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Introduction

PICTURE YOURSELF as a scientific explorer in the Age of Revolution, setting out in the 1820s to brave the high passes of the southern Andes. Travelling overland from the Argentine coast, you might well have broken your journey at Mendoza, a small city a day's horse-ride away from the cordillera. Here, more than a thousand kilometres from the cosmopolitan port of Buenos Aires, you'd probably have been surprised to find a place thriving on the benefits of the latest knowledge in agronomy, philosophy and education.

Your trip across the 'gloomy brown' desert would have been long and nerve-wracking.¹ It took at least two weeks by stage-coach, a month by oxen and cart; the roads were rough and lawless.² What a relief, then, to be strolling at sunset along Mendoza's tree-lined Alameda, refreshed by a gentle breeze lifting the hot, dry air, awed by the granite-under-snow soaring above.³ Gazing out over the well-irrigated orchards and market gardens, you'd have spotted some vineyards, too, but the wine industry for which the area is now famous was still half a century away. Wandering the paved streets, you could have counted seven churches and nearly as many schools,⁴ including the Colegio de la Santísima Trinidad (College of the Most Holy Trinity), one of independent Argentina's first state secondary schools. You'd have seen a large hospital, a public library and a theatre, all in the low-lying buildings that in those days were the only defence against earthquakes.⁵ You might have noticed the absence of church bells, most of which had been melted down to make 'cannons, ammunition and bayonets' during the war.⁶ But you would have heard music, strains of Bach and Rossini mingling with Peruvian *tristes*, the songs of mourning for the Inca emperor.⁷ In the main square, wandering over to join a cluster of people listening to the news read aloud, you'd have picked up stories from local papers that were among the first to appear in South America. The three publications available reflected the fault-lines of

this post-independence era: a liberal weekly, promoting social reform through modern subjects such as political economy, geography and education; an official register, containing decrees and regulations both governmental and civil; and a Catholic paper denouncing the governor's anticlerical reforms.⁸ None of these experiences would have been commonplace for a traveller to the interior in the early 1820s, when Mendoza was unusual in its variety of cultural life. Ten years earlier—or, indeed, ten years later—it would have struck any visitor as a very different place.

Mendoza's ephemeral 'age of enlightenment', as one historian of the city ruefully dubbed it, can be dated virtually to the day.⁹ It began on 7 September 1814, when the arrival of General José de San Martín (1778–1850) brought the struggle for independence right into the heart of a city that had hitherto been distant from the main events. Three thousand Chilean patriots arrived a month later, fleeing defeat by the Spanish at the Battle of Rancagua (1–2 October). San Martín had requested the post of governor, having identified Mendoza as the best base of operations for his planned military campaign to liberate Chile. It is easy to see why he chose it. The local economy might have been designed to supply an army, producing leather for saddlery and tack, cloth for uniforms, food, and saltpetre to make gunpowder. Political conditions were right: Mendoza had declared in favour of the May Revolution of 1810, which deposed the Spanish viceroy, initiated self-government in Buenos Aires and triggered the war that led to independence in 1816.¹⁰ Mendoza's location, at the intersection of lands later known as the Republics of Chile and Argentina, had made it a hub for goods, people and information. Chinese silk and Bengal cotton were hauled over the mountains from the Chilean port of Valparaíso; the 'herb of Paraguay', brought by gauchos, went the other way to fill the maté-pots of Santiago.¹¹ People of many kinds passed through Mendoza, so San Martín had no difficulty finding an Argentine engineer to run a gunpowder factory, or a Chilean friar with the expertise to take charge of the arsenal and ordnance.¹² Nor was there any shortage of manual labour: the local economy had relied on African slaves since the early 1700s, after most of the enslaved indigenous people had been taken by landowners to work in other parts of Chile. An estimated two-thirds of Mendoza's Black people, whom San Martín famously declared to be the best foot soldiers, were 'liberated' to join the Army of the Andes when it left in 1817, constituting about half of the whole force. During the previous two years they had continued to work the mines and fields for the war effort, while taking every opportunity to deploy the new liberal principles to improve their lot.¹³

The war economy brought both practical and philosophical enlightenment to Mendoza and its surroundings. Out in the rural areas, a long tradition of innovative irrigation, dating back to pre-Inca days, was moved on again by the latest techniques. The town benefited from improvements in public health: a military hospital, dispensaries, smallpox vaccination and sanitation. Education had been a priority in Mendoza since the Jesuits arrived in 1608, but at the municipal secondary school opened in 1818 the curriculum, shorn of scholasticism, introduced students to both academic and applied knowledge, including the nation-making skill of drawing (see chapter 4). Lay teachers were trained to take elementary education into the countryside. San Martín ordered the town's first printing press so that news of the war could be spread as quickly and accurately as possible. The mobilisation generated a spirit of common endeavour which made a benign environment for civil associational life. By the 1820s, Mendoza had been transformed. James Thomson, missionary of the London Bible Society, who had travelled widely in South America promoting Lancasterian schools as a sweetener for Protestantism, arrived in Mendoza in 1822 to find both a sympathetic governor and a pool of citizens keen to found a society that encouraged primary instruction for all children.¹⁴ The scars of war were all around, of course. Death, fear and political reaction cast long shadows over social reform. In the main square, someone would probably have pointed a visitor to the spot where the Chilean brothers Carrera, conspirators against San Martín, had been executed by firing squad. Still, Mendoza was something of an oasis, a place where there were at least signs of the modern knowledge order envisaged by independence leaders. Even the music sounded better: the bands of the Liberating Army had improved their skills and expanded their repertory as they tramped back and forth across the Andes.¹⁵

For these crucial ten years or so after independence, Mendoza can be seen as a republic of knowledge in microcosm. If San Martín's arrival symbolised the beginning of this experience, then a sign of the end was the departure, in February 1824, of the young reformist intellectual Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur. The multitalented Lafinur, a poet, dramatist and composer, had spent three years in Mendoza, during which time he co-founded the theatre, edited the official periodical and entertained the locals with concerts featuring his own music. As master of philosophy at the secondary college, he had also been teaching the secular liberalism that had finished his career in Buenos Aires. The success of his Catholic opponents in forcing him into exile in Chile indicated the enduring strength of political forces marshalled against any experiments in modern ways. In the early 1820s, conditions in Mendoza were

emblematic both of the drive to reform unleashed by the wars of independence and of the various forces acting as a brake. In this respect, as in so many others, the changes brought by independence appeared to be dramatic, and in the long run turned out to be, but they were slow to work their way into the interstices of society.

Republics of Knowledge

The term ‘republic of knowledge’ is intended to evoke three ideas that guide this book. First, it conceives of knowledge as having a reality and an organisation along the lines of a republic or series of republics. In this sense the phrase deliberately echoes the well-studied early modern Republic of Letters (a virtual community of intellectuals, based on networks of correspondence reaching across the globe, active from the mid-sixteenth to the late eighteenth centuries), while indicating some significant differences. Second, the term highlights the fact that the sovereign states created in Spanish America were founded on promises of enlightenment for all the people; hence access to knowledge was intrinsic to the legitimacy of the new republics. Third, it suggests the potential for nations to be interpreted as communities of shared knowledge.

The image of knowledge as a republic alludes to a transnational ideal based on principles of openness, free exchange, absence of privilege and a sense of the common good. The republic of knowledge aspires to be sovereign, in the sense of being governed by its own values and, it follows, secular, meaning outside the control of any religious authority (rather than non-religious or anti-religious). Like the Republic of Letters, it could only fulfil its purpose of advancing knowledge through the exchange of ideas by being a community ‘not of those who shared beliefs but of those who differed.’¹⁶ Like the Republic of Letters, the republic of knowledge is sustained by a mix of formal institutions, voluntary associational life, voyages of both body and mind, rites of exchange, and rituals of belonging. But while the Republic of Letters was a network of learned individuals, membership of which required certain credentials, the modern republic of knowledge is constituted as rightfully open to all.

During the wars of independence in Spanish America, republics of knowledge in this first sense of open exchange converged and to an extent overlapped with the second sense of knowledge as foundational to a modern republic. On battlefields across the region, one of the most precious pieces of equipment was the *imprenta volante* (portable—literally flying—printing

press). About half a metre long, sturdily built yet light enough to be transported on the back of a mule, these European-made gadgets of gleaming wood and bronze were easily operated with a single lever. Reports of the campaigns, proclamations of victory and rallying calls to hastily designed flags, as well as military orders and policy edicts, were cranked out onto single sheets of scarce paper, snatched from the miniature press and borne away to be read—often out loud—wherever people gathered.¹⁷ These new nations of the 1810s and 1820s were born in smudgy print.

The idea for this book took shape when I discovered so many references in the primary sources to new kinds of knowledge and the benefits they could bring. Advocates of independence played astutely on the burgeoning popular interest in ideas and information, stoking the Black Legend with claims that the Spanish rulers had deliberately kept the Americas in ignorance of modern science and philosophy in order to sustain their ‘tyranny’ and prevent Americans from coming to ‘the awareness [*el conocimiento*] of their own dignity.’¹⁸ In the fight to retain control of American lands, the Spanish authorities lent substance to these claims by calling for the destruction of recently developed industries, such as cloth factories in Quito and vineyards in Chile, and closing new educational institutions and libraries founded by provisional governments. Independence leaders made compelling offers to go out and get ‘all the knowledge that we lack: [. . .] Chemists, Mineralogists, books, all kinds of instruments for the sciences and the arts, a Chemical Laboratory, and a colony of craftsmen.’¹⁹ The new knowledge was to be secular and open to public scrutiny. No longer channelled down the secret passages of Jesuit compounds, it was already out on the streets, being shouted aloud from the new printed matter. Periodicals and newspapers multiplied, even if few lasted more than one or two months, and all the incoming governments made sure to publish one. References to the importance of knowledge came up in popular songs and street theatre. An embrace of modern knowledge was both a founding justification for the new political communities emerging in the Americas and a necessary condition of an inspirational future.

Knowledge, especially of a science or an industrial process, conferred citizenship rights on foreigners in many parts of independent Latin America.²⁰ All the republican constitutions contained clauses protecting freedom of the press; some also guaranteed free speech and free association. Most of them—unlike the US Constitution—contained a commitment to promote public education; some of them specifically deferred making literacy a requirement for citizenship for ten to twenty years, in an optimistic prediction

of how long it would take to implement the policy.²¹ A few went further still, making it a constitutional stipulation to advance the general enlightenment of the population.²² The connection between knowledge and the nation was embedded at the outset and echoed down the generations. It is striking how often nineteenth-century disputes over policy were couched in terms of a conflict about what kind of knowledge was legitimate and whose claims to knowledge had the higher status. The causes of a meat shortage, the demarcation of a border, the correct response to a foreign power—all were conducted as battles of knowledge, each side deploying an arsenal of references, metaphors and citations to rout their opponents.²³ At the centenaries of independence, the governments of Latin America showcased their commitment to knowledge as a key element in their strategies for the twentieth century. Their critics, especially students and workers, targeted universities as sites for national regeneration through decolonisation (the University Reform Movement). In the twenty-first century, now that access to knowledge has risen to the top of the political agenda everywhere, Ecuador was the first country in the world to establish a Ministry of Knowledge and Human Talent.²⁴ Colombia, after decades of civil war, in 2017 introduced mobile libraries into the zones of bitterest conflict, in a pioneering initiative to revive hope and stimulate economic development.²⁵ While US presidents enshrine their legacies in archival vaults, Latin American presidents build public centres of culture.

The term ‘republic of knowledge’ stands for an ideal political community in which republican values—autonomy, equality, liberty, justice—are invested and realised in equitable access to knowledge for everyone. This ideal was embedded in the political discourse of the Spanish American republics, where all the people were in principle citizens, so that even when schools could not be built to educate them governments produced countless political catechisms to instruct everyone in republican rights and duties. As is well known, in practice most people were excluded from citizenship, under both liberal and conservative regimes, until well into the twentieth century. Yet what has always struck me as remarkable about the course of modern Latin American history, and in need of explanation, is the continual return, despite all the obstacles, to the cause of making knowledge and culture more accessible. The question of public knowledge has continued to matter greatly in Latin America, as was inversely (perversely) confirmed by the burning of books under the military dictatorships of the 1970s.²⁶ This book explores the period between independence and its centenaries to find out why.

What Is Knowledge?

There are many kinds of knowledge, of course, and many ways of knowing. The English language is unusual in its catch-all noun, which defers any differentiations—practical or theoretical, formal or informal, pure or applied—to the secondary, adjectival place. Likewise, English has only the verb ‘to know’. In contrast, there are two words for ‘knowledge’ in Spanish (*el conocimiento / el saber*) and Portuguese (*o conhecimento / o saber*), as in other modern European languages. These distinctions vary between languages and are hard to capture in English, precisely because the corresponding vocabulary is lacking, but in broad terms they differentiate knowledge acquired through immediate experience of the material world (such as sensation, perception or personal acquaintance) from more abstract types of cognition (concepts, ideas and theories). In Spanish and Portuguese, moreover, both of the nouns for ‘knowledge’ tend to be used in the plural form, especially *los/os saberes*. ‘Ignorance’, however, always seems to be a substantive singular.

At the time of Latin American independence, there was no common equivalent to the generic term ‘knowledge’. The singular noun *el conocimiento* was used primarily in the sense of awareness of something, with the implication of its being brought out into the open. In early draft constitutions, it often referred to practices of accountability—for example, in the stipulation that the legislature should ‘publish an annual statement and account of income and expenditure of funds for the knowledge [*conocimiento*] of all.’²⁷ This phrase is adapted from the US Constitution, significantly with the emphasis on making the information *known to everyone* rather than merely making it available.²⁸ There are rare examples of a usage of *conocimiento* closer to the modern sense of a body of information socially endorsed as true, but to convey that meaning it assumed the plural form. The Constitution of El Salvador (1824), for example, included the caveat that ‘in eight years’ time, when practice and more knowledge [*más conocimientos*] have laid bare the disadvantages and advantages of the present Constitution, a Constituent Congress can be convened to examine it fully in order to reform it.’²⁹ *Saber* appeared occasionally as a verb, in the sense of ‘to know how to’—especially common was *saber leer y escribir* (to be able to read and write)—but not at this stage (that I have seen) as a noun. Plural forms—*ciencias, saberes, conocimientos*—remain the norm in Spanish rather than the singular, generic ‘science’ or ‘knowledge’ of English.

It follows that to use the English term ‘knowledge’ in a history of *los saberes* and *los conocimientos* of Latin America is potentially hazardous. At the very

least, it risks imposing a conception of knowledge derived from one particular set of historical circumstances onto societies with quite different histories. At worst, given the current dominance of English as an international scholarly language, it may be seen to condone the claims to objectivity and universal validity made by the Anglo-American academy, some sectors of which often seem oblivious to the economic and political advantages that have shaped their international lead in research and technological development. My aims are precisely the opposite: to question any such claims to easy transferability of knowledge and to analyse how it is that certain forms of knowledge come to acquire greater legitimacy and status than others, both locally and globally. I use the generic term 'knowledge' not to prioritise any particular type of knowledge over any other, but to prompt the necessary questions about how different kinds of knowledge came to be valued or despised or ignored in any particular context. Typologies of knowledge may highlight variety, but they also embed into the analysis certain assumptions from one context that may not be appropriate in another. They often rely on the binary divides that are prevalent in modern European thought—formal or informal; abstract or concrete; pure or applied—and that have been criticised by many thinkers from Latin America. The generic term makes it possible to keep open a global, comparative framework that is both truer to the historical record—in that many connections and exchanges were made both within and between different societies—and allows us to avoid working on the basis that different cultures are incommensurable. It also avoids the essentialist assumption that particular kinds of knowledge are unique to specific groups—for example, 'creole' or 'indigenous' knowledge. My working definition of knowledge is information that the holder believes to be verifiable by criteria that command social acceptance. For the purposes of this book, knowledge is the outcome of a process of interpretation that involves a human mind making a claim to a demonstrable truth. The crux of the matter is how and why some such claims are socially accepted while others are not, with all the attendant consequences for asymmetries of power.

Nations as Republics of Knowledge

It is easy to see why Benedict Anderson, looking to the Americas for a new way of thinking about nationalism, came up with the term 'imagined communities.' After independence, new governments sat precariously in former viceregal capitals, trying to extend control over racially divided populations spread over vast territories. Their economies, which had been geared to the

needs of the colonial power, were further weakened by the destruction or neglect of mines and livestock during the wars. Formal sovereignty was quickly compromised by informal imperialism, as Britain, France and, from the mid-century onwards, the United States competed to take advantage of the end of Iberian rule. Entrenched regional and corporate interests, not least the Catholic Church, stood ready to defend their privileges. Despite the rapid creation of flags, anthems and shields, many people argued that these countries were little more than figments of the imagination. Building a state, let alone a nation, was a formidable task. Yet the great Cuban intellectual José Martí made a valid point when he argued, in 1891, that the nations of Spanish America had in fact made remarkable progress in a relatively short time, especially when compared with the European nations that had taken centuries of war and social unrest to achieve stability.³⁰ In Spanish America, state-building and the creation of collective identities intersected and were negotiated in the realm of public knowledge, which was central to the success or otherwise of national integration. On that basis, I will explore the idea that these nations—and possibly all modern nations—are best understood as communities of shared knowledge rather than as imagined communities.

The book is in two parts. The first, ‘Landscapes of Knowledge’, explores a variety of approaches to the history of knowledge, all of them designed to bring together questions often treated separately (in histories of education, art or science). I’m hoping to avoid academic silos by drawing on a variety of disciplines to frame the questions, rather than merely to adjust the answers. This entails thinking about institutions and practices of knowledge (usually the preserve of sociology) alongside ideas, images and discourses (the concerns of intellectual history or cultural studies). It involves looking beyond the famous public intellectuals, whose lives and works have been widely studied, to highlight the contributions to knowledge of many other kinds of people. It means paying attention to the variety of locations, both geographical and social, in which knowledge was exchanged—from fashionable salons in the capital city, where society women exercised their discreet influence on policymakers, to small-town squares, where travelling theatre companies acted out the heroic deeds of struggles against the Spanish. In the second part of the book, ‘Knowledge for Nation-Making’, I aim to illustrate how and why knowledge and its circulation mattered in public debates, in policy-making and in the formation of collective identities.

The book draws on evidence from independence in the 1810s to the centenary celebrations of the 1910s, when governments made much of their

achievements in making knowledge more accessible and restated the founding commitments to public knowledge as a key constituent of a modern nation. The 1920s saw a series of changes that made me close there. The Mexican Revolution (1910–20) highlighted the tensions between the liberal republican discourse of rights for all and the harsh practices of exclusion and authoritarianism; its reverberations throughout Latin America, along with the new possibilities raised by the Soviet Revolution, gave a new urgency to the questions of what the majority of the population knew, as well as what was known—or not known—about them. At the same time, and not coincidentally, there were increasingly aggressive moves by the United States to colonise knowledge production throughout the Americas. Besides the promotion of its own financial, commercial and management practices, there was effectively a US takeover of scientific exchange within the Americas, as what had been congresses organised by and for Latin Americans became events orchestrated to serve the Pan-American Union, resulting in a dramatic drop in attendance.³¹ In the knowledge economy itself, the introduction of radio and cinema redefined the possibilities for information and ideas to circulate.

There are many more areas of knowledge to explore than was possible in this project. In part 2, below, I look at philosophy of language, geography, political economy, civil engineering and philosophy of education, because they emerged as especially relevant to debates about nation-making, but there could equally well have been chapters on law, political thought, history, medicine, mining engineering, ethnography and theology. I chose to focus on institutions that I felt shaped the landscapes of knowledge throughout Latin America, mainly national libraries and universities, but in some places, at some times, others were equally if not more important, notably official bodies for gathering statistics, certain secondary colleges or particular museums. And I came to suspect that actually informal settings such as travelling shows, agricultural fairs or improvised lecture halls were the real unexplored hinterland of knowledge circulation. Nor have I dwelt on the institutional roles of the Catholic Church and the religious orders, because as discussed in chapter 2, some clerics were more receptive to modern science and philosophy than their secular peers, and I argue that the fundamental epistemological questions at stake blurred the divide between church and state. My greatest regret is that I have only touched upon the history of struggles by indigenous peoples to secure recognition for their knowledge, because without the requisite languages and ethnographic training I did not feel qualified to undertake this work, which in itself raises serious questions

about how historians can access the world of ideas that exists beyond written texts.

My evidence is drawn mainly from three case studies: Argentina, Chile and Peru. It seemed necessary to look in some depth at particular examples of knowledge orders in different societies, but they are intended to be indicative of a range of possibilities, not in any sense representative. These three were chosen because Argentina and Chile had many features in common at the time of independence, while their diverging histories over the course of the following century should prove telling. Evidence for Peru's extensive connections with both Argentina and Chile made it a good choice for the third example, which was confirmed by thinking about how its differences from Argentina and Chile—above all in having a far higher proportion of indigenous peoples in its population—would stimulate comparative thinking. Moreover, all three countries compared themselves with each other throughout the nineteenth century. But they also made connections and comparisons with various other Latin American countries, notably Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia and Ecuador, so I will follow the sources to trace these transnational connections and thereby open windows onto the history of knowledge in other parts of Latin America. The question of nomenclature is always tricky, but in general I will refer to 'Spanish America' when comparing the three case studies and to 'Latin America' when making observations I have reason to think are more widely applicable. As outlined above, the founding commitment to public knowledge was evident in primary sources from all over the region (including the Empire of Brazil). Although the specific conclusions about my case studies will not necessarily apply even to other Spanish American republics, I hope that this book's variations on the general theme of knowledge in relation to the making of nation-states will resonate with historians of anywhere in the modern world. The book aims to be suggestive rather than comprehensive in approach.

Latin America is usually regarded as an exception to general theories, notably of colonialism, nationalism and liberalism. Yet it was in that part of the world, not in Europe, that the Age of Revolution brought the founding of a second wave of modern republics (1808–26), as the outcome of uprisings that certainly *evolved into* wars of anti-colonial liberation, even if they did not all start out as such. It was in Latin America that pioneering attempts were made to apply liberal principles in societies with inherited caste divisions and corporate institutions. It was there that some of the richest debates about the vexed relationship between collective identities and contract-based

individualism took place. Anderson was right that these countries were the ultimate test-cases of viable nation-statehood, because they were constituted without any obvious differences of race or language to differentiate one from another. His main point stands despite all the problems that historians of the Americas have identified with the specifics of his interpretation.³² What was meant by a 'nation' was debated throughout Europe and the Americas during the nineteenth century; it was not so much the idea itself that was 'European' as the one-state, one-culture model that acquired the status of ideal type there. The differently constituted nation-states of Latin America have been grappling for two centuries with questions that have more recently become troubling throughout the world. To what extent could modern political systems based on secular rights and freedoms coexist with widespread religiosity and racially based social hierarchies? How could the defence of sovereignty be combined with openness to investment and ideas from elsewhere? What role could the circulation of knowledge play in supporting cohesive social identities and participatory democratic life? Latin America has a unique reserve of historical experience which challenges historians of all areas of the world (including core European countries) to rethink their approaches to the history of knowledge.

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