

## IS CHÁVEZ GETTING WHAT HE WANTS? BOLÍVAR AND POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY ON LATIN AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

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With the bicentenaries of Latin American independence fast approaching, the struggle to appropriate the memory and symbolic power of Simón Bolívar has acquired new meanings and new strength. The *bicentenarios* - the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of formation of independent Latin American states throughout Latin America - present a series of dilemmas for historians and politicians alike.

Politicians, on one hand, seek to celebrate independence in ways which highlight the continuities between present regimes and the political ideologies of the people and national heroes 200 years ago. Understandably, they wish to use the bicentenarios to strengthen national unity behind present-day political projects. In this regard, there is no difference between left and right. Both Chávez and Uribe have shown remarkable interest and willingness to invest in their nations respective bicentenarios. The number of seminars, conferences, exhibitions, documentaries, new books, radio programs, public essay competitions, websites and school material in Venezuela and Colombia on the independence period is overwhelming, and probably already exceeds the cultural production of the quincentenaries of 1992. They testify to want to capitalize on the strong symbolism of independence.

They want histories of independence that sell, but also that sell a particular message. They want readable accounts of independence that show the linkages between the past and the present. More specifically they need histories that clearly state the relationship between the heroes of independence and present political leaders. Put bluntly, they seek to appropriate the past for present political purposes.

Not for nothing have both Colombian and Venezuelan governments created their own websites for the bicentenarios with remarkably similar addresses [www.bicentenario.gov.co](http://www.bicentenario.gov.co) and [www.bicentenario.gob.ve](http://www.bicentenario.gob.ve) and remarkably different content. Perhaps sensing that public interest in the independence period is on the rise and undoubtedly understanding that public memories of independence may be used for present political purposes, governments across Latin America are trying both to foster and to manipulate new writings on the independence period. The principal question to be addressed in this essay is: To what extent will they get what they want? Or to be more precise: Will professional historians produce the kinds of historic visions that suit the present political purposes of for instance Hugo Chávez and Alvaro Uribe?

Most governments avoid being explicit about the kind of independence history they want from professional historians. The Colombian website on the bicentenario is a case in point. Apparently they have invited historians from a range of different political backgrounds, from many universities across the country and with quite different views on the independence period to participate in writing articles, being interviewed and even in defining the actions to be taken within the framework of the bicentenarios. The result, not surprisingly, is a diverse, large and fragmented website where readers may encounter a vast array of different approaches and opinions about independence and its possible meanings today.

The Venezuelan site, on the other hand, is much more explicit and streamlined and - at least so far – limited in content. In one of the principal pages at the site with the heading “Comisión presidencial”, the author(s) provide an interesting answer to the question how do we conceive the celebration of the bicentenaries of the American independencies?

¿Cómo concebimos la celebración del Bicentenario de las Independencias Americanas?:

- La concebimos como la presencia entre nosotros de un proceso que comenzó a fines del siglo XVIII y aún continúa.
- Concebimos la celebración del Bicentenario de las Independencias, como un proceso vivo y actual, en el que todos debemos participar, porque nos corresponde como generación, concluir el proceso, que se inició en el siglo XIX y aún no concluye.

- La concebimos como un proceso con tanta pertinencia en lo actual, que debemos enfrentar todas las distorsiones y tergiversaciones que se pretendan hacer de ese proceso.
- La concebimos como un proceso nuestro americano que incluye a todos los pueblos que desde el siglo XIX luchan por su liberación.
- La celebración de los Bicentenarios deben convertirse desde Venezuela en una fiesta popular en la que los pueblos nuestroamericanos sean los protagonistas. Las actividades desplegadas deben superar el carácter estrictamente oficial y académico que solían tener este tipo de eventos en tiempos de la cuarta república.
- El protagonismo del pueblo debe expresarse en todas y cada una de las actividades incluyendo aquellas consideradas tradicionalmente como reservadas a la academia y a los sabios. Las investigaciones deben superar los paradigmas hegemónicos y dar paso al protagonismo de los saberes, las prácticas y la memoria popular.

BICENTENARIO DE LA INDEPENDENCIA DE LA REPÚBLICA BOLIVARIANA DE VENEZUELA 200 AÑOS DESPUÉS:  
¡INDEPENDENCIA Y REVOLUCIÓN!

To summarize, independence is seen as an ongoing, unfinished, popular and revolutionary project involving the whole continent where Venezuela continues to play a leading role. This view of independence is obviously intimately connected to the present *Bolivarian* movement in Venezuela spearheaded by Chávez. The use Chávez and the Bolivarian movement makes of the historical memory of independence in general and Simón Bolívar in particular is crucial. Ever since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a strong state-led cult of Bolívar in Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> One crucial aspect of Chávez political project is his redefinition of this public memory. Christopher Conway has convincingly described and analysed Chávez use of Bolívar:

As tempting as it might be to think of Chávez as yet another demagogue taking advantage of the symbolic capital of a century and a half of Bolivarian nationalism, a closer look reveals that this president is engaged in a more complex transaction [...]. For Chávez, Bolívar is not a trophy for consolidating national pride, but rather a call to arms to remake a nation marred by what he calls „a moral cancer’ [...]. His Bolívar is not the monument, but a spirit of renewal in an age of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> One of classic studies in this topic is Germán Carrera Damas, *El culto a Bolívar; esbozo para un estudio de la historia de las ideas en Venezuela* (Caracas: Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1969).

As such, Chávez engages the Bolívar question on two related fronts: on the one hand he criticizes the static and self-congratulatory discourse of official identity, while on the other he tries to mobilize a more dynamic and politically transformative version of Bolívar. In the process, Chávez cultivates parallels between himself and the hero of independence, suggesting that his authority springs directly from Bolívar himself.<sup>2</sup>

If, in some ways at least, Chávez is a reincarnation of Bolívar, it is evident that the public image of *El Libertador* needs to be cultivated in the correct way. As Conway notes, there has existed for several decades an alternative vision of Bolívar which suits Chávez well:

The solution to this dispersal of Bolivarian meaning is a return to the kind of Bolívar celebrated by José Martí and Pablo Neruda. Their Bolívar was a Bolívar of the people and for the people, stirring into life every time that the masses lift themselves up to struggle for liberty. This linking of Bolívar to internationalist social justice is not new in of itself, but the endorsement of this vision by a Venezuelan president signals the legitimization of a rich tradition of Marxist interpretations of Bolívar that have existed on the margins of official culture in Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

As a response to the question in the title of this essay, it is tempting to say then that Chávez already has what he wants. In addition to the literary versions of Bolívar alluded to by Conway, there are numerous slightly more recent examples of histories of Bolívar that fits in well with Chávez' Bolivarian concerns. One emblematic example is *Bolívar: Precursor del pensamiento antiimperialista* written by Cuban historian Francisco Pividal, originally published in Habana in 1977 and awarded the *Premio Casa de las Américas* the same year.<sup>4</sup> In recent years new editions have appeared in Cuba, Venezuela and Argentina. In Pividal's work we meet Bolívar the anti-imperialist; not only the Liberator from Spanish rule, but perhaps even more importantly for present political purposes, the Bolívar who opposed USA. Pividal's Bolívar resembles not only the Bolívar of José Martí. Pividal may even be one of main inspirations for the Bolivarian movement since the 1980s and continues to be the book on Bolívar that the radical Bolivarians today read and recommend.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher B. Conway, *The cult of Bolívar in Latin American literature* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2003). Pp. 156-57

<sup>3</sup> Conway, „The cult of Bolívar“, p. 158

<sup>4</sup> Francisco Pividal, *Bolívar: pensamiento precursor del antimperialismo* (La Habana, Cuba: Casa de la Américas, 1977).

One remarkable and notorious absence in Pividal's work however is an analysis of the relationship between Bolívar and the people. For Bolívar to be a legitimate source of inspiration, one would suspect that this would be a critical point. To what extent did Bolívar mobilize the population, and to what extent did his objectives correspond to popular ones two hundred years ago? If Pividal is silent on this theme, is it possible that Chávez will be satisfied by the newest research into the independence period? Are other historians filling in the gap and giving evidence of Bolívar as a champion of the common people?

The main idea that I will be arguing in this essay is a negative answer to that question. The historians who have been most interested in popular participation in the independence wars are those influenced by subaltern studies, postcolonial theory and new cultural history. Although many of the practitioners of this new historiography are heavily engaged in social and political activism and concerned about how history as an academic discipline may serve to better the lives of people in Latin America, - somewhat paradoxically – the new historiography is not likely to be of much use for existing political regimes in Latin America, neither left nor right.

To illustrate this I will use some examples of the most recent work on Bolívar and the issue of race in the independence movements, particularly some notable articles and monographs written by Alfonso Múnera, Camilla Townsend, Peter Blanchard, Aline Helg and Marixa Lasso. Readers may be surprised that most of the historians mentioned here are either foreigners or Latin Americans educated abroad. This is no coincidence. The subaltern studies and the new cultural history are beginning to leave its marks also on history written in Latin America, but again - somewhat paradoxically – these trends were first felt in the U.S. And studies of independence within these not so new frameworks have hitherto to a large extent been done outside Latin America.

I will begin with a very brief and general outline of some of the major tendencies in the historiography of independence. First of all it is important to note that few periods of Latin American history is so well served numerically as the independence

period. Ever since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a wide range of authors and historians have written on the independence period. But much of this writing has been of the anecdotal, romantic, elitist and nationalist kinds, overwhelmingly written by amateur historians. They are not necessarily of bad quality, in the sense that they may be based on extensive archival research and provide the public with new and original perspectives on the motivations and actions of central figures in the wars of independence. But they tend to avoid or evade central questions such as popular participation, the social and economic background of the independence movements, the long-term effects of independence on Latin American societies and cultures and they frequently have a narrow geographic focus. It has nevertheless been common to present independence as a revolution, a watershed in Latin American history that marked the end of Spanish and Portuguese domination and the beginning of a new political era, the birth of the Latin American nations and the states.

For quite some time between the 1940s and the 1980s professional historians working in or on Latin America avoided the independence period. With the advent of the new materialist trends within the discipline of history in the mid-twentieth century, the impact of independence in Latin America became increasingly questioned. The materialist historians were inspired by the Marxist emphasis on economic and social structures, the dependency models which lead historians to focus on the unequal patterns of commerce and power relations between European metropolis and Latin American peripheries and the French *Annales*' school insistence on the '*longue durée*'. All these theoretical and methodological tendencies contributed to make the 'materialist' historians perceive the independence period as a parenthesis. In their view, independence did not alter the social and economic structures of Latin America and it did not make Latin America less dependent on first-world economies. The materialist historians thus differed from the traditional historians both in their assessment of the nature of independence and of the characteristics of the republican regimes. While the former had seen the independent republics as free and democratic societies essentially different from the monarchical and despotic Spanish empire, the materialist historians were prone to see the new republics as feeble and weak political structures dominated

by traditional elites and easily falling into the neo-colonial traps of the British, French and North American capitalists. One of the first influential studies which marked a shift away from the nationalism of the ‚historias patrias’ was an article by Charles C. Griffin published in 1949.<sup>5</sup> He argued that

[...] the revolutions which brought about the establishment of independent governments in America differed in marked degree from the classic revolutions of modern Europe - the French and the Russian - in that their primary effect was to throw off the authority of a transatlantic empire rather than to bring about a drastic reconstruction of society.<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis on the continuities between the colonial and national periods in Latin American history led to an impressive production of studies on the colonial period. For a long time after the Second World War the common wisdom was that the class structures and power relations which characterised contemporary Latin American societies were formed during the colonial period. The colonial period thus became the object of considerable study, focused especially on social and economic phenomena, such as class and race, the nature of agricultural production and the restraints on domestic industries, the imbalance in trade, the supposedly ostentatious consumption and non-capitalist attitudes of the elites, in short all those themes which could contribute to the understanding of the continued underdevelopment of Latin America.<sup>7</sup> Given the tendency to emphasise the continuance between the colonial and neo-colonial periods, independence came to be regarded of secondary importance. 'When the wars of independence ended', George Pendle asserted, 'no real *social* revolution had occurred. The structure of colonial society, inherited from Spain, remained essentially unaltered [...] To the mass of population

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<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Griffin, 'Economic and Social Aspects of the Era of Spanish-American Independence' in HADR, vol 29 (1949), pp. 170-187.

<sup>6</sup> Griffin, 'Economic and Social Aspects', p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the most influential studies in this vein include Raúl Prebisch, *The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems* (1950); Caio Prado Junior, *The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, Portuguese original first published in 1945); Stanley J. and Barbara H. Stein, *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), Celso Furtado, *The Economic Development of Latin America* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970).

the change of masters was of no great consequence'<sup>8</sup> Stuart B. Schwartz and James Lockhart summed up the view of a generation of scholars in one of the most frequently used textbooks on colonial Latin American history, when they concluded that '[...] the degree of continuity in the social, economic, and cultural realms between pre- and post-independence [...] is obvious and overwhelming.'<sup>9</sup>

Still in 1994, Heraclio Bonilla one of the few historians prior to 1980 who did publish on the independence period, could claim that

[...] los esfuerzos por revisar las tesis principales de la historiografía tradicional sobre la independencia en Bolivia y Ecuador han sido desafortunadamente escasos, por no decir nulos.<sup>10</sup>

Although the situation may have been less depressing in countries with larger historiographic production such as Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Brazil, the general tendency also in these countries was that professional historians either worked on the colonial period (especially conquest or 18<sup>th</sup> century) or on 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary history. Of course there were some notable exceptions. Hermes Tovar Pinzón attempted to write an article in the early 1980s about popular participation in the Colombian wars of independence.<sup>11</sup> More interesting perhaps, were the attempts in Peru by Alberto Flores Galindo and Manuel Burga to study in conjunction the rebellions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the wars of independence; they sought to inquire into the possible continuities between so-called Indian rebellions of which the

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<sup>8</sup> George Pendle, *A History of Latin America* 4<sup>th</sup> ed (London, Penguin Books, 1976), p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz: *Early Latin America. A history of colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 424.

<sup>10</sup> Heraclio Bonilla, "Tendencias actuales de la historiografía sobre los Andes. Siglos XIX y XX," in *La historia al final del milenio: Ensayos de historiografía colombiana y latinoamericana*, ed. Bernardo Tovar Zambrano (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Nacional, 1994). p. 727.

<sup>11</sup> Hermes Tovar Pinzón, "Guerras de opinión y represión en Colombia durante la independencia (1810–1820)," *Anuario colombiano de historia social y de la cultura* 11 (1983).



Tupac Amaru was the most emblematic and the creole<sup>12</sup> uprisings during the wars of independence.<sup>13</sup>

But since the mid-1980s at least two fundamental new ways of approaching the independence period have appeared. One is associated with the work of the late François-Xavier Guerra and historians inspired by him. For Guerra, the war of independence was to Latin America what the revolution was to France. Echoing Habermas, Guerra saw independence as a series of mutations in manners of sociability in Latin America. Together they meant the arrival of modernity. It was during the political crises which followed the French invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1807 that modern concepts of political representation and modern forms of sociability took hold in Latin American societies. Guerra emphasised the role of the printing press, the emergence of newspapers and popular elections, which were all central elements in the political revolution of Latin American independence. According to Guerra, independence meant '[...] the end of the old society and the entry into a new era, [...] the founding of a new man, a new society and new politics [...]'<sup>14</sup> In the wake of Guerra's suggestive work there has been both debate about this approach and many historians who have done new and very

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<sup>12</sup> Creole in the same meaning that the Spanish term *criollo* (Editor's note).

<sup>13</sup> Alberto Flores Galindo, *Aristocracia y plebe : Lima, 1760-1830 : estructura de clases y sociedad colonial* (Lima: Mosca Azul, 1984), Alberto Flores Galindo, *Buscando un inca*, 3a ed. ed. (Lima, Peru: Editorial Horizonte, 1988), Alberto Flores Galindo, "In Search of an Inca," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, 18th to 20th Centuries*, ed. Steve J. Stern (Madison: 1987), Alberto Flores Galindo, *Independencia y revolución, 1780-1840* (Lima, Perú: Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 1987). And Manuel Burga, *Nacimiento de una utopía: muerte y resurrección de los incas* (Lima: Instituto de Apoyo Agrario, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> François-Xavier Guerra: *Modernidad e independencias. Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas* 2ed (México, Fondo de Cultura Económica/Mapfre Editores, 1993), p. 13. See also François-Xavier Guerra, "Forms of Communication, Political Spaces, and Cultural Identities in the Creation of Spanish American Nations," in *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Washington D. C./ Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/ John Hopkins University Press, 2003). and François-Xavier Guerra, "The Spanish-American Tradition of Representation and its European Roots," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994).

interesting work on the printing press, elections, newspapers, tertulias etc.<sup>15</sup>

The second approach or influence is more relevant to our discussion here. It concerns the influence of subaltern studies and other trends that may be called postcolonial or even more generally a part of what is sometimes called "new cultural history". The group of Indian historians who in the 1980s established the journal "Subaltern studies" have come to play a role also in Latin American historiography. In an short and informative essay for the first volume of the short-lived journal *Nepantla: Views from the South*, Dipesh Chakrabarty traced the general contours of the subaltern studies take on history since the early work of Ranajit Guha in the 1908s.<sup>16</sup> Dissatisfied and frustrated both with orthodox Marxist and traditional liberal perspectives on Indian history, Guha wanted to write Indian history from below. Inspired by British Marxist historians such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm and perhaps even more importantly by Antonio Gramsci, Guha sought a vision of Indian past that did not simply reflect or reproduce categories and ways of understanding the people of Indian that the colonial government had produced and which was easily available in the archives. The work of Guha and other subalternist historians emphasized the need to rescue the global history with perspectives from below. In doing so, they marked a rupture with the traditional Marxist emphasis on structure. It also signified at least a partial departure from a material understanding of history. Following Gramsci (rather than Thompson?), it also questioned the validity of using the nation and the formation of the nation as a yardstick to measure development. In short, it was a kind of history very sceptical of any linear and universal scheme of history that could be applied to the non-Western world.

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<sup>15</sup> Eduardo Posada-Carbó, "Civilizar las urnas: conflicto y control en las elecciones colombianas, 1830-1930," *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico* 32, no. 39 (1996), Eduardo Posada-Carbó, "Limits of Power: Elections Under the Conservative Hegemony in Colombia, 1886-1930," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 77, no. 2 (1997), Hilda Sabato, "On Political Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century Latin America," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography," *Nepantla: Views From the South* 1, no. 1 (2000).

The subalternists soon found an interested audience among academics working on Latin America. A "Latin American Subaltern Studies Group" was founded in 1993, initially consisting mainly of literary scholars, but anthropologists and historians were also becoming fascinated by this approach. In 1994, historian Florencia Mallon who later has become renowned for her books *Peasant and Nation* and *Courage Tastes of Blood* published an article where subaltern studies was presented as a new approach to Latin American history which could serve socially and politically engaged academics at a time when confidence in older European radical historical perspectives experienced a crisis of legitimacy.<sup>17</sup> But she also pointed to some dilemmas that had no easy resolution for those who followed the subalternist approach. One is that when historians take seriously the experiences of the "subalterns", their histories quickly become heterogeneous. On one hand this serves as a necessary correction to the simplistic notion that the dominated or the colonised are all the same. On the other hand, politically it is problematic because it tends to add to the fragmentation of subaltern politics and highlight the difference between dominated groups or communities. The other dilemma emphasised by Mallon concerns how far historians should follow the linguistic turn which increasingly was leaving its mark on the work of the Indian subalternists after Guha. The interest in interrogating the relationship between knowledge and power evident in Guha's early work did easily develop into a quest for new ways of reading documents for instance from colonial archives. It could also go further. Some of the later subalternists, and perhaps to a greater extent literary critics and anthropologists than historians, were happy to read published texts even written by elites in new ways rather than go into the painstaking work of digging up new sources more closely associated with the world of the subalterns.

The hitherto best and most informative debate about subaltern studies and postcolonial perspectives as perceived by historians working on Latin America, were presented in a 1999 issue of the *Hispanic American Historical Review* titled "Mexico's New Cultural History: Una Lucha Libre". In this issue,

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<sup>17</sup> Florencia E Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994).

historians with very different views of the new historiographic fashion expressed their evaluations. Most critical to the new approaches was Stephen Haber, an economic historian who has written extensively on Mexican and Latin American history in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His main criticisms concerned what he perceived to be a departure from common standards in history.<sup>18</sup> Contrasting traditional historians with social science historians, he likened the former with attorneys in a court of law using documents and witnesses to argue for a case and the latter with scientists who test general and universal theories applied to specific cases. In Haber's view, the new cultural historians combined the worst of both worlds. They wrote argumentative and speculative history with a specialized jargon making it difficult for other academic to understand and assess the value of their work. Florencia Mallon obviously objected to Haber's criticism and defended the ways of writing history that the new cultural historians had embraced.<sup>19</sup>

But perhaps the best exposition of the promises of the new cultural history was at this time formulated by Eric Van Young, who was about to complete a monumental history of the wars of independence in Mexico from a subaltern perspective. Not only did Van Young defend the new cultural history, he thought that it should have stronger imperialist ambitions.<sup>20</sup> Presenting himself as a converted materialist, Van Young argued that culture permeated everything. Although he accepted that material and economic matters are important, he did no longer see them as fundamental, or as a basic structure of society on which everything else rests. In a way the new cultural history, then, is Marxist history turned on its head. Culture comes first, and the economics and social patterns are merely superstructural. Moreover, for Van Young it was imperative to adopt perspectives which could rescue the visions of the subalterns. Commenting on his work in progress on the independence movements and the wars in Mexico, Van Young stated:

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Haber, "Anything Goes: Mexico's "New" Cultural History," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>19</sup> Florencia E Mallon, "Time on the Wheel: Cycles of Revisionism and the "New Cultural History"," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>20</sup> Eric Van Young, "The New Cultural History Comes to Old Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1999).

In the course of thinking through my research materials, I was increasingly drawn to culture - to the process of meaning formation, the codes by which meanings are stabilized and transmitted, and the ideas in people's minds- through the question of individual motivation for joining in collective political violence. It seemed that the internal images in people's heads that formed the basis of these motives rarely had anything explicitly to do with economic grievances, or with larger, more abstractly structural representations of "interest." Seeing people's behavior as a reflex of class or market relationships, therefore, seemed reductive and out of synch with the evidence. This has thrown me back ever more on the representations themselves-whether of family, community, forms of earthly authority, religious cohesion, cosmic order, and so forth-as being largely at the source of collective action.<sup>21</sup>

These considerations has an enormous effect upon how new cultural historians perceive for instance the Latin American wars of independence. Van Young's own monumental *The Other Rebellion* from 2001 reflects this most clearly.<sup>22</sup> The 700-page monograph details an impressive number of local rebellions and life stories of individual men and women largely from rural communities in central Mexico who in different ways are caught up in the whirlwind of the independence wars. Although it is difficult to summarize the book in its entirety, it is important to highlight some of the recurring themes emphasized by Van Young to be able to compare them to the works I mentioned in the beginning of this essay. In this we are aided by an interesting interchange between Alan Knight and Van Young published in *Historia Mexicana* in 2004.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most important insights offered by Van Young is that the subalterns/ commoners/ non-elite/ inhabitants of the rural *pueblos* of central Mexico frequently pursued objectives very different from the elites. Even though they were often recruited into royalist or patriot forces, when Van Young analyzes their representations and actions he finds that they often had goals that little of anything to do with the larger aspirations of creole

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<sup>21</sup> Van Young, „The New Cultural', p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> See Alan Knight, "Crítica: Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion* y la historiografía mexicana," *Historia mexicana* 54, no. 1 (2004). and Eric Van Young, "Réplica De Aves y Estatuas: Respuesta a Alan Knight," *Historia mexicana* 54, no. 1 (2004).

elites. They cannot be easily divided into royalists or patriots. Van Young holds that their objective tended either to be individual or connected to the maintenance of local communitarian identities. In accordance with his insistence on the pre-eminence of culture, he finds that material and economic interests – such as defence of communal lands, opposition to tribute collections and other taxes - were less important than the struggle for religious ideals, millenarianism or other more or less utopian perspectives with local roots. This heterogeneity of ideals among the subalterns makes it difficult to construct a meta-narrative of the independence wars. Van Young's book is a collection of fragmented experiences that point in many different directions. In this way, there are obvious similarities between *The Other Rebellion* and the Guha's work on India as mentioned above.

Another important aspect of Van Young's book, is the insistence on the continuity principle. Unlike François-Xavier Guerra and other historians inspired by him, Van Young still defends the continuity principle. He highlights the similarities between the rebellions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the local uprisings and rebellions occurring in Mexico during the 1810-1821 period, and with other Mexican rebellions up to and including the Mexican revolution. The stress is not on the continuity of basic economic and social structures, but in popular political culture. The forms of resistance were basically the same from the late colonial period until the Mexican revolution according to Van Young. Independence is therefore not a watershed in Mexican history, although because of all the political activity it implied on both elite and popular levels it is a very useful window through which one may approach subalterns in the past.

Concerning the social make-up of the participants in the independence movements, Van Young is keen to dispel what he regards to be long-standing myths in the traditional historiography. Contrary to what is commonly written on the independence movements in Mexico, the participation of priests was quite limited. Morelos and Hidalgo were not typical examples of parish priests in Mexico, according to Van Young. More importantly still, and also contrary to accepted wisdom, the inhabitants of the rural communities and *pueblos de indios* in central Mexico were just as likely as the rest of the population

to participate in the patriot struggles. This is of course a fundamental aspect of Van Young's view on the independence period; it cannot be properly understood without entering into the perceptions and actions of ordinary people at the time. Furthermore, there is no simple correlation between ethnicity or race and the political outlook during the independence period. Those defined as Indians by the colonial state, were just as likely to fight for the patriot armies as the rest of the population. But fighting with the patriots did not necessarily mean that they shared the goals and objectives of the creole elites who led the independence movements.

It is hard to see how Van Young's perception of the independence period can satisfy the wishes of radical bolivarianos of today. If popular and subaltern objectives were so variegated and at the same time so separated from the goals of the creole patriots, how is it possible to argue that patriot leaders were the champions of the people? To posit Hidalgo, Morelos or Bolívar as a sort of ideological vanguard who knew the true interest of the people better than the people themselves, would run counter to the whole premise underlying the subaltern studies engagement with history from below.

Historians working on independence movements in other parts of Latin America have no doubt been influenced by Van Young's work, but not necessarily copied neither his form of writing nor his conclusion regarding popular participation.

Some historians have gone farther than Van Young in exploring the use of language by non-elite actors during the Latin American independence period. Several particularly revealing cases concerning slaves and their potent use of political language have been studied by Peter Blanchard and Camilla Townsend. Concepts such as "liberty", "freedom", "slavery", "rights of man" and "equality" have very different connotations when enunciated by slaves towards owners or political leaders rather than by creole elites towards peninsular authorities. Parting from this insight, Blanchard and Townsend explore how slaves in Latin America were able to use the liberal and republican rhetoric to their own personal advantage during the independence period. Townsend wrote an illuminating article on the meeting between the slave Angela Batallas and Simón

Bolívar while he was there to meet San Martín in 1823.<sup>24</sup> Batallas entered into a legal dispute with her owner, a young wealthy merchant who had seduced her saying “mi amor te hará libre” and left her when she got pregnant with his child. With the aid of a lawyer and with the direct intervention of Bolívar, Batallas was able to win her freedom. She based her legal argument on the fact that the sexual union of the two bodies made them one, and that half her body could not remain enslaved while the other half was freed. She also argued that the honour of the new republic depended on the fact that the authorities were willing to uphold the principles on which they were based. In other words, Angela Batallas was able to use the new republican rhetoric to her own advantage against the interest of her owner, incidentally a supporter of the patriot cause. In a similar vein, but using many more cases from Spanish South America, Blanchard has studied the participation of slaves in the wars of independence, both the ones who fought on the patriot side and those who fought for the royalists. Again, a similar picture emerges. The interests and outlooks of slaves and free were by no means identical. Yet, it was possible both for slaves in the royalist armies and on the patriot side, to use the language of their respective leaders to their own personal advantage.<sup>25</sup>

Comparing these works on slaves to Van Young’s on subalterns in central Mexico, some interesting differences appear. First of all, the slaves seem much less communitarian than Van Young’s subalterns. Only very rarely do slaves use the wars of independence to press for the outright abolition of slavery or other general claims common to slaves, let alone society at large. Blanchard’s and Townsend’s slaves pursued individual goals, they seek freedom for themselves and their families, and they used the new “language of liberation” to that effect. This, however, does not necessarily mean that were

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<sup>24</sup> Camilla Townsend, “Half My Body Free, The Other Half Enslaved’: The Politics of the Slaves of Guayaquil at the End of the Colonial Era,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 7, no. 1 (1998).

<sup>25</sup> See Peter Blanchard, “The Language of Liberation: Slave Voices in the Wars of Independence,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002). See also Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom: Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).



merely parroting the speech of their political leaders. But to assess the genuinity of their adhesion to either republican or royal ideals, is in practice extremely difficult with the sources available to us. Still, the overall picture that Townsend and Blanchard leave us with concerning the relationship between elite creole patriot interests and those of the slaves, is much less clear-cut than the deep division that Van Young draws. In some ways at least, the participation of the slaves in the independence armies had the effect of radicalizing both the objective and the outcome of independence, despite the fact most of them sought individual gain.

Most Latin Americans in the late colonial period were neither rural Indian pueblo-dwellers nor slaves. Large groups of people were in the censuses defined as *mestizos*, free people of all colours, *castas*, or *pardos*. For the case of the Caribbean provinces of New Granada, three recent books have paid particular attention to the roles played these groups during the independence period; Alfonso Múnera's *El fracaso de la nación*, Aline Helg's *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia* and Marixa Lasso's *The Myth of Racial Harmony*. They are worth discussing in part because they offer perspectives that differ from Van Young's, but more importantly because they reveal interesting aspects concerning the significance of race for a better understanding of popular participation in the independence movement.

One of the first in Colombian historiography to draw attention to popular protagonists in the independence struggle was Alfonso Múnera, in his *El fracaso de la nación* first published in 1998.<sup>26</sup> The largest part of his book concerns the relationship between the two largest cities in the Viceroyalty of New Granada, Santa Fe de Bogotá and Cartagena de Indias during the eighteenth century. Múnera argues that the conventional view of Colombian independence has privileged the study of the interior over the coast. His study is to a large extent a vindication of the importance of the coastal region for a better understanding of the formation of the Colombian nation-state. In one of the key chapters of the book titled "Los artesanos mulatos y la independencia de la república de Cartagena, 1810-1816",

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<sup>26</sup> Alfonso Múnera, *El fracaso de la Nación: Región, clase y raza en el Caribe Colombiano* (Bogotá: Banco de la República/ El Ancora Editores, 1998).

Múnera analyzes popular participation in the establishment and politics of the short-lived independence republic of Cartagena. The narrative is structured around the actions of a Cuban-born artisan and militia captain Pedro Romero and other inhabitants of the popular barrio of Getsemaní and their political protagonism. In Múnera's view the mulattoes (which is the term preferred by Múnera) are the most radical sectors of the city and they manage to pressure the elite into adopting a more radical stance, especially towards the Regency Council in Spain. Incensed by the debates surrounding the Cádiz 1812 constitution and the question of whether *pardos* would be obtain full citizenship, they came to identify independence with legal equality and pressed the Cartagena elites to break with Spain, even though the latter had preferred a more diplomatic solution to the political crisis. In Múnera's version of the events, the racial issue is the most important factor for explaining why the city of Cartagena opted for full independence from the Hispanic monarchy. The independence of Cartagena, thus seen, not only had political objectives. It was based on more fundamental social almost revolutionary motives.

Although this is a simple and attractive narrative, it has some serious methodological problems. It is based on a particular reading of documents written by Cartagenero elites at the time which only in very indirect ways hint at the motivation of the popular sectors of the city. The citations reveal the ambiguity - and at times the fear - of the elites towards the people. They tell us quite a bit about how the elites thought at the time, and the documents show common prejudices against the coloured population, but to conclude from them that Romero represented the *pardos* in general, and that they were both well informed about the Cádiz debates and that they successfully pressured the local creole elites seem far-fetched. In a more recent essay based on more primary sources, "Pedro Romero: el rostro impreciso de los mulatos libres", Múnera presents a more nuanced view. Romero now represents

[...] las frustraciones y anhelos de un sector social de extraordinario vigor –los artesanos negros y mulatos– [...] pero además [...] un interlocutor válido de la elite criolla [...] no fue sin embargo [...] un simple servidor de la clase dirigente cartagenera; por el contrario,

defendió sus propios intereses, aunque en la forma ambigua y contradictoria propia de sus circunstancias sociales [...]<sup>27</sup>

Romero is here more of an interlocutor between elites and popular sectors of the city. The division between the population and the elite is not as clear-cut as before, and Múnera opens up for the possibility that Romero not always played the role of a popular leader. He seems to have changed sides during the later years of the Cartagena republic and it seems that he also pursued more individual goals. Nevertheless, if Múnera's description is accurate we have at least one example of a place where popular sectors of the population were heavily involved in the independence struggle, participated clearly in the central ideological and political debates of the time *and* stood up for a radical position favouring independence and the establishment of an equalitarian and liberal republic.

The Swiss historian Aline Helg offers a more detailed and somewhat more depressing analysis of the same events in her 2004 book.<sup>28</sup> Unlike Múnera, Helg studies political participation and the relationship between both urban and rural groups in and around Cartagena before, during and after the independence period. She emphasises the continuity between the late colonial and early republican periods, and she finds that popular sectors were *not* able to impose their outlook on neither the patriots nor the royalists in Cartagena. On the contrary, the *pardos* of Cartagena were too divided, too fragmented to withstand elite domination. Once in power, the new republican leadership in Cartagena is able to detain popular influence like they had done during the colonial period.

Perhaps even more interesting for the discussion of the relationship between Bolívar and the people, Helg devotes a separate chapter to *pardo* admiral José Padilla, his attempts during the 1820s to secure more influence in republican government for himself and others who had risen during the wars to prominent military and political positions and the

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<sup>27</sup> Alfonso Múnera, "Pedro Romero: El rostro impreciso de los mulatos libres," in *Fronteras imaginadas: La construcción de las razas y de la geografía en el siglo XIX colombiano*, ed. Alfonso Múnera (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2005), 167.

<sup>28</sup> Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

reactions of Bolívar and Santander towards what they perceived to be the threat of *pardocracia*.<sup>29</sup> Bolívar in a letter to Santander claimed that the natural propensity of the pardos was to exterminate the privileged class and he opposed a plan to form an expedition headed by Padilla to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule on the grounds that it would lead to another Haiti. Santander, it seems, was more well-disposed towards Padilla, and considered him relatively moderate compared to other *pardo* militants. Intertwined with personal ambitions and rivalries concerning key military and political position in the new republic, the dispute between Padilla and Bolívar had a lot to do with racial grievances in Helg's rendering of the conflict. Far from a champion of the people, Bolívar here comes across as a stern defender of aristocratic and white domination. As is well known, Padilla in the end was executed in 1828, after an ill-fated attempt to rebel against the new Bolivarian constitution. It goes with saying that this version will be of little use to Chávez.

Marixa Lasso also discusses the independent republic of Cartagena and the role of popular and racial politics.<sup>30</sup> Her interpretation is in a way more akin to the perspectives of Townsend and Blanchard in that it gives language a pivotal role. The chapter "The First Republic and the *Pardos*" - is a detailed analysis of the independent republic of Cartagena, the political conflicts that permeated its short existence and their racial underpinnings. Lasso has the *pardos* playing a crucial role as supporters of the radical faction of Gabriel Gutiérrez de Piñeres in opposition to the *aristócratas* led by José María García de Toledo. Lasso's primary interest is how *piñeristas* used against the local aristocracy the very same principled arguments on equality, merit and virtue that the American deputies used against *peninsulares* and royalists. *Piñeristas* accused the *toledistas* of being aristocratic, harbouring secret pro-Spanish sentiments and acting in ways contrary to the

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<sup>29</sup> Helg, 'Liberty and Equality', pp. 195-218. See also Aline Helg, "Simón Bolívar and the Spectre of *Pardocracia*: José Padilla in Post-Independence Cartagena," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35 (2003).

<sup>30</sup> Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia 1795-1831* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). See also Marixa Lasso, "Race war and nation in Caribbean Gran Colombia, Cartagena, 1810-1832," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (2006).

principles of independence and republicanism. The toledistas in turn, responded by charging the piñeristas with instigating disorders that could lead to another Haiti. The real or imagined fear of race war, according to Lasso, henceforth became a constant element in the Colombian myth of racial harmony and was used against those who criticized the democratic shortcomings of the republic. Subsequent chapters illustrate both the limits of racial equality in early republican Colombia and the extent to which race became a political taboo, making overt state racism impossible. Based primarily on court cases from the 1820s, Lasso analyses the fortunes of various Afro-Colombians in challenging white domination through the justice system. She shows how the new republican language of racial equality both enabled *pardos* to seek justice, positions and rights that had previously been denied them *and* at the same time limited their possibilities of expressing their aspirations in terms of racial grievances. Instead of explaining the absence of outright racial rebellions in the decades following independence, Lasso tries to show how the rumours of race war found in secret reports, closed senate hearings, private letters and in pasquinades constituted a crucial aspect of the early republican political disputes and discourse on race, especially in the conflict between the supporters of Bolívar and Santander. The final outcome of the political struggles of the 1820s was that racial grievances became a taboo, "not by further repressing *pardos*, but by upholding the notion of racial harmony".<sup>31</sup>

A basic problem with all three of these studies, is that they seem to part form the premise that we should expect that the population at large, and especially those defined as *mestizos*, *mulatos*, *negros* or *pardos*, favoured independence from Spain and adopted patriotic, liberal and radical stances during the wars of independence. We do not need to further than the neighbouring province of Santa Marta to find examples of large popular support for royalism.<sup>32</sup> And we should not forget Van

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<sup>31</sup> Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia 1795-1831*, p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> Steinar A. Saether, *Identidades e independencia en Santa Marta and Riohacha, 1750-1850* (Bogotá: Instituto colombiano de antropología e historia (ICANH), 2005), Steinar A. Saether, "Independence and The Redefinition of Indianness around Santa Marta, Colombia, 1750-1850," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005).

Young's warning that in most instances in Mexico, popular grievances did not necessarily correspond nicely with those of the elites.

In sum, what we are getting is similar to what Guha predicted in the 1980s. When focusing on subaltern movements and actions, the overall picture tend to become highly fragmented and heterogeneous. The people wanted different things. Sometimes their aims coincided with Bolívar's, but more often than not they did not and at times they were in opposition to what he wanted. Chávez will not get what he wants, at least not from professional historians influenced by the newer currents in social and cultural historiography. The *bicentenarios* may as a result become even more interesting.

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