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Edited by A. P. Kinzig, S. Pacala, & G. D. Tilman:

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Introduction

The Labyrinth of Sovereignty

IN A FAMOUS STORY called “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Jorge Luis Borges recounts the fate of a protagonist who does not know, until the very end of the tale, the reasons for his crime. At the center of the story is the mystery of a book, an endless novel where multiple futures continue to proliferate and fork. The image of the labyrinth was important for Borges; the solitary quest for deliverance inspired the poem that serves as the epigraph for this book. Tales of wandering in a labyrinth have been a common parable of Latin American history, depicting the dilemma of a region caught between a traumatic past of conquest and oppression, and a future of freedom and democracy.¹

Parables are not literal models for history. But they nonetheless capture features of a formative moment in modern Latin American history: the passages from empire to nationhood forked in ways that required actors to make choices without knowing the certainty of the outcome. The labyrinthine image also conveys the sense of the endlessness of the process. The passage that began in the eighteenth century did not end with the triumph of something new, as so many accounts of the “transition” from colony to nation-state denote. Rather, the beginnings, middles, and ends of the epic described in this book were above all about the ways in which history remained—and remains—unresolved, and therefore political.

This book retraces the steps, beginning at the entrance, of the main actors who redrew the political, economic, and social map of the Iberian Atlantic in search of a social order in a turbulent time. Their elusive goal was to create a world governed by the notion that people who live in a civil society abide by rules to which all subjects are bound. They wanted

¹Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” in *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1999), pp. 118–28, “The Labyrinth,” in *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 275. See also Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), esp. pp. 204, 208.

these rules to extend to the defensible territorial boundaries of their political communities. They were struggling for sovereignty.²

It was sovereignty of and within empires, monarchies, nations, and republics that was at stake during the great epoch of upheaval and struggle from the middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth centuries. What was so labyrinthine was the quest to create new foundations for social life while old rules and norms decomposed. And yet, through decades of imperial change and collapse, civil war and revolution, protagonists eventually emerged with different conceptions for the modern age. These conceptions—the ones that have shaped Latin American history to the present day—were formed, to take Borges’s words, in the “severe galleries which curve in secret circles” in which reformers, rebels, and reactionaries struggled over the means to deliver societies from the endless forking paths of the beginnings of modernity.

The quest for sovereignty has had its historians from the moment the struggle began. After all, one of the propositions of the age was that a modern concept of sovereignty meant that people could make—and thus write—history anew. To a remarkable extent, it was through history writing that protagonists sought to give meanings to sovereignty. For this reason, the acts of creating and writing are hard to disentangle; part of the quest for sovereignty also involved efforts to plot narratives to evoke a sense of history of a people coming into being as they were doing so.³ Self-rule therefore shaped and was shaped by the drive for historical self-consciousness.

If history making and history writing are entwined, this does not mean that people struck out with foresight armed with plot lines of a drive to modern futures. Rather, they used hindsight to explain how they got themselves into a present they only dimly grasped. In this fashion the birth of modern states and national historiographies were bound together, equal parts shaped and scarred by the process that sired them.

Consider a few of the first “histories” of these struggles for sovereignty. After two decades of fighting in the Andes, Simón Bolívar sat down to write a short history of Spanish Americans’ struggles for sovereignty.

²Sovereignty has become a highly disputed notion in the social sciences, fueled by the contemporary debate over the limits of sovereignty of nation-states in a globalized world. See Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Stephen Krasner, ed. *Problematic Sovereignty: Contested Rules and Political Possibilities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). If this book helps to keep the waters stirred, it is to insist that sovereignty was always contested, unstable, and equivocal. The quest to define it has been a motor force of international and infranational conflict.

³Rogers S. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

En route from Lima, where he left behind a deeply fractured government, to Bogotá, where the fissures ran just as deep, the Liberator paused to compose a dispirited synthesis, “A Panoramic View of Spanish America.” Bolívar’s short epic began in Buenos Aires, where the revolt against Spain devolved into an “anarchic revolution”: what had begun as a confrontation with Spanish cousins soon became a civil war between American brothers. Rather than leading their people to the promised land of freedom, revolutionaries unleashed “the rampant appetite of a people who have broken their chains and have no understanding of the notions of duty and law and who cannot cease being slaves except to become tyrants.” This “history is that of all Spanish America.” Now the formal chains of empire had been broken; but what had been freed were the passions of “unbridled ambition” once tamed by the powers of monarchy and empire. Bolívar put down his pen and resumed his own voyage, hoping to marshal his historic vision for the final prophetic act of delivering his people to freedom, only to preside over the disintegration of Gran Colombia, the secession of his native Venezuela, to die a year later, like his aspirations, in torment.⁴

Not all the protagonists in South America’s independence struggles were so gloomy—or wrote such dispirited “histories.” According to José da Silva Lisboa, soon the Viscount of Cairú, Brazil’s history also did not dispose its subjects to a new model of political community in which kings gave way to peoples as the repositories of sovereignty. But for this Bahian jurist and writer, this was all to the good, since he did not have much affection for republican or liberal ideas. Indeed, the success of Brazilian independence, the ability to slay the demons of provincial secession, civil war, and slave revolt, lay in its ability to change so little. The fundamental principles of sovereignty—monarchy, central rule, and the ballast of an ennobled slave-owning aristocracy—remained intact even though the formal ties to Lisbon were broken. What was most important about the old regime survived, and thus prevented Brazil from getting swallowed up in civil war. This was the only major colony of all the European empires in the Americas not to splinter into parts as it proclaimed its independence. Brazil, as Cairú put it, became an integrated sovereign entity because it did *not* have a revolution. Those who struggled for Brazilian sovereignty, aware of the limitations of their subjects, knew not to take the more tempting path of relying on popular sovereignty as a way out of the maze. True to his Burkean principles, the viscount celebrated the leadership of the old regime for knowing how to guide change in order to control it.⁵

⁴Simón Bolívar, “A Glance at Spanish America,” in David Bushnell, ed., *El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 96.

⁵José da Silva Lisboa, *Constituição moral e deveres do Cidadão com exposição da moral pública conforme o espírito da Constituição do imperio* (Rio de Janeiro: Typographia Nacional, 1824), v. 1, pp. iii–8.

Bolívar the defeatist and Cairú the triumphalist obviously differed in their politics. But they did not necessarily differ in their assumptions about Iberian empires and their South American colonies. What these accounts shared was the sense that imperial and colonial legacies endured through the struggles to dismantle them. The stamina of these legacies reflected not just what Iberian colonies were, but what they were not. They were not, in their view, colonies made up of civic-minded subjects of self-governing communities as they were idealized in the “other” America, that of English origins. Absent in the America of Iberian origins were the virtues of private citizens and the habits of representative governance. Bolívar and Cairú were not the only ones to make these kinds of assumptions. Thomas Jefferson, watching political events in Spanish America, drew some teleological conclusions of his own about “his” America in a letter to John Adams: the English colonists’ owed much of their success to what they inherited from the mother country: traditions of self-government. In the Spanish colonies, Jefferson found that subjects “habituated from their infancy to passive submission to body and mind to their kings and priests” stood little chance of realizing true liberty. The people best prepared for a revolution were those least oppressed by the old regime, and those who most needed a revolution would see theirs fail.⁶

Bolívar, Cairú, and Jefferson were protagonists in events they witnessed firsthand. These “founding fathers” of new sovereign nations offered privileged retrospectives that would become the histories that lay the groundwork for grand epic writing of the nineteenth century. Their histories have come down the generations to frame the principal trajectories of the histories of the New World.

In response to the romantic emphasis on the role and limits of human will, more recently scholars have emphasized the ways in which revolutions are unintended by-products of social conflict, not the results of antecedent volition. The goal has been to disentangle intentions or motives for revolting from their results. Dismantling the past was seldom what motivated actors—a changing order was often less intended than consequential.⁷

⁶Cited in David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 70.

⁷Eric Hobsbawm, “The Making of a ‘Bourgeois Revolution,’” *Social Research* 56:1 (1989): 5–31; Jack A. Goldstone, “Comparative Historical Analysis and Knowledge Accumulation in the Study of Revolutions,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 41–90; Clifton Kroeber, “Theory and History of Revolutions,” *Journal of World History* 7:1 (1996): 21–40.

This book seeks to illuminate the ways in which it was not at all inevitable that the people of the Iberian Atlantic considered their Spanish and Portuguese inheritances as anything less than desirable. The fact is, the Spanish and Portuguese domains, like so many others, crumbled less out of internal conflicts and more from the compound pressures of several centuries of rivalry between Atlantic powers. Social revolutions transpired when international pressures of competing sovereignties broke down state systems; it is not so easy to find a sharp boundary between internal and external dynamics of large-scale social change—in large measure because instability, not immutability, was central to sovereignty.⁸ The crisis of the anciens régimes were the effects of a pan-Atlantic struggle for mercantilist control, political loyalty, and ultimately for military alliance to define the future of monarchy, aristocracy, national markets, and bonded labor across the Atlantic world.

Yet, if there is a structural backdrop to the making and remaking of sovereignty, surprisingly little is known about *how* state systems decomposed. This requires closer attention to processes of making, defending, and abandoning systems of state sovereignty—examining modern revolutions and their coeval partners in state formation, counter revolutions. When, for instance, old privileges began to face mounting pressures, some defenders of ancient entitlements sought to impose tradition on highly explosive societies. And the more there was to question about the old regime, the harder it was to contain prophecies of a new one, and the more vicious became the reaction. So, as international warfare provoked civil war within the Iberian Atlantic, the contradictory pressures of unity and secession became more difficult to resolve. At that point, the revolution—and its antithesis, the counterrevolution—tore apart the economic, social, and political foundations of the Iberian Atlantic.⁹

The challengers to, and defenders of, old ways were dealing with specific kinds of regimes: empires. This book seeks to restore the centrality of the imperial dimension to the way we think about revolutions and their national progeny, not just because they were so historically connected in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish dominions in the Americas went up in revolutionary flames, but because until then sovereignty was reflexively associated with imperium.

⁸Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 5.

⁹Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 45.

Two aspects of imperial sovereignty shaped the course of events. The first involved defining the legal personality of political subjects within a state, their reciprocal obligations and rights inscribed in laws that extended to the state's borders. The second definition of sovereignty involved drawing the borders around the political community, which in the case of empires meant inscribing limits between insiders and outsiders, creating standing national "parts" out of a hitherto imperial "whole." These two dimensions were entwined since they both implied the struggle to define categories of subject, citizen, and state, and the boundaries around them. In the Americas, colonial societies made of the pluri-social peoples of the Atlantic world and mapped out since the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), the simultaneity of the struggles for sovereignty magnified the meanings and complexities of freedom. It also made the relations between them very explosive once the legal structures that shaped centuries of exploitation, domination, and transatlantic exchange began to collapse.

This may seem self-evident. But even the majestic study by R. R. Palmer of what he called the democratic revolutions of "Atlantic civilization" treated the struggles for democracy as an epic poised against aristocracy. Personal equality, not so much state sovereignty, was the issue and quest. Sovereignty, within or outside empires, was not a *casus belli* worth much systematic analysis for Palmer. And yet, as anyone concerned with civil and human rights nowadays knows, defining and defending equality depended on states and their command over legal instruments. For much of the Western Hemisphere, sovereignty *was* the heart of the matter, and as the legal foundations of statehood became the source of debate and conflict, so did the social and economic practices that it upheld and legitimated.¹⁰

Empires have centers and peripheries, a distinction that has led to some unfortunate incisions that separate "imperial" history as European and "colonial" history as American. This book blurs the imperial-colonial distinction by referring to an Atlantic world whose history can be looked at bifocally to bring both sides of the ocean into the same visual frame of empire. The metropolises of Lisbon and Madrid and the colonies in the Americas were locked in an integrated struggle over the sovereignty of the empires. Each side constituted the other mutually, if not always amiably. Therefore, in writing about empire one principle underlies this book: empires were not about "Spain," "Portugal," or their colonies, but about the transactions and relationships between the various peoples of their domains.¹¹

¹⁰R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

¹¹Models of this interactive approach include Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Independence of Spanish America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

These crises of ancien-régime empires did not unfold uniformly or evenly. Indeed, for decades, the empires were in trouble, but they did not collapse. What is remarkable—and worth exploring—is how they survived, or even revived, under duress. Accounting for the durability of archaic structures requires suppressing postdictive temptations to make empires appear fated to eclipse, a predilection that has always been uncomfortable for historians of Iberian worlds. We have come, perhaps due to the influence of Gibbon’s 1776 masterwork, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the more recent grand narrative by Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, to presume that empires were—and are—doomed structures.¹² Gibbon best captured the problem with empires: they start, appropriately enough, as cities, home of the virtuous *civitas*, filled with communally minded citizens who put the general good ahead of particular reward. But their greatness leads them to expand, and as they aggrandize, the temptation to pursue private gain and abandon the virtues of the civic community is too hard to resist. So the imperium, with conquest, sows the seeds of its own decay. Kennedy compressed this story line into the synthetic term of “imperial over-stretch” in which the public costs of defending the realm exceed the private gains to those who profit—and invariably, eventually, either give way to new rivals or simply collapse.

Examined more closely, empires do not always plot themselves so neatly along curvaceous inclines and declines. Once again, a labyrinthine model better captures the ways in which subjects of empires handled imperial crises. For much of the time that the Spanish and Portuguese empires were in deep trouble, colonists did not reject the weakened hands of the metropolises when it would have been easier to declare colonial sovereignty. Not all institutional breakdowns lead to breakups. In fact, the breakdown of empires intensified proclamations of loyalty on their peripheries. If Madrid’s and Lisbon’s policies of recovery were oftentimes oppressive, colonists voiced some of their concerns—though almost always in the name of what was good for the empire as a whole because, in their mind’s eye, sovereignty was synonymous with imperium. There was, however, a point—when the metropolitan monarchy itself was

¹²Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), originally published, though not timed to coincide with the first crisis of the British empire, in 1776; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1988). On the social science discovery of empire, see David B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires, 1415–1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

destroyed—at which imperial sovereignty went into shock. One pivotal point in this narrative involves the French invasion of the Iberian metropolises and the centrifugal effects on the peripheries. Only at this stage did imaginings of a new, postcolonial order begin to eclipse the old one.

These stages in the breakdown and breakup of empires did not lead in lockstep from one to the next: revolutions unfolded not as mechanical expressions of a self-conscious desire to “exit” empire but jostled with other, more familiar ways of coping with the decline and crisis of the world colonists knew best, “loyalty” and “voice.” The options of expressions of loyalty, voice, and exit as responses to the deterioration of institutional life come closer to illuminating agents’ judgments and choices that determined the fate of their empires.¹³ It was the deterioration of the empires that led to the breakup of their ruling coalitions and the stirrings of revolution. Social revolutions were not the cause of imperial breakups, but their consequence.

What has been said about empires and revolutions raises some issues about nations and nationalism. It is a commonplace to argue that colonials acquired a sense of selfhood, a national identity, in opposition to empire. The assumption is, therefore, that Americans acquired a distinctive sense of self within empire. The sense of colonial apartness led colonists to repudiate imperium and to secede because they no longer felt like they belonged. The pursuit of national liberation spelled the end of imperial sovereignty in colonial lands; anticolonial nationalism spawned imperial crises; nations, with a congruent political unit, replaced empires as the dominant model of sovereignty in the Atlantic world.¹⁴ Benedict Anderson made the case for the origins of nationalism as an alternative political community made of horizontal comradeship and held together by the circulation of print media.¹⁵ These affective ties created proto-national identities that functioned on an entirely different level from imperial ones, so that the former supplanted the latter like distinct, separable phases in the trend lines of modernization. What Anderson, Pagden, and so many other students of nationalism have tended to presume was that “creole patriots” acquired a different sense of self as a prelude to their

¹³Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁴Cited in Anthony Pagden, “Identity Formation in Spanish America,” in Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 91–83.

¹⁵Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

