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NATION AND LIBERTY IN LATIN AMERICA

Inspired by Columbus, Spaniards set out on an adventurous voyage of the circumnavigation of the globe and, to their surprise, encountered a new continent.

This is the essential fact. There were no preliminaries, no previous knowledge, but an abrupt and unexpected meeting between a handful of men who represented the mentality of Spain at the end of the 15th century and an immense geographical panorama that slowly and continuously unfolded, populated by beings for whom there was not even a name and who represented native cultures in different stages of devopment with no previous contact with Europeans, almost diametrically opposed in values, concepts and mentalities to what the transatlantic navigators represented and brought with them.

It was a complete and total encounter. Everything was different; no language in which to communicate, no names for the multitude of plants, animals and unknown phenomena that they found. They even had doubts that the beings they found were men in the same sense that the word had for a Spaniard during the time of the Catholic Kings.

It was a difficult encounter, confused and full of ambiguities.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

The Spaniards thought they had arrived at the legendary Indies of Prester John or at the land of the Great Khan of Cathay and, actually, were on an unknown continent that was later called America.

The encounter presented misconceptions and conflicts of all kinds. The Spaniards were faced with a geographical area that was inordinate in European terms and with beings that were very often unclothed, with beliefs and a way of life like the infidels the Spanish had fought for many centuries.

Very quickly, and precisely because of the impossibility of succeeding in adapting the Antilles Indian to a European work discipline and municipal order, the Africans appeared. They brought other languages, other cultures and another attitude toward life. They came as slaves to do the work the Spaniard did not want to do and the natives did not know how to do. A powerful and vast process of reciprocal and mixed adaptation began at that moment. The Spaniard could not continue being the same as he had been in Spain. Housing, the city, work relationships, food, clothing, the seasons and nature were different. Neither could the native continue as he was before the arrival of the *conquistadors*. His living habits, his beliefs, his social situation: everything began to change for him. As soon as he had to adapt his old divinities to the new religion brought by the Castilian Christians, with its complicated Trinity, its innumerable saints, its ritual apparatus and its difficult theology, he also had to submit to a new order of the city, law and work. He did not do this passively but brought with him his peculiarities and traditions. He raised a church under the direction of the Spanish *alarife*, but the result was never a Spanish church; in decoration, form and color there remained the visible presence of the other culture. The same mixture occurred in the cult. The case of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico is not unique, with its complicated genealogy in which Aztec beliefs and American myths are mixed with traditional forms of Spanish Catholicism.

Joined to the teaching that in homes and schools gave instructions in Spanish culture and language, institutions and history, was a black pedagogy, personified by the slave nurses who, in most of the Spanish Empire, had, for three centuries, the very important task of taking care of the children from their birth until the beginning of their formal education. In this occult school of the illiterate African nurse, rich in traditional black culture, were formed many generations of the most distinguished and influential Spanish-Americans, and they received a contribution from her that is no less important than the one that could be given by their fathers or tutors. Simon Bolivar, the Liberator, had a Negro nurse that he loved and respected like a mother. He called her "my mother Hipolita," and she, in the splendor of his power and glory called him "my child Simon."

This meeting of three cultures in a geographical *scenario* that had extraordinary power over men is the fundamental fact that characterizes the birth of the Spanish-American world. From the first moment, it determined a feeling of singularity and difference. The Spaniard himself who came to America and remained there for some years went through visible changes that distinguished him from his compatriots who had remained in the old country. In Spanish literature of the time there is an abundance of satirical references to the "Indian," that personage whose permanency in the Indies had changed to the point of being a motive for joking and curiosity among the peninsulars. An American manner was created. If the Spanish immigrant changed, his son, born on the American continent, changed even more. From the beginning, the "creole" had a personality and character that made him different. There were many cases of mixed blood in which were combined, in innumerable forms, the biological inheritance of Spanish, Indian and Negro, but above all there was a continuous and multiple process of cultural intermixture. The contact of the three cultures on the new physical stage profoundly affected the three great actors of the creation of the new world.

They did not make up a homogeneous society. There were profound divisions that lasted in various degrees during the three centuries that the Spanish Empire survived. There was a difference determined by the different cultural origins. The Spanish predominated in language, religion, juridical and social institutions and ideals of life that penetrated to various degrees in the direct heirs of the indigenous and African cultures. There was an appreciable change in the way of life, in language, in the idea of time and in attitude toward life. The creole, son of Spaniards, and the peninsular began to be not only different in many things but to feel different and at times opposites. Values, institutions, religion itself underwent modifications. We may speak of an Indian Catholicism that in its rites, cult forms, sensitivity to miracles and conception of the Divinity differed from the Catholicism of Spain. Without arriving at the extreme forms that it could reach in the Jesuit Missions in Paraguay or the attempts of Vasco de Quiroga in Michoacán, the Christianity of the Indians, Negroes and *mestizos* of America took on peculiar and sometimes surprising characteristics.

There was also the sharp horizontal division in castes: a pyramidal society, with little mobility, that coexisted and mixed in many forms but without abandoning its hierarchical foundations. The peninsulars, who held the high offices of the Church and the Crown; white creoles who descended from the *conquistadors* and were the wealthy landowners, dominating the only political institutions open to them, the *Cabildos*; then all the innumerable color tones of the mulattos, offspring of all the possible combinations of the three founding races and who in the Caribbean and Atlantic countries very soon made up most of the population; and finally at the bottom of the scale, the African slaves, work force and basis of production. In a different situation were the great and populous indigenous colonizations of Aztecs, Mayas, Chibchas and Incas along the ridges of the mountain chain that runs parallel to the Pacific coast from Mexico to Chile. In them, the Indian could maintain his powerful presence that was difficult to assimilate into the new process of cultural mixture.

That distinct society of the Spanish and also the pre-Columbian indigenes was soon to feel its difference in an active way. The relationship with the metropolis was going to become continuously conflictive. The first struggle occurred very early and was the one of the *conquistadors* with the Crown. The men who had won the new lands did not willingly submit to the power of the laws and representatives of the far-off kings. A whole series of revolts, such as those of Martin Cortes, Gonzalo Pizarro and Lope de Aguirre, bloodied and threatened unity from the beginning of the colonial order. Neither were indigenous revolts lacking that reached their highest form in the one of Tupac Amaru. There were continual uprisings of the Negroes on the plantations so far as to form many communities of "wild men," who seriously menaced order in the new provinces.

All these events were forms of particularism and conflict with the order that Spain sought to impose. For the most part, creoles fought against the rebellious slaves and the natives but without losing their resentment against the peninsulars. Hostilities of both sometimes coincided, as in the cases of the movements of the commoners, of such revealing characteristics, or in the apparently partial movements against certain institutions or against the predominance of the natives of certain provinces, as in the cases of the struggle between bands in Potosí or in the curious rebellious movement against the *Compañías Guipuzcoana* of Caracas that occurred in the middle of the 18th century. If we look objectively at the naturalness of these movements, we immediately see, beyond the alleged pretexts, the presence of a feeling of particularism. There are expressions in the documents of the time that permit us to think that there already existed an idea of identity as a nation and a vague or confused desire for independence.

The influence of certain collective myths and motivations in the formation of the American consciousness would have to be traced. The centuries-old search for El Dorado is one of them. It was not only a matter of finding another treasure of Montezuma or Atahualpa or another Potosí but, above all, the strong belief that a concentration of riches of such magnitude and abundance as to make all men happy could be found in America.

Another could be the realization of Utopia. It is not a mere coincidence that Thomas More situated his island of happiness and justice in some spot in America. For the Europeans of the 16th century, the idea of the New World coincided with that hope. However, the most important aspect was the tenacity with which, during centuries and in various points of the continent, the attempt was made to make the vision of Thomas More a reality. It was not only Vasco de Quiroga who thought that the New World should be the occasion to realize a new epoch for man, an epoch of justice, good and peace; but also the very great experience of the Jesuits in Paraguay, which is perhaps the most extraordinary attempt to form a new man in a new society up until the programs of modern revolutions, without forgetting the attempts of Bartolomé de las Casas and the concepts and projects that, on many occasions, millenarism in America took on and the Inquisition persecuted.

They did not feel exactly Spanish, those creoles who began to look at the world and become conscious of their own situation, especially after the new dynasty of the Bourbons began in the 18th century. Since the uprisings of the *conquistadors* there was talk of liberty. It was invoked by Gonzalo Pizarro and Lope de Aguirre. Do we have to ask ourselves: what kind of liberty? How and for whom? For them, liberty meant basically to depend no longer on the Spanish Crown, its governors, its *bachilleres* and its inapplicable laws. However, this liberty was not going to change or modify whatever the order of government or social structure. It was not liberty for the slaves nor for the Indians, nor even for the despised *mestizos*.

When, in the second half of the 18th century, they began to consider in distinct forms the possibility for some autonomy, even under the Crown, as in the case of Arnada or Godoy, or even in the early projects of Miranda, under the influence of European rationalism, the old reality of a different society began to take on the forms of a concept of a nation. And the idea of liberty abandoned its restricted concept of rupture with Spanish authority to signify civil and political liberties for all inhabitants.

When the precursors of independence began to speak of nation and liberty, linked with and even beyond the old motives of the quarrel with the Crown and the resentments of the creole against the peninsular, the synopsis of the ideology that the French and English rationalists formulated around those concepts and the reflection of the two great successes that had particular repercussions in Spanish America appeared: the independence of the 13 English colonies in North America that set up a Federal Republic and, later, the French Revolution. European possessions on American soil had rebelled against the metropolis and had succeeded in installing a republican regime of representative government and civil liberties; and in France, the democratic revolution had been unleashed and a king of the French branch of the Bourbons had been deposed and decapitated.

Need we ask ourselves what the initiators of the independence of Latin America understood by the concept of nation? Through their words and their projects not only do they refer to their own native province but more often speak of all of Spanish America and think of its future as a unity. Miranda conceived a State as large as the continent, with its own government and a constitution copied from that of England. That vision of unity, implying a concept of all of Latin America as one sole nation, persists in all the documents of the time and is what Simon Bolivar, the Liberator, endeavored to realize against all obstacles. From the beginning of his incomparable action, Bolivar expressed clearly and unforgettably that condition: "We are a small human race: we are the possessors of a world apart; circled by vast seas, new in almost all the arts and sciences, even though in a way old in the practices of civic society."

The practical difficulties that a project of such magnitude presented at that time were insuperable. Distance, lack of communication, mutual ignorance, lack of any experience in self-government, and the absence of social homogeneity derived from the caste system and lack of representative institutions in the Spanish Empire caused the failure of Bolivar's undertaking. Nevertheless, he never abandoned his hope for unity. It has been, and is, reborn in many forms throughout the years, and within the consciences of the Latin Americans is the conviction or the sentiment that they are called upon by the past or the exigencies of the present to become integrated and to cooperate in some form of unitary organization.

The long war for independence served to define and affirm national sentiment. It was not easy. Throughout all its long and changing process the struggle had more the character of a civil war than an international conflict. It arose immediately after the break in the Spanish monarchy with the invasion of Napoleon and the usurpation of Joseph Bonaparte. Later, a process appeared in which the old social divisions were converted into battle fronts. The popular mass was often with the Spanish authorities against the insurgence of the white creoles. In America as in Spain, with natural differences, the harsh confrontation between liberals and traditionalists was reflected. In many ways, the struggle for independence of Spanish America was an important chapter in the old struggle between the two Spains. It was an antecedent of the conflict that later would be revealed in the Carlist wars. Many of the military heads of Spanish liberalism had gone through the American experience.

The time and the form in which the independence of Spanish America was historically produced ally it closely with the republican and liberal form. The case of Brazil is explained by other reasons. With the exception of the tragic failures in Mexico, independence and republic were synonymous. New states were constituted as republics, with a proclamation of the rights of man and under the most liberal principles. It is important to point out this strict bond between the idea of independence and liberty. Constitutions proclaimed the most absolute liberal dogmas, equality and civil rights. In fact, the phenomenon of *caudillismo* and governments by force arose but were never converted into an established political constitution. In law, constitutions continued being invariably liberal even though in fact they rarely were accomplished: the law did not succeed in being a strict norm for public conduct but a moral proclamation and an almost religious tribute to what should be but was not. In addition, this attitude toward the law was not new. During the colonial regime, the Indies laws were never strictly and effectively applied. They were viewed more as ideals and moral precepts than coercive dispositions.

This formal and never repudiated fidelity to republican and liberal principles has been maintained throughout Latin-American history. The proclamations of the uprisings and the programs of the *caudillos* invoked the great principles of liberalism and the desire to restore them and make them effective.

The concept of independence and republic tended to be mixed and complementary. None of the great dictatorships of the *caudillos* that occurred during the 19th century ever dared to institutionalize its form of government and eliminate republican and democratic principles from the sanctuary of the constitution. Often when the government was most unjust and arbitrary, the constitution was most liberal and idealistic. It thus tended to be converted into a mere relic of almost unreachable hopes for those who did not want to renounce them formally.

When the sentiment of the nation as a political idea acquired strength and expanded, beginning with the French Revolution and the literature of the Romantics, it found an echo in Latin America. Tho old particularist sentiment that had been formed under the colonial regime found a powerful stimulus in the new concept. However, just as the idea of independence was born closely bound to that of a democratic republic, the national sentiment was never completely separated from the underlying concept of the community of culture, history and destiny of the entirety of the old Spanish provinces.

The plans and political ends of the founders of independence were generally continental. They always spoke of the possibility of an America integrated into a strong political organization. The union of the former English colonies of North America served as example and spur. The vicissitudes of the history and ambitions of the local leaders made the realization of that proposition impossible, but it was never renounced. The new states ended by conforming within the limits of the former jurisdictions of the Spanish Empire but without openly renouncing the possibility and dream of integration. This persistent ambiguity is in the hearts of the children of Spanish America and characterizes the national sentiment. This is not the case in any other continental collectivity and thus is a characteristic worthy of being taken into account.

Neither independence without a republic nor nationalism without opening in some way toward integration. These traits characterize Latin America in a peculiar way and give it an unequaled originality compared to other groups of peoples of our time.

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