Chapter 8

Liberal Ideas and Patrimonial Practices in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America

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Liberal ideas made an early appearance in the Iberian world. After the American and the French Revolutions, a wave of political change reached the shores of the Iberian empires triggered by Napoleon's expansionism in southern Europe. The overthrow of the legitimate king of Spain and the escape of the Portuguese sovereign to Brazil altered, in a fundamental way, the relations of the Iberian metropolis with its overseas colonies, eventually leading to the independence of the colonies. Under such extraordinary circumstances, the Spanish and the Portuguese empires went through a constitutional process in order to deal with the political situation and preserve their territorial integrity. However, constitutionalism in the Iberian world was not only induced from the metropolis. The first insurrectional movements in the colonies similarly proclaimed constitutions worded in liberal terms. Liberal ideas not only legitimized the termination of the colonial bond, but also bolstered subsequent attempts to create modern state institutions and made a stormy return at the end of the twentieth century under an economic, neoliberal guise. It is also true though, that the political course of the new independent countries has often been portrayed as a troubled journey. Terms like imaginary, chimerical, incomplete, dreamed, or disenchanted are frequently found in monographs focusing on their political history.¹ The strains for creating a new, postcolonial order haunted the governments in the region from their very inception until

well into the twentieth century. The foundations of the new regimes took a
long time to consolidate, and when this occurred the outcomes were often
weak and unstable institutional systems.² Most of the Libertadores – the found-
ing fathers of the new republics – would not live to see their political work
culminated, and ended their days in exile or at the hands of their adversaries.
The old metropolis did not fare much better. In nineteenth-century Spain,
isurrectional movements, military pronunciamientos and strongmen’s rule
were also the order of the day. Even if political power was constituted and
upheld differently in each country – depending on the local land-owning
structure, class relations, and ethnic cleavages – some practices, like patronage
networks and praetorianism, were widespread and recurrent. While these fea-
tures were certainly not unique to nineteenth-century Iberia and Latin
America, their intensity and persistence were not equalled in other Western
and North Atlantic regions.

Attempts to create nominally liberal institutions in the absence of a recog-
nizable liberal political culture have traditionally disconcerted interpreters of
the Iberian world. As a result of this perplexity, nation-state formation in the
region has sometimes been judged as a historical miscarriage and its liberal
tradition disqualified for being allegedly fictitious or little more than a rhetori-
cal exercise to mask the naked contest for power and the defence of encapus-
lated social privileges. Without reaching this extreme conclusion, Evelyne
Huber and Frank Safford have recognized that,

Even if we accept a simple formalistic definition of democracy, as a politi-
cal system with responsible government and high levels of institutional-
ized contestation and political inclusion, and do not ask any questions
about the reality of participation in political power by the masses, it is
clear that there are very few countries in Latin America with a demo-
cratic trajectory.³

² For an updated and encompassing view of the state making process in the region, see Miguel
A. Centeno and Agustin E. Ferraro, eds. (2013) State and Nation Making in Latin America and
Spain: Republics of the Possible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and Miguel Angel
Centeno (2005) Blood and Debt. War and the Nation-State in Latin America (University Park: The
Pennsylvania State University). For the role of liberalism in this process, Iván Jaksić and
Eduardo Posada Carbó, eds. (2011) Liberalismo y poder. Latinoamérica en el siglo XIX (Santiago:
Fondo de Cultura Económica Chile); Vincent C. Peloso and Barbara A. Tenenbaum eds. (1996)
Liberals, Politics and Power: State Formation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America (Athens:
Georgia University Press), and Marco Palacios (1999) Parábola del liberalismo (Bogotá: Norma).
and Peasant in the Making of Latin America (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh