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Lester D. Langley. *The Americas in the Age of Revolution 1750-1850*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. xvi + 374 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06613-5.

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Lester Langley has produced a sweeping history of the “age of revolution” in the Americas (1750-1850) which focuses on the revolutionary struggle against the British in North America after 1776, the Haitian revolution which began in 1791, and the wars for independence in Spanish America which swept the region between 1808 and 1826. A brief introductory chapter is followed by three chapters (Part 1) on the unfolding and aftermath of the American Revolution. Then there are three chapters (Part 2) on the origins and trajectory of the Haitian Revolution, which leads to three chapters (Part 3) on the Spanish American Revolutions. The fourth part of the book is comprised of three more chapters, followed by an epilogue, which assess the post-revolutionary era in North and South America up to the 1850s (in this section the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution receives very little coverage in contrast to the United States and the new republics of Latin America). Langley’s stated purpose is to provide a “comparative history of the revolutionary age” which takes its “political” instead of its “social measure.” He does this because, first, although he acknowledges that the “involvement of popular forces” in the revolutionary struggles pointed to the presence and even “the centrality of powerful and divisive social issues” he contends that these “cannot be extrapolated from the fundamental political strains of the age.” He argues that, although the radical character of these wars for independence “may be measured by the dynamics of social change,” his preoccupation is with the way in which the “violent overthrow of legitimate authority and the creation of independent states largely defined the revolutionary meaning of the age.” Second, he emphasises the way in which the “revolutions” became “fundamental historical references in the formative years of political cultures” in the various new nation-states concerned (pp.

2-3).

He argues at the outset that many of the modern studies of the revolutions which occurred between 1750 and 1850 lack an “appreciation of the dynamics of the age,” particularly the regional and local specificity of chaotic events and the “social explosiveness” which was, in his view, driven by “color” not “class” (it could be argued, however, that in the Americas to a considerable degree color was, and is, class, and vice versa). From Langley’s perspective, contemporary efforts to come to grips with the age of revolution have also failed to capture the complexity engendered by the collision of conservative views with rising ideas of liberty, and the various ways in which Indians, African slaves, and mestizos adapted to the wider trends of the revolutionary era (p. 8). He contends that none of the revolutions under scrutiny “conforms sufficiently to any of the prevailing theories of revolution” which have been generated by social scientists and historians. In this situation, he concludes that a satisfactory explanation for why the revolutions “occurred” and why they “followed a particular course” is to be found in their “chaotic form.” >From this perspective, explanations for their “triumphs” lie in the “creativity made possible by chaos,” while explanations for their “failure” are rooted in “the inability to contain that chaos”. Finally, explanations for the “choices” made by the “post-revolutionary leaders” are to be found, argues Langley, in “their determination to channel the chaotic forces unleashed by war, or if fearful of what they portended, to crush them” (pp. 285-286).

While Langley finds that a common factor driving and shaping the revolutions was chaos, one of the major differences between the American Revolution and its counterparts, which he identifies and which had impor-



tant implications for politics in the post-revolutionary era, was that the revolution in North America, in contrast to those in Haiti and Spanish America, led to the mobilisation of the population for war without militarising society and without tilting the balance of political power between civilians and military officers towards the latter. The author emphasises that the U.S. had actually “been perilously close to a military coup in the final years of the revolution.” At the same time, the contradictory legacy of the (North) American revolution which involved “the fighting of a war with a professional army and citizens in arms” has been a problem in the United States right down to the present; however, this is “a minor issue compared with the militarism that plagued Latin America in the aftermath of independence” (p. 60, 54, 248-250.). Langley also explains the different political outcomes in terms of the fact that in British North America in the 1770s, the “political arena” was inhabited by ideologues who “debated inalienable rights” and “orators” who “expounded on the power of colonial assemblies” while on the eve of the wars of independence in Spanish America, the political terrain was still dominated by a “patrimonial state” connected in “a precise and comprehensible way to the Crown.” Thus, when the Spanish monarch was “forcibly removed from his seat of authority” in 1808, “his Creole subjects were thrown into disarray and confusion” and their initial “commitment as revolutionaries was an expression of political loyalty to the deposed monarchs and opposition to the usurper” (pp. 211-212).

Another and much debated difference which Langley addresses relates to the issue of why the Thirteen Colonies emerged from the struggle with Britain as a united nation, while the revolution in Spanish America (despite the aspirations of revolutionary leaders such as Bolivar) led to the fragmentation of the Spain’s empire into numerous republics. In attempting to explain this difference in outcome, Langley identifies a number of contextual factors. First, he points to the “comparatively more promising economic prospects for the United States in the early years of the republic.” A second, and somewhat more vague explanation apparently lies in the different “political experience” and “political culture” which characterised the three cases. Third was the fact that in North America, the post-revolutionary era was characterised by an “increase in opportunities for horizontal if not vertical mobility offered by the opening of western lands for settlement” (of course, westward expansion also put considerable stress and strain on the overall political architecture of the United States and contributed to the Civil War in the 1860s). Fourth, Langley argues that at

the time of its birth, many people in the United States “may have suffered from poverty”; however, in contrast to Spanish America they “were not mired in misery” (pp. 74-75).

He also concludes that the United States was “notably more successful” than Spanish America or Haiti in integrating “often disparate and conflictive social groups in the postrevolutionary era and in the molding of a citizenry” (p. 237, also see pp. 248-251). At the same time, Langley rejects explanations which either explain Bolivar and his compatriots’ “failure to create a viable state” out of the wreckage of the Spanish Empire in terms of the external economic influence of Britain and the United States, or point to the Creole elite’s “adoption of inappropriate foreign models” as the key to the fragmentation of Spanish America. In keeping with his overall theme, he concludes that a “more persuasive general explanation” incorporates the dynamics of chaos into evaluations of the legacy of revolutionary Latin America. He emphasises that the “dilemma” which the Creole elites faced “was more complicated than one of choosing between foreign and indigenous cultural and political models,” again arguing somewhat vaguely that the “social and political dynamics of postrevolutionary Latin America responded to different forces” (p. 255).

On the question of why the Thirteen Colonies emerged united and the Spanish Empire fractured into a range of independent republics, much more could be made, however, of the fact that the Spanish Empire was a large and sprawling entity which was often sharply divided along administrative, geographical and economic lines. Significantly, all of the republics which eventually emerged from the wreckage of Spanish imperium in the Americas were grounded in relatively distinct and usually longstanding units of the colonial administration. Furthermore, not all of the British empire in the Americas was integrated into the new nation of the United States, with colonies and territories which would become the nucleus of modern Canada, not to mention British colonies in the Caribbean, remaining part of the empire. In fact, one begins to wonder whether asking why the Thirteen Colonies emerged united and the former Spanish empire fragmented is even the right question. Do the Thirteen Colonies represent a unit which can be meaningful compared to the sprawling Spanish Empire? Should not the comparison be between the British empire in the Americas and the Spanish empire in the Americas? Geographically, the colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America which became the nucleus of the United States of America occupied an area

smaller than Venezuela. The Thirteen Colonies were clustered close together and well connected in terms of information and economic activity. Ultimately the perceived “failure” of the wars of independence in Spanish America, in contrast to North America, to throw up a “Spanish-America-wide nationalism” of any strength and lay the foundations for a new and united nation-state whose boundaries coincided with those of the former empire needs to be placed in a context which pays more attention to geography, administrative boundaries, and the character of capitalism and technology at the end of the eighteenth century in British North America on the one hand and the “local” particularities of Hispanic capitalism and technological capabilities in the context of the immense geographical spread and administrative arrangements of the Spanish empire on the other hand.[1]

Lester Langley has produced an impressive synthesis based on a great deal of material. At the same time, this book induced a contradictory reaction in this reader. On the one hand, I thoroughly enjoyed the book’s synthetic narrative, its wealth of insights, and its challenging speculations. On the other hand, I became frustrated by the often haphazard approach to comparison and the somewhat vague and rather unsatisfying macro-causal explanation for the revolutions in the Americas which pointed to their chaotic and complex character.[2] His comparative history of revolutions in the Americas is undermined by the lack of a clear framework to explore the similarities and differences between the various cases. Surely it is possible to deploy a rigorous comparative framework and still allow for the contingency and ambiguity which Langley has sought to foreground as the key to understanding the respective revolutionary trajectories. Furthermore, because the book eschews a more compre-

hensive comparative framework, it ends up becoming a series of analytical and narrative histories of the revolutions in the Americas between 1750 and 1850 rather than the comparative history promised at the outset. Building on his years of experience as a historian, Lester Langley illuminates the various revolutions with elegance and flair and draws some insightful comparisons which could have contributed to a more sustained comparative history. At the same time, criticisms aside, this book deserves a wide readership as an important and pioneering study which will undoubtedly stand as a marker for future efforts to write the comparative history of the colonial and revolutionary eras in the Americas.

Notes

[1]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 47-48, 63-64. Immanuel Wallerstein has emphasized geographical differences noting that because the area involved was so great “Bolívar’s dream of replicating the formula of unity achieved by the Thirteen Colonies” was doomed to fail because “there was no possibility of unifying the military struggle, an important factor in the creation of the United States.” Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy 1730-1840s* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989), 254.

[2]. Other reviewers have apparently had a similar reaction. See Gordon S. Wood, “Doing the Continental” *The New York Review of Books* 20 November 1997, 55.

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