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Introduction

A GREAT POLITICAL commotion marked the beginning of the nineteenth century across the Spanish empire. Napoleon's occupation of the Iberian Peninsula shattered imperial unity and inaugurated a long history of political change on both sides of the Atlantic. In the Americas, most of the former colonial territories entered into a period of reformulation of the colonial links that ended in independence, followed by a vast, lengthy, and intricate process of redefinition of sovereignties and formation of new polities. Attempts at nation building followed different directions, and many a project was tried and failed, while no linear or predetermined path led to the fifteen individual nation-states in place by the end of the second half of that century.

There was, however, a common denominator to that complex process: the polities in the making, the short- and the long-lived alike, all adopted forms of government based on the principle of popular sovereignty. Spanish America was, therefore, part of the larger history that involved the English, the American, and the French revolutions, the foundation of constitutional monarchies, the invention of a federal republic in

the United States and of other republican regimes in Europe, and—above all—the institution of the sovereignty of the people as a founding principle of the political. These developments shattered the edifice of the *ancien régime* in various parts of the world where, from then on, the political no longer referred to a transcendent instance but was considered a human construct. The making of the Spanish American republics belongs to this broader picture. Until a short while ago, however, this experience remained marginal to the mainstream narratives of political modernity that revolved around the northern Europe–United States axis. By introducing Spanish America into this story of political transformation, this book joins the work of other scholars who, in recent years, have adopted a more global approach in order to widen the scope of those narratives.

Popular sovereignty marked the way to modernity, but within that framework two main regime options were available: the constitutional monarchy and the republic. At a time when most of the Western modern polities endorsed the former, the Americas, both North and South, and with the sole exception of Brazil, opted for the republic. There was no single republican model, and the label applies to a wide variety of ventures across the continent, but all of them entailed a radical innovation in the ways of instituting the polity and of legitimating authority. If the former Spanish territories were not original in their move toward popular sovereignty, their adoption of republican formulas tried on a vast scale was unparalleled outside the United States, and it inaugurated a decades-long history of political experimentation in the ways of the republic. The purpose of this book is to reflect upon this vast and long-term “republican experiment”¹ in Spanish America as part of the broader political transformations experienced during the nineteenth century in a global context. It also

seeks to illuminate that larger process under a new light, and thus contribute to reshape the overall history of republics and republicanism.

The Adventure of Self-Government

By the mid-1820s, all of continental Spanish America had left behind the colonial condition and entered into a new political era, marked by the adoption of popular sovereignty as the founding principle of the polity and of the republic as the favored form of government. This implied a radical change at the level of what Pierre Rosanvallon has called “the political,” that is, “the modality of existence of life in common,”² a change that in this case meant a complex transit from a social order consisting of natural or God-made communities and corporations that integrated the body of the kingdom to a secular, nontranscendent, man-made, self-instituted polity. This transit was not a straight road, but rather a winding path of irregular trajectory and unpredictable ending. Nevertheless, the decisions—that proved final—to replace the divine right of kings and to dismiss the constitutional monarchy alternative set the stage for the new, that is, for the successive experiences in republican self-government. Yet these experiences were themselves subject to the uncertainties and tensions of a self-instituted “life in common,” which triggered an open-ended process for decades to come.

The founders of the new polities faced two main challenges. First, how to reconstruct political authority on the bases of popular sovereignty. This was both a theoretical and a very practical matter that, throughout most of the century, found various, always partial, solutions. Second, how to define the human and territorial contours of the polities that were to be

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the sources of that sovereign power as well as the domains for its application. The severance of the colonial bond had led to the formal erasure of the old territorial division characteristic of the imperial institutional arrangements. Yet the initial proposals to create a single “nation” did not prosper, and the following decades witnessed the drafting and redrafting of new boundaries, and therefore, the shaping and reshaping of the polities. The vicissitudes of this story owed as much to the colonial legacy as to the challenges of the postcolonial era, and their traces were still visible in the relatively stable pattern of republics-cum-nations that crystallized by the second half of the nineteenth century.

The focus of this book relates to the first of these questions, that is, to the problem of the creation and legitimation of political authority in Spanish America. The adoption of republican forms of government entailed a radical change in the foundations of power and the “invention of the people”—to borrow the term used by Edmund Morgan in his seminal book on Britain and the United States.³ Besides this simple yet indispensable initial platform, there were no fixed formats or universal protocols that defined a republic, so that actual republics could and did vary greatly throughout the century.

Despite this variability, and the social, economic, and cultural diversity of the Spanish American territories, the polities that took shape across its variegated geography show common patterns and trends of political organization that defined a distinct republican order that lasted for more than five decades. This order was in flux, but it revolved around certain recognizable principles and institutions common to most of these republics until roughly the 1870s. The problems they had to face were often similar, as were some of the directions they followed to solve them. They also found common inspiration in the available republican examples and ideological traditions.

In their initial drive toward self-government, the postindependence leaderships were well aware of the broader connections of local events, and were committed to what they perceived as the larger struggle on behalf of modernity. They were also strongly influenced by the political traditions and developments beyond the region. The United States featured in a prominent place, but other historical cases appealed in various ways to the founding fathers and their successors: the classical republics—particularly Rome—the Italian early modern city-states, the United Provinces of the Netherlands (late sixteenth to late seventeenth century), and revolutionary France, plus the prestigious English constitutional monarchy and the short liberal experiences in Spain (1812, and 1820 to 1823). These external examples remained a source of reference for the rest of the century, together with a widespread awareness of the Brazilian case—a neighbor constitutional monarchy subject to both praises and critique. But the locals did not mimic any of the existing models; rather, they adapted and innovated, adopted or rejected external influences according to their own legacies and experiences. In short, they followed their own ways, and although criticism ran high in certain periods and places, the search for solutions to the actual political problems did not lead them to fundamentally challenge the republic. Unlike what happened in several European cases that opted out of their republican regimes, Spanish Americans stuck to them for good.

In their search for inspiration in the ways of the republic, they also resorted to the available pool of changing ideas and values in circulation. They could find it in the republicanism of the ancients and in the more recent forms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and Italian republican thought or of Anglo Saxon civic humanism, as well as in the various and successive formulations of what came to be known as

“liberalism.” Also, they could turn to the doctrine of natural rights, from Grotius to Vattel, and to different strands of the Catholic tradition. The echoes of socialist thinkers reverberated in several places after the midcentury, when also positivism gained an increasing presence in most of the region. These ideological lineages provided a shared background whose elements were usually combined in very eclectic ways, shaping original political languages whose main concepts were strongly rooted in the current political contexts.

This changing repertoire provided different and sometimes conflicting orientations for the formulation and reformulation of norms, institutions, and practices that shaped the political life of the republics. Yet innovations in this regard resulted mainly from the concrete political experience of self-government, which turned out to be a risky undertaking with unpredictable effects. In that context, contemporaries sought different ways to produce and reproduce power and authority within the framework of the republic. They tried various normative and institutional alternatives, and devised mechanisms to channel the participation of the “sovereign people”—whose definition was itself controversial. This process of experimentation resulted from a combination of very conscious exercises in innovation and the unpredictable effects of political action, so that the consequences usually went well beyond the wishes and expectations of the main actors of the political game.

By the midcentury, most of the nations-in-the-making had established certain institutional and normative thresholds devised to stabilize the political system, such as the affirmation of individual rights and freedoms, the regulation of government powers, and the explicit demarcation of citizenship. For most of the period, however, political life remained highly volatile. Instability, in fact, proved to be an inbred feature of these

republican regimes—as we shall see throughout this book. And although concerns regarding the difficulties to achieve a more predictable political order were commonplace, only by the last decades of the century did they amount to an overall challenge to the prevailing republican values and practices, which led to decisive changes in the rules of the game and inaugurated a new political era that best fitted in the dawning global age of nationalism and imperialism.

Points of Departure

Scholars have long discussed the characteristics of nineteenth-century Spanish American politics. For years, they considered its pervasive volatility as a symptom of the “failed” modernization of the new polities, where liberalism could not set foot on account of different factors, from colonial heritage to premodern forms of resistance. This literature produced some of the more compelling interpretations of the Latin American past that are still persuasive and highly influential. In recent years, however, historians are leaving behind the teleological perspectives that informed those views, and rather than seek to measure the actual history of the area in terms of the liberal canon, or try to detect obstacles presumably obstructing the road to progress, they are now exploring how politics actually functioned then and there. Liberalism itself has been revisited, as well as the conventional narratives of its all-encompassing influence in the construction of political modernity in the United States and other Western nations. No longer considered to be an exception, Latin American political history is understood in its own terms and as part of that wider story. From this fresh angle, the issue of the instability of nineteenth-century politics may be addressed anew as part of the history of the republic, not only in Spanish America.

Recent scholarship has also left behind a second powerful view of that history, which considered nineteenth-century politics exclusively as an elite affair that kept the rest of the population aside or barely included on the margins. Historians now claim, to the contrary, that the shaping of the Spanish American republics involved not just elites and would-be elites; it implicated larger sectors of the population in politically significant forms of organization and action. It has shown how people from different walks of life mobilized in large numbers and became involved in the political life of the new polities in the making. In this regard, Spanish America shares some of the main traits of political modernization in other areas, while at the same time it shows specific features that account for the intensity of its politics during most of the nineteenth century.

This vibrant scholarship is my point of departure.⁴ Latin American historiography has profited immensely from the recent revival and renovation of political history. In the last twenty to thirty years, the number of books, articles, and dissertations in the field has been larger than all the earlier production put together. This expanding corpus has succeeded in changing our former views of politics and the political in nineteenth-century Latin America. The studies cover a wider range of topics, regions, and periods; they display various methodological perspectives and put forward different interpretations. Most of them deal with national, regional, or local cases, although there is an increasing tendency to include transnational comparisons not just within Latin America but also considering other areas of the world.

I also rely heavily on the theoretical and historical scholarship that studies republicanism, citizenship, the public sphere, revolutions, and more generally, nineteenth-century politics beyond Spanish America. This literature has also offered new concepts and insights in the last decades, and it has allowed me

to think the problems I am concerned with in comparative perspective. Moreover, this study has given me the opportunity to deploy theoretical and empirical inputs that come from different sources and combine them in order to make sense of the overall republican experience.

Itinerary

In the light of these theoretical and historiographical references, this book explores what I have called “the republican experiment” by delving into a crucial component of politics in the republics: the relationship between people and government that developed after the adoption of popular sovereignty as a founding principle of power. While most of the current literature is concerned with particular countries or regions, and chooses to focus either on the elites and would-be-elites or on the popular classes (in some formulations, the “subaltern”), this book points to the common traits and shared tendencies in the relationships established *between* “the many and the few” across Spanish America in the period of the 1820s to 1870s.

In order to reflect upon how power and authority were redefined in the republican era, I seek the commonalities among very different societies through a long period of time; therefore, the differences—which of course are many—are concealed or minimized. Moreover, not all areas of Spanish America are equally covered by the existing literature, so that my interpretations are surely biased in the direction of the countries most favored by it. In this regard, I have decided to limit my arguments to continental Spanish America, thus leaving aside the islands of the Caribbean, which offer a rather different trajectory.

The chosen time span, in turn, has allowed me to conflate these experiences, as it leaves behind the highly conflictive

and heterogeneous processes of independence to concentrate on the core decades of the republican thrust, and ends when that thrust waned in the face of new formulas and actions toward the consolidation of nation-states. For roughly five decades after independence, I find a shared pattern in the ways of the republic, particularly as regards the main topic of this book.

The people were at the center of the adventure of self-government, so a great part of the history of the new republics is tied to the ways in which this abstract principle was made effective in the institution and reproduction of the polity. And the people are also at the center of this book, but rather than attempting an overall consideration of this multidimensional object, I follow a more limited approach and focus primarily on the normative frameworks, institutional setups, and actual practices involving the people of the Spanish American republics from the 1820s to the 1870s. Three dimensions of the political life of the period offer a privileged point of entry to explore that relationship: elections, armed citizenship and the militia, and “public opinion.” These by no means exhaust the possible ways of addressing the chosen topic, but they were spheres of political discourse and action crucial to the forging of politics in the republics. Therefore, the central part of this book explores how these instances worked as arenas for the definition, action, and representation of the people, as well as for the construction and legitimation of power. From there, I go on to discuss the formation of the modern polity, the changing contours of citizenship, the dynamics of politics, and other key features of the Spanish American republican experiment from the aftermath of independence to the last decades of the century. In connecting these developments to the global context and particularly to other republican experiences, I hope to illuminate that larger history from a fresh perspective.

Chapter 1 presents the Latin American scenario at the time of the imperial crisis that plunged the former colonies of Spain and Portugal into a succession of events with unforeseen consequences. There is a very rich literature that discusses Napoleon's occupation of the Iberian Peninsula in the context of the struggles for domination among the main European powers, as well as its multiple consequences for the Iberian empires both at home and overseas. With this historiographical background, the chapter focuses on the final outcome for the American mainland territories under imperial rule: their independence from their metropolis and the subsequent disputes around conflicting sovereignties. Secondly, it discusses the available options of political organization after the severance of the colonial bond, and the choices made in this regard, which led Spanish America in the republican path while Brazil became a constitutional monarchy. The challenges posed by the adoption of republican forms of self-government are at the center of the rest of this chapter, which focuses on the attempts at reconstructing political power on the basis of popular sovereignty and on the final controversial decision to introduce modern representation as the appropriate way to create legitimate authority. This decision opened the way to the definition of different dimensions of political citizenship that will be the main theme of the following three chapters.

Chapter 2 revolves around one of the key mechanisms devised to materialize representation: regular elections. Suffrage, elections, and electoral practices are discussed here in tune with a vast recent scholarship on this subject that has radically changed the former prevailing views on the right to vote and the role of elections both in the dynamics of political struggle and in the relationships between "the many and the few." The Spanish American record and performance in such matters were not very different from those of other contemporary

republics; if anything, and contrary to conventional wisdom, the former reveal more systematic widespread electoral participation than was the case in most west European countries. The right of suffrage was widely extended among the male population, and although not all potential voters actually attended the polls, those who did came from a wide social spectrum. Electoral machines, in turn, show striking similarities all over the Atlantic world, where partisan organization and competition often set the pace of practical politics. Despite the controversies often raised around Spanish American elections, for most of the period, these were the main legitimate road to government posts, and they offer a key to understand the politics of the republic.

As the ultimate source of power, the people were not only in charge of electing governments but also of controlling them regularly. While the periodical exercise of the suffrage could be considered a means of checking chosen representatives, the regular control of those elected rested mainly in the hands of public opinion, on the one side, and of the citizens in arms, on the other. Chapter 3 focuses on the latter. Today we are familiar with the role of the former in our democracies, but armed citizenship is no longer mentioned as a valid means of keeping government power in check. For most of the nineteenth century, however, it was an important aspect of republican regimes—not only in Spanish America.

As guardians of popular sovereignty, citizens had the right and the obligation to defend freedom and to bear arms in the face of any abuses of power. Although this was an individual right, its effective exercise was channeled through the institution of the militia. The chapter analyzes the creation and transformation of the militia—in its different formats, including the national guard—as well as its relationships with the professional army. It discusses the fragmentation of military power, and the role both institutions played in politics. As the material

incarnation of armed citizenship, the militia was considered a genuine political player; it intervened in times of elections and performed important functions in the civic rituals of the republic. Above all, it was a decisive player in revolutions. The use of force was deemed legitimate against abuses of government power, so that revolutions (in various forms) became a regular and frequent means to challenge the existing authorities on the charge of alleged despotism. This chapter ends with a discussion of this distinctive form of political action. In contrast with a long scholarly tradition of considering revolutions as a typically Spanish American premodern form of resistance, I argue that they were part and parcel of the new, of the practices developed during the era of the republic, not only in this part of the world.

Public opinion is the focus of chapter 4. The adoption of popular sovereignty and representative government introduced a dimension to politics that was increasingly referred to as “public opinion,” the voice of the people that was to exert control over those in power. This concept was widely used at the time, and it had changing meanings, but it was central to the republican rhetoric and procedures of the nineteenth century. This chapter concentrates on the institutions and practices connected to public opinion, such as the periodical press, the associative movement, and other instances of public action. The study of the Spanish American case adds new insights to the current theoretical and historical debates around Habermas’s theory of *Öffentlichkeit*, and provides new evidence for exploring the ways in which civil and political society articulated in republican contexts.

The last chapter puts together the different dimensions explored in the previous three, and advances an interpretation of the shaping of the Spanish American republics, with focus on the relationships between the people and government, and the boundaries of inclusion in and exclusion from the polity. The

introduction of popular sovereignty and the adoption of republican forms of government changed the scale of politics, and it opened the way to the development of a vigorous political life that involved large sectors of the population in the creation and legitimation of power. The chapter first concentrates on the two protagonists of republican politics, the “ruling few” and the “many,” and refers to their respective collective profiles and the main venues of political involvement, as well as to the transformations thereof. It then goes on to discuss the creation and development of partisan formal and informal networks that articulated participation through elaborate material and symbolic means and gave shape to a highly inclusive yet unequal and strongly hierarchical political life. Competition and conflict were the engines of politics, whose internal dynamics—I argue—was marked by an inborn instability, fueled by republican values and practices. For decades, this feature did not get in the way of the legitimacy of the system, which proved quite efficient in shaping authority and delivering political rule. In the last quarter of the century, however, this prevailing order entered into a critical phase, and the chapter finishes with an overview of the incoming changes that led the way to the political novelties of the *fin de siècle*.

Finally, a short epilogue reflects on some of the main trends of the nineteenth-century republican experiment in Spanish America in the context of the overall history of modern republics.

Landscape

At the time of independence, the territories that had been part of the Spanish empire in the Americas had many things in common. For starters: three hundred years under the same colonial rule, which meant the social organization under the

premises of a corporate and hierarchical society of orders, the political subordination to the rules of the absolute Spanish monarchy, and the economic dependence upon the imperial needs. Also, they were all under the cultural and spiritual determinant power of the Catholic Church, which had strong economic and social connotations. But there were also many differences among those territories, from the geographical settings to the resource endowment, the population size and composition, and the actual social structure. Even certain features that may seem analogous at first sight soon reveal their disparities. Such is the case, for example, of the multiethnic configuration of the population that was common to all areas, but had, at the same time, marked regional differences. Thus, at the heart of the Andean region as well as in central Mexico, over 60 percent of the population was classified as indigenous—itsself a highly heterogeneous category—a figure that was much lower in the Southern Cone as well as in Colombia, Venezuela, and parts of Central America. Blacks—most of them slaves—were strongly represented in the areas around the Caribbean basin and in some parts of the Pacific coast. The numbers of mestizos and mulattoes was also variable, as was the figure for “blancos.”

The imperial crisis brought about decisive changes in Spanish America. First of all, there was large-scale war: more than fifteen years of armed confrontations—not only against Spanish domination but also to solve internal conflicts—all of which dislocated the established economic and social organization. The severance of the colonial bond further affected the previous order, so that by the aftermath of independence, the former Spanish territories in America had entered a new era. There was, in the first place, the radical innovation in the political sphere discussed above and in the rest of this book. There was, also, a succession of territorial rearrangements and, for several decades, the actual boundaries of the polities in the



MAP 1. Spanish America: Political division circa 1800

making were in flux (see maps 1, 2, and 3). The economy, in turn, experienced an important reorientation due to the end of the colonial demands and restrictions, which meant the redefinition of internal circuits as well as the opening up to the international markets. Changes in the social and cultural



MAP 2. Spanish America: Political division circa 1830

landscapes happened more gradually, and colonial legacies coexisted with the new values, institutions, and practices for decades to come.

The impact of these developments varied greatly across Spanish America, so that the nations already defined by mid-



MAP 3. Spanish America: Political division circa 1900

century showed significant differences in their social and economic structures, which came even more visible in the following decades. All of these countries increased their connections with the world market and their dependence toward the financial and commercial dominating powers thereof—first among

them, England. They produced primary goods for export, and imported most of the manufactures and the capital required for growth. But this equation varied greatly according to the resource endowment, the structure of production, and the size of the internal markets, among other factors, so that, for example, countries like Argentina and Colombia could better profit from the situation than others with less favorable conditions, like Bolivia. Nevertheless, all of them experienced the vulnerability of their dependent condition and subordinate place in the world economy.

The social landscape was also diverse. By the end of the nineteenth century, population size ranged from over twelve million in Mexico to around two to four million in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela, to below two million in the rest (Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Areas with strong European immigration, such as Argentina and Uruguay, had experienced the highest rates of growth, while the rest had more or less multiplied their population by two to three in sixty years. An increasing process of *mestizaje* contributed to modify the ethnic profiles of most countries, which nevertheless kept their initial basic patterns. The early eradication of the colonial caste system did not erase the many deeply ingrained forms of discrimination against indigenous peoples, while the dismantling of slavery took several decades with initial steps to stop the trade and free the newborn, with abolition usually coming later.

Most of the people lived in the countryside, and although urbanization accelerated in the last decades of the century, the majority of Spanish Americans qualified as rural residents. These were mostly illiterate peasants or workers employed in low-skilled jobs. Literacy rates were higher in the towns and cities, where schooling expanded after the midcentury, to-

gether with jobs in manufacturing and the service sector that required certain qualifications on the part of the salaried labor force and the self-employed. Unskilled hands were still an important presence among urban workers, a fact that increased the differentiation within the popular classes. The expansion of a middling sector was characteristic of late nineteenth-century cities and in some rural areas, a feature that was more significant in some countries than in others.

Spanish American societies were strongly hierarchical, but the sharp distinction between the so-called *gente decente* or *hombres de bien*—a vague denomination that connoted possession of material assets and symbolic capital—and the plebeian rest, typical of the first half of the century, gave way to a newly stratified social structure. The image of an overall concentration of wealth and economic power in the hands of a small and closed class of powerful families may apply to some specific cases and periods, but in many others—and especially in the larger countries—it fails to account for the dynamism of these societies where the powerful one day could be successfully challenged the next. Within the context of a nonlinear transition from a basically traditional mercantile structure of production to one increasingly marked by capitalism, the upper classes were subject to the risks and hazards posed by the new demands of the system. This transformation did not diminish or eliminate social difference; on the contrary, it opened the way to a renewed process of stratification legitimized by the new creed of individual self-realization and the ideology of personal progress, typical of the *fin de siècle*.

By then, little was left of the Spanish America that broke its ties with the empire. We may even doubt of the pertinence of conflating this whole area with its fifteen different, very heterogeneous nations in a single collective. So why does this book wade into such dubious waters? In this case, I made the choice

at the end of the road, when I realized how much of what I thought specific of the political history of Argentina was actually part of a larger story, one that led me beyond its frontiers to the transnational scene. While trying to make sense of the local in a global context, I found more: that the nineteenth-century political developments in the River Plate belonged to the Spanish American experience of the republic and to the wider history of political modernity. So it is to that experience that this book now turns.

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