

José M. Portillo Valdés. *Crisis Atlántica: Autonomía e Independencia en la Crisis de la Monarquía Hispánica*. Madrid: Marcial Pons Ediciones de Historia, 2006. 318 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-84-96467-16-3.

Reviewed by Erika Pani (División de Historia, CIDE (Mexico))
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Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Spanish Atlantic

Perhaps because of its origins in Cold War politics or the perception that it is “intellectual colonialism disguised as a legitimate form of writing history,” Atlantic history as a framework for intellectual endeavor has not been particularly attractive to historians of the early modern Ibero-American world.[1] This is particularly salient in the literature on Atlantic revolutions, in which the Hispanic world has been marginalized when not altogether ignored, its experiences considered trivial rather than exceptional within the Atlantic context.[2] Similarly, Latin American national historiographies have traditionally portrayed the revolutionary process of 1808-26 as one of liberation of pre-existing national entities which shook off colonial domination, and not as the collapse of a complex transoceanic system. Until recently, from the perspective of many Latin American historians, the Atlantic was nature’s way of separating the nations of the New World from the despotic former metropole.[3]

By taking on the 1808-26 crisis in the Catholic monarchy as a whole, the work of scholars such as François-Xavier Guerra, Tulio Halperín Donghi, and Jaime E. Rodríguez O. has greatly contributed to our understanding of the revolutionary process. But our appreciation of it is considerably enriched by José M. Portillo’s *Crisis Atlántica* and its decidedly transoceanic perspective. Portillo’s elegant prose describes the complex, multifaceted transformation unleashed throughout Spain and its possessions by the incursion of France’s revolutionary tyrant into the Peninsula. The Hispanic revolution is revealed as the most “Atlantic” of them all. Its language resonates

with references to the “healthy revolutions” of Holland, Switzerland, and North America, and to that of Jacobin France. It has been written about by (among many others) a Scottish philosopher, a Venezuelan jurist, and a cosmopolitan revolutionary from Caracas, who collectively took a pseudonym redolent with Atlantic connotations: that of “William Burke” (pp. 176-180). More importantly, constitutional solutions to the crisis, all equally relevant and creative, were put forth on both sides of the Atlantic, among which the perhaps overstudied 1812 “Cádiz constitution” is but one example. Finally, Portillo argues effectively that, among the Atlantic revolutions, the Hispanic movement alone sought to create “a national identity” that would embrace all of the former Empire (p. 31). By adopting an Atlantic perspective, this author reconstructs a broad, densely interconnected process in which neither Cadiz, Madrid, nor any of the Spanish American capitals are the center, and in which phenomena such as modernity, constitutionalism, and independence cannot be identified exclusively with certain territories. This “Atlantic crisis” entailed a transformation that was transoceanic and imperial in scale, unlike that of the British Americans, whose rebellion created new sovereign entities and a modern republican government, but barely ruffled the feathers of empire; and that of France, where, with the exception of Haiti, the national dimensions overwhelmed those of empire. The originality of the Ibero-American case brought forth by Portillo’s work seems to promise that a comparative study of the foundations and mechanics of imperial identity would be fertile ground for inquiry.

Crisis Atlántica reveals the open-ended nature of the constitutional debate, as elite Spaniards, in both Europe and America, sought to reconstruct the relationship between government and governed, and between the colonial power and its possessions, through fundamental law. It traces the experimental search that drove the men who (in 1808, as Spain was invaded by French troops) set up provincial *juntas* as temporary guardians of the sovereignty of an absent king, and, two years later, called for the election of constituent congresses that placed themselves on planes that were politically superior to that of the monarch (p. 134). The book illustrates the ways in which these elites strategically juggled the principles of monarchy, loyalty, and representation, and redefined contentious and essential concepts such as “people” and “nation,” “autonomy” and “independence.” It closely analyzes American efforts to restructure the colonial relationship along the lines of greater autonomy, by resorting to the same language and legal justifications as the revolutionaries on the Peninsula.

In accounting for the failure of both the Cádiz constitution’s efforts to create a nation of Spanish citizens from the materials of the old monarchy, and that of the American *criollos* to maintain autonomous “American nations” within its fold, Portillo steps away from what have been the standard explanations: the existence of an Iberian—or Latin American—ethos that is refractory to or even incompatible with liberalism and modernity. He suggests that it was culture—the way people saw and thought about certain things—that crippled a federation under which the American nations could co-exist with their rights and autonomy preserved like those of the districts including the Basque country, Navarra, and Catalonia, that made up peninsular Spain. Portillo shows how the eighteenth-century endeavors of “Creole patriots” to paint the American nations as “republics”—“perfect” communities, endowed by history with a constitution and an autonomous capacity for representation (p. 60)—so similar to those of Basque *ilustrados*, failed to convince their European counterparts; Creole responses to the 1808 crisis, although they closely followed the patterns of Spain’s “provincial revolution,” were perceived as “illegal, tumultuous acts of rebellion” (pp. 53, 63). The federation was stillborn because the Americans lost the Enlightenment’s “dispute over the New World.”

Thus, for all of the European talk of equality and the insistence that America was an “integral part of the monarchy,” for all of the “exquisite legality” of the Americans’ arguments, European liberals were incapable of conceiving of the ultramarine possessions in the way

they thought about the autonomous provinces in Spain. When the Spanish Cortes met, the American *juntas* (unlike their European counterparts) were denied corporate representation; equality of representation between American and European provinces was made impossible by the exclusion of those of African descent from suffrage; and diverse proposals for the autonomy of an “American nation” within the structure of a transatlantic constitutional monarchy were rejected. Although it seems difficult to grasp how, on the Peninsula, provincial enthusiasm for a liberal constitution (that allowed for the consolidation of local privilege) would turn, two decades later, into the violent rejection of liberalism that fed into the Carlist wars, Portillo’s argument is luminous in that it explains how similar processes were perceived differently, and provoked such different reactions. It also suggests that historians of Ibero-America, when searching for those elements that structure political discourse and beliefs, could be well served by linking republicanism—which as an analytical category tends to be related to a tradition of “civic humanism,” or to the struggle to establish representative government—to the concept of a community’s “perfection,” its self-sufficiency, its being endowed with the necessary elements for civilized life.

Culture, then, acted as the mirror in which the image of American *criollos* became so blurred that Spanish liberals simply could not see them as capable of self-government and of controlling the New World’s ethnically diverse societies. It was also a set of visions, prejudices, and expectations shared by both European and American Spaniards, that stained the first Hispanic constitutionalism, which denied its promise of equality to those whom Portillo calls, in a clever turn of phrase, *la mayoría en minoría* (the majority as minority)—America’s indigenous population. Constitution-writing Spaniards on both shores of the Atlantic largely considered Indians incapable of civilized behavior, unless “dressed and shod” (effectively, unless they became non-Indians), and then only if they maintained their subservient position in society. Portillo highlights the tragic downfall of Atanasio Tzul of Totonicapán in the Guatemalan highlands, who wore a three-cornered hat and rebelled in 1820 against the authorities in order to re-establish the 1812 Constitution; he had to humiliate himself before the *audiencia* (court) in order to be pardoned (pp. 245-249).

Portillo shows that exclusion was an integral part of Ibero-American constitutionalism in the early years of the nineteenth century. Much like the dissonant “all men are created equal” of the North American Declaration of Independence, “between what the constitutional

texts said, what they left out, the assumptions they took for granted and what was culturally understood, the first Hispanic liberalism had a rather scrupulous idea of citizenship" (p. 244). Indian culture was "on principle, excluded from the republican feast." Indians were declared citizens, but remained minors who needed to have constitutional principles explained to them, and to whom constitutional rights were granted as gracious concessions (pp. 218, 238, 230).

The Hispanic constitutions' claims of equality were actually tempered in the texts themselves, as they institutionalized inequality by establishing (along with the "generous" definition of citizenship) indirect elections, where most could participate, but only a few could decide. But Portillo's sensible warning that historians' traditional sympathetic vision of this "first liberalism" as egalitarian and inclusive needs to be toned down is relevant and timely, for constitutional rule did not bring about either "legal or effective" equality (p. 238). It also has broader methodological implications, showing that the cultural assumptions under which constitutional and legal texts were written, read, and understood are as important, in assessing their influence, as the texts themselves. The author is not concerned with addressing the theoretical issues brought forth by debate among intellectual historians. Nevertheless, the importance of "context" and "reception" has been at the heart of the Cambridge School's proposal for a "new history of ideas" that is rarely taken beyond theoretical and methodological discussions. *Crisis Atlántica* grounds these proposals in a particularly effective way, by reconstructing the culture that created the mindset.

On the other hand, one misses an analysis of circumstances, perceptions, and cultural turns applied to the Indian question that parallels Portillo's analysis of Spanish liberals' differing assessment of positions taken by autonomous peninsular provinces and American possessions. Such an analysis might suggest why the unanimous condemnation of Indians as inferior, because they were uncivilized, produced different reactions and yielded different results. Why, in some cases, as liberalism swept away traditional forms of protection and preservation of spaces and lands (p. 245), did many of those excluded take liberalism at its word, and rely on the ideas and practices of the new order to act upon the

public sphere and sometimes carve out greater degrees of autonomy? Why, in other cases, did liberals backtrack, as illustrated by the example of Justo Sierra O'Reilly's Yucatán. Here, the term "Indian," banished by liberalism's theoretically granting citizenship to all upstanding men, re-entered the language of law in the 1840s (p. 216). What are the presumptions behind the fact that some indigenous communities were more "successful" with liberal nation-building than others (presumptions explored for the comparison of Basque autonomists with *criollo* autonomists)? Such tensions perhaps fall outside the chronological range of *Crisis Atlántica*, but probing the intricacies of this "American" problem would greatly benefit from a similar breath of scope, as would the study of slavery and of the Afro-American populations.

By weaving together the existing literature from an Atlantic perspective, José M. Portillo has freed the Hispanic revolutions from the constraints of necessarily anachronistic national histories and of rigid definitions constructed *a posteriori*. His is a fascinating story of roads not taken, and an important contribution to the history of the Atlantic revolutions.

Notes

[1]. To understand the imbalance, see the bibliography compiled by Federica Morelli and Alejandro E. Gómez, "La nueva historia atlántica: un asunto de escalas," in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, 6 (2006), on line April 5, 2006, referenced on May 4, 2007, available at <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/document2102.html>.

[2]. See Lauren Benton, "No Longer Odd Region Out: Repositioning Latin America in World History," in *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84, no. 3 (August 2004): 423-430; and Claudio Lomnitz, "Introduction" and "Nationalism's Dirty Linen: Contact Zones and the Topography of National Identity," in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xvii, 127.

[3]. For the evolution of the historiography of the Independence period, see Alfredo Ávila, "De las Independencias a la modernidad. Notas sobre un cambio historiográfico," in *Conceptualizar lo que se ve. François-Xavier Guerra, historiador. Homenaje*, ed. Erika Pani and Alicia Salmerón (México: Instituto Mora, 2004), 76-112.

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