CHAPTER 4

Decorum and Liberty in the Spanish-American Revolutions of Independence

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If we are to believe the accepted narrative of Spanish-American Independence, what prompted the dissolution of the Spanish Empire in America was the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1808. In Spain itself, resistance to the French, led by the various juntas (or government councils) organized to fight the occupying forces, began almost immediately. On the other side of the Atlantic, the colonial authorities formed their own juntas as soon as news of the invasion reached them, and they sought to assume control of their respective territories. Quarrels over precedence among the juntas on each side were seen as a serious instance of conflict with metropolitan authorities. For many years the Spanish Crown had sought to secure a system of colonial government that would prevent the rise of a challenging, autonomous political class composed of the so-called criollos or Creoles – American-born Spaniards. The political response from Mexico City to Buenos Aires, however, was initially more loyal than revolutionary. The question was, who would represent the king now that he had lost effective control of his dominions? This was indeed a more pressing issue than whether monarchy should be abandoned, as finally happened, in favour of the new liberal republics. For the most part, what I shall call, using a classical term, decorum, not independence, was the question of the hour.

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Nowadays we do not talk much about decorum. Liberalism is usually associated with globalization, free markets, and minimal regulation. Decorum is seen as obsolete, as part of the ideological remains of a forgotten past. However, as the new century advances and major challenges arise, we have come to realize that our enduring moral dilemmas and liveliest political debates usually

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derive from the cultural patterns that lie at their base. Let me take a moment, then, to explain what I mean by decorum in this context as well as my purpose in trying to make sense of this term in relation to the idea of liberty.

First, in the original classical sense, decorum meant that political actors had to adapt to the multiplicity of circumstances and expectations required by the occasion. The Greeks termed this sense of accommodation το πρεπον (tò prépon). The Romans, who exercised a more lasting influence over the ideologies of the Spanish-American revolutions of independence, called it decorum, in the sense of that thing which is fitting or appropriate to any given situation. Classical rhetoric remained a central element in political education throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the early modern period, only to disappear in the nineteenth century. Second, it was highly significant that the age that saw the decline of decorum also saw the rise of a historically unprecedented concern for the dignity of the individual. The contemporary languages of liberty carry the same classical demand that all political actors – individuals or states – behave according to certain standards of human dignity. In this context, however, decorum, following Cicero’s account in De Officiis, acquired a more rational, moralizing tone. Third, images of decorum were frequently used by states to strengthen their power, at both institutional and ideological levels. In this third sense decorum was seem as part of the state’s public actions rather than as propositional, as part of the activity of legitimation rather that the quality of legitimacy, to use a distinction once made by Max Weber. This also reminds us that most states in the past have been able to conduct acts of decorum, particularly in circumstances accompanied by acts of war, by claiming openly, but often falsely, a rational explanation for those actions.

The fact that Spanish-American claims for liberty arose initially not from a public debate on political legitimacy but from a breakdown in decorum as

5 Weber’s famous typology of modes and sources of legitimacy forms part of his ‘sociology of domination’ (Herrschaftssoziologie) and is to be found in the monumental compilation Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (1922).