national sovereignty are far removed from the central interests of historians today. On that, they all agree. But, aside from the nation, it is also clear that the issue in dispute in the nineteenth century was how, and with what, to fill the vessel of colonial societies after Spain's empire was stricken by crisis and invasion in Europe. Should there be republics? Federations? Archipelagos of free communities that might define their codas for themselves (as in James C. Scott's model of anarchist sovereignty)?<sup>1</sup> Societies ruled by people freed from all their colonial fetters and legal inequities? New forms of monarchy, empire, and honorable slavocracy? Or amalgamations whose parts might at first blush appear incompatible? The nation, in short, was just one of many possibilities.

One can never get too much of Simón Bolívar, as the late Simon Collier notes in *Simón Bolívar: Essays on the Life and Legacy of the Liberator*, the volume edited by David Bushnell and Lester D. Langley. John Lynch (2006) and Bushnell (2004) recently published important profiles of Bolívar. Countless more have appeared in Spanish. Langley's monograph and the collection edited by Bushnell and Langley are reminders of why Bolívar is such a captivating figure. Historians have explored the multiple meanings, processes, and legacies of independence through him; the arc of his life story has allowed them to weave so many themes together. It helps, in addition, that Bolívar was a master rhetorician, a gifted aphorist, a complicated thinker, and a better and better military commander. But it is principally in his shifting positions and evolving doctrines that historians have found an inexhaustible font for exploring the complexities of independence.

Langley's *Simón Bolívar: Venezuelan Rebel, American Revolutionary* is a brief, highly accessible work. It does not break any new methodological or evidentiary ground. Its chief virtue is its very fine synthesis, comparable to Bushnell's recent profile. Langley does, however, make a couple of big points; his is not just a sequential account of the Liberator's life and achievements. Those familiar with Langley's earlier work will know that he puts his subject into a broad, inter-American frame, often to align Latin America's revolutions with their North American cousins, showing how entangled these developments were. Langley also seeks to illustrate how Spanish Americans had to tackle vexing issues—such as the rights of slaves and racial equality—that North Americans had suppressed for almost a century. This made Bolívar not just a liberator like George Washington but also a republican like Abraham Lincoln. Hence his passage from rebel against Spanish authority to revolutionary in the service of a different model of

1. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

society. In the end, Bolívar bequeathed a “dilemma” (117): he could finally free Spain’s colonies only by promising to free slaves and empower subaltern peoples, a solution that, in Langley’s view, alienated some of the support he might have earned from elite Creoles. He also had to forgo all support from the United States, which was not enthusiastic about spreading the flames of antislavery to its South. Indeed, if there is an uncommon feature to Langley’s synthesis, it is his reflections on U.S. attitudes, ambivalences, and in some cases hostilities to the independence movements. In Langley’s view, just as Bolívar was the revolutionary that North Americans never had, his crusade was one they could not embrace as part of a hemispheric ideal. At the same time, Langley does not endorse a Hugo Chávez-style notion of Bolívar as the prophet of national sovereignty versus American imperialism. For one, Bolívar was willing to compromise national independence in a deal with the British Empire, although Langley does not explore this topic at length. What he does emphasize is Bolívar’s strategic commitment to free slaves to win a republic for everyone who might choose to struggle for its redemption. This idea was very incendiary around the time that Maine and Missouri were inducted as states.

The marvelous collection coedited by Bushnell and Langley reprises some of the same ground. Yet this book also implicitly questions one of the basic assumptions of Langley’s biographical profile: that there is a core significance to Bolívar, a basic theme in his struggles. Indeed, as the Venezuelan historian Germán Carrera Damas notes, the mission of the cult of Bolívar was to give him an essence that has been revitalized of late with the demise of socialist utopianism and the rise of charismatic figures like Chávez, who wish to cast themselves as heirs to the Liberator (Bushnell and Langley, 159–160). The chapters in this collection in fact reveal many Bolívares. What is consistent, however, is the accent that the authors put on his adaptation of ideas, strategies, and alliances to time and circumstance. At the most extreme—visible especially in his more constitutionalist, latter years—was his abiding interest in the British model (explored in smart contributions by Collier and Karen Racine) and in eighteenth-century republicanism (revealed in Iván Jaksic’s exploration of the tension between Andrés Bello and Bolívar, a tension that spoke to one of the many fissures dividing secessionists). But even these principles and ideas were adapted, refashioned, and at times abandoned or disfigured beyond recognition by political exigencies of the moment. Indeed, as several other contributors note, there was also a powerful streak of *realpolitik*, an effort to place Spanish America into a transatlantic, postrevolutionary balance of diplomatic powers (Judith Ewell’s fine chapter), an effort to reconcile the “other” America with the expansionism that emerged around the crucible of the Missouri compromise and Monroe Doctrine (Langley’s chapter). Frank Safford also studies Bolívar’s radical shift in 1826–1828, in his final years of life, from autocratic constitutionalism to a more democratic, if fatalist, position. In a sense, it was the position adopted by Bolívar in 1826, especially in the wake of writing Bolivia’s constitution, that most seared the future divisions of many of the republics that he liberated. What mainly concerns the authors of this collection is this later Bolívar, the constitutionalist and the republican, and less the man who helped lead the fight to bring down Spain’s empire in America.

How this happened—how Spain “lost” America—has itself been the subject of several studies. Many of these have focused on the political economy of Spain’s empire and the desacralization of the monarchy, in which Bolívar played one role among many. But two of the books under review expand dramatically the spectrum of social agents involved in the downfall of the old regime by examining the population at the bottom of the social pyramid: slaves. Revolutions look rather different through the eyes of slaves, or more precisely through the words that they left behind in archives scattered about Spanish America and Spain. Peter Blanchard and Jane G. Landers look at the slaves who became foot soldiers in the struggle over empire and sovereignty. They show two things: first, that slaves played an important, and in some cases, decisive, role in the fates of the colonies; and second, that slaves forced leaders to reckon with their ideas of personal and family freedom.

That is about the extent of the overlap between Blanchard and Landers. For although they are both interested in how and why slaves fought, they examine slaves who pursued the same personal cause of individual or kin freedom under entirely opposite political banners. Landers’s slaves fought for the king and empire; Blanchard’s fought for rebels and republics. That slaves supported such diametrically opposed causes should itself remind us of how fundamentally divisive the revolutions of 1810 were throughout the social classes. It is telling that none of the books under review is even tempted to portray the revolutions as a fight between popular sectors and incumbent elites. So, not only has the nation been sidelined; so, too, has simpleminded class analysis. Still, we are left to wonder what the revolutions meant for slaves. Landers and Blanchard provide important insights.

Landers invokes a model of Atlantic Creoles borrowed from Ira Berlin’s celebrated study of the adaptation of African slaves to New World settings.<sup>2</sup> Creoles were the founders of African American cultures and social formations. For Landers, the Creole generation of greatest importance was that which used the revolutionary conjuncture to take up arms to defend their rights. She pieces together an original and provocative tale of itinerant fugitives who lived on the margins of empires precisely to escape the bondage of slave labor, which buoyed those empires. But, more than marginal figures, men like Prince Big Whitten and Georges Biassou lived between empires, in this case those of the western Caribbean and Florida, crossing boundaries between Spanish, English, and French dominions in search of shelter or weapons to cripple their rivals. The life stories of Landers’s subjects are remarkable, as is their willingness to lay down their lives in defense of monarchs and empires that were, if anything, determined to use them to expand the frontiers of slavery itself. These fugitives may be rebels of a sort. But they are hardly revolutionaries. Indeed, in some cases they traded and owned slaves; in others, they were only too happy to take on the trappings of aristocrats and royals to bolster their reputation as local rulers and brokers. The Spanish Crown in particular excelled at enlisting fugitives, rewarding them with

2. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

the symbolic baubles of the ancien régime to wreak havoc to the aspirations of French and especially English settlers. Indeed, Africans and Spaniards “shared many understandings of the proper relationship between ruler and subject” (8). Landers refutes the simpleminded proposition that all slave resistance must be revolutionary or protorevolutionary. Several slaves instead preferred to ally with the Spanish king and slavery than to be free under the French in Saint-Domingue. Two decades later, in 1817, they again fought for Spain and Fernando VII—a ferocious advocate of slavery—instead of joining a motley republican force, and the promise of freedom, in Florida. Loyalism was the political key.

This is where Landers gets herself into a bit of trouble because the crucial importance of loyalism does not appear to be a conclusion that she herself wants to draw. In fact, despite persistent regalism and a lack of evidence that rebels sought to dismantle the institution of slavery, she argues that slaves were united in a “determined quest for freedom” (14). They were not just opportunists, looking to better their immediate conditions through accommodation with existing imperial orders, she insists. But it is hard to see slaves otherwise, especially as Cuba pioneered a model of “second slavery,” and those who fought for Spain in Florida found themselves betrayed by the deal that gave the colony to North American expansionists; many free blacks found themselves in chains. Only much later—and Landers pushes her story as far as the La Escalera uprising of 1843—do we encounter collective antislavery action. By then, faith in Spanish monarchs as defenders of the rights of slaves had vanished. What explains this delay is not clear, especially in the face of evidence that slaves elsewhere did defect from the Spanish monarchy. If slaves “based their alliances primarily on their desire for freedom and a measure of dignity” (235), it is not, in the main, what they got.

Blanchard’s *Under the Flags of Freedom* is a striking counterpoint. Blanchard’s slaves also sought freedom and dignity, and they were also prepared to lay down their lives for alliances that might help them realize those goals for their kin. However, to contrast the regalism of Biassou and Whitten, Blanchard introduces us to Francisco Estrada and Antonio Castro, slaves who left bondage to join rebel armies whose leaders promised them freedom for their sacrifice. Like Landers, Blanchard emphasizes that enlistment and flight were motivated less by ideology or grand political visions than by convenience. In the cases assembled by Blanchard—and his archival work is, if anything, more impressive than that of Landers—slaves sided with the revolution, not the counterrevolution. Why? Because revolutionaries were more forceful in promising freedom, according to Blanchard. Here we circle back to Bolívar, who, especially after 1815, promised freedom to all slaves who joined his armies (Bolívar’s vaunted Jamaica Letter is often singled out as the text that indexes his eventual embrace of abolition). Blanchard argues that this was “more than just a recruiting ploy” (72). Deepening freedom down the social ladder was becoming a credo of revolution itself. Indeed, the promise of freedom was such an effective device for building reliable fighting machines that even the Spanish general Pablo Morillo yearned to do the same, only to be smacked down by the king in Madrid (for whom, it bears recall, Landers shows that slaves appeared willing to fight). Blanchard notes that Morillo was left to fume that the king’s decision not to embrace abolition all but

lost him the war (70–71). Along the way, female slaves took it on themselves to be more and more assertive in challenging slavery, if not by directly serving rebel armies in nonmartial ways (espionage was one important role), then by invoking their fighting male kin against those who would curb their autonomy. Women such as María Antonia Gauna used funds from male kinfolk involved in fighting to procure their freedom through manumission (153). After years of warfare, the slaving belts of Venezuela and coastal Colombia, and the slave economies of the estancia-dominated Banda Oriental, were unrecognizable. Between the predations of war and flight to rebel armies, slavery was “not the institution that it had been when warfare had erupted” (140). There is a paradox to this outcome, however, for as slavery changed—slashed in scale and centrality to the new social order—it did not end. Indeed, with the widening scope for freedom through war, slave soldiers and their relatives faced fewer and fewer inducements to demolish slavery altogether. Several decades would pass before the institution would be declared illegal on the books.

Although Blanchard and Landers look at similar actors, we are still left to wonder as to what explains the contrary allegiances of the slave fighters studied in their books. It appears that timing was a big factor. Much of Blanchard’s compelling evidence comes from after 1814, when Ferdinand VII returned to the throne to shred all constitutionalist precedents and to order his forces resolutely not to free slaves, thereby breathing new life into what was by then a fairly dispirited cause—after all, Bolívar was in Jamaica because he had been driven from Venezuela not once, but twice. This seems to have been an important turning point, for, until then, it was less clear that a slave would be better off with the rebels than with the royalists. Either way, it reminds us that the meanings of freedom and political obligation were hardly unambiguous and certainly quickly evolving. This makes it hard to pin any essential character on the revolutions, their leaders, or their foot soldiers.

Despite this difficulty, many intellectual historians have recently tried to make sense of the political rhetoric that erupted after Napoleon’s invasion of Spain and the need of the fleeing government to appeal to its colonies with a vocabulary very different from that composed of old viceregal concepts of righteous submission. More and more historians of Spanish America have of late discovered the influence of classical republicanism—as Anglo-American historians did, amid heated debate, four decades ago. In place of the familiar “liberal” arsenal of freedom and individualism, republicanism urges virtue and restraint in the service of a commonweal and excoriates arbitrary authority and corruption. What is more, such republicanism can be fully consistent with monarchy and stratification. This discovery has been important for two reasons. First, attention to republican ideas focuses on the long intermediate period between the waning appeals of absolutism and the emergence of liberalism; the former did not automatically give way to the latter without a formative interlude. Something important came before liberal constitutionalism, whose emergence on Spanish America’s political stage we might pin to the 1820s and associate with Bolívar’s erstwhile lieutenant and chief rival, Francisco Paula de Santander. If this is so, the revolutions were not liberal revolutions. So what were they? This is the second area in which republicanism

has significance for historians, for its language of civic virtue remits to a model of citizenship that does not rest on individuals endowed by nature with certain capacities (e.g., reason) and thus entitled to rights. Rather, rights must be acquired or earned through well-mannered and other-regarding behavior. This enabled the revolutionaries, as republicans, to articulate concepts of rights that were much more contingent and specific—and less universal and transparent—than would have been the case if they had been liberals.

This is one of the reasons there has been so much ink spilled over Bolívar. Was he a liberal? Not really. Did this make him a conservative? This makes even less sense. So, treating him as a classical republican, as Rafael Rojas does in his prize-winning collection of essays, *Las repúblicas en el aire*, opens up all kinds of possibilities to understand the intellectual spirit of the revolutions of 1810. In fact, in Rojas's treatment, these were not about national sovereignty at all. They instead used the experience of exile and the practice of translation (both of which are vital themes for Rojas) to create an "American" political ideology that cannot be reduced to national or liberal ideals.

Rojas presents case studies of displacement—republican émigrés in Philadelphia such as Fray Servando de Mier, and even Bolívar himself—to track the aspirations and disenchantments of utopian projects, a kind of *hispanoamericanismo* ahead of Hispanism or Pan-Americanism (15). Rojas forces us to reckon with identities before nations, alliances before hemispherism, and politics before statehood. This is a major intervention in Latin American historiography, not just because it is new, but also because it presents a creative enigma. Were these "befores" the roots of developments that we have simply ignored because we presumed that representative systems and postimperial monarchies could appear only in the nineteenth century? Or were these "befores" alternative arrangements that were quashed, or at least constrained, by later liberal and national formulations? Rojas has set the terms for a major debate among the coming generation of historians of the nineteenth century.

In this republican landscape of virtuous laws and schoolhouses teaching proper manners, those who imagined a new model of statehood opened up pluralistic ideologies of a utopia that did not, it is worth repeating, remit directly to the nation or the state, but to a more amorphous political community. This amorphous dreaming, Rojas points out, was of course intentional, for what had first to be imagined was how to fill the colonial space. This required sorting out what America was and who Americans were. The revolutions were not necessarily unconcerned with independence from kings and empires, but rather began much more as experiments: dreams, if you like, of autonomous political communities in empire and under the carapace of a less intrusive (and less autocratic) monarch. This helps explain why so many republicans remained fervently monarchist, even as they fought against Spain's armies.

The difference between republicanism and liberalism is easily exaggerated in historical analysis—and it has been exaggerated. Indeed, the two models share much, such as principles of sovereignty, political equality, individual rights, and civil liberty. This point was made by Joyce Appleby many years ago, when Anglo-American historians became euphoric after they discovered their republican

moment in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The same can be said of Spanish America's discovery of its latent republicanism more recently. Certainly, to make the distinction between republicanism and liberalism, we must attend to complex political imaginations missed by the shopworn dichotomy of conservative versus liberal. It may, therefore, be of help to recast Rojas's formulation. Perhaps liberalism and republicanism should be treated less as a dichotomy and more as two points on the spectrum of models of sovereignty laid bare by revolution. In this fashion, Rojas aids us in transcending the simple divide between loyalism and rebellion. This is a welcome consequence of waning interest in the national question and in the flaws and failures of revolutionaries. After two centuries, debate can confront the plenitude of historical meanings of revolution.

3. Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).