SUMMARY - CHAPTER 1

Independence Narratives, Past and Present

In North America, broadcast media sometimes functioned as an engine of propaganda that promoted a national identity based on “right” rather than “might.” National identity was also created in this way by a post-civil war American government seeking to promote the idea of a justly achieved independence. This vision was somewhat imperfect since it failed to address the social inequities of the post-civil war American society. Nonetheless, this vision continued to be resilient as propaganda.

The Problem of Beginnings

The complicated nature and narrative of the Latin American past prevents us from applying a straight narrative of Independence in the style of the US. Here there is a diversity of independence narratives based on the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Latin American peninsula.

The view of an independence narrative depends entirely on the viewer. The fragmentary experience(s) of independence in Latin America cannot negate the shared experience of the communities that went through their respective narratives of independence.

The paradox of a monolithic narrative of independence versus little pocket narratives can be resolved by focusing on how—historically—Latin American narratives of independence have been rendered and which of their values have been lionized.

Stories of Freedom

In spite of insurmountable odds, the indigenous communities of Latin America continued to rebel against colonial forces that were drastically stronger. An example of this occurred in Haiti. France’s richest Latin American colony at that time, Haiti was a prime place to begin the independence narrative, with its mix of disgruntled slave population and its “colored” handlers. The free slaves of Haiti revolted in 1791 and finally won their independence in 1804, after having gained their emancipation only eleven years earlier in 1793. Haiti became the first republic to win its independence and to ban slavery.

The slave revolt experiment in Haiti spread to the rest of Latin America, prompting a substantial shift in the way slavery was perceived. The shift in perspectives on slavery brought about a liberalism that potentially could both argue against the regressive nature of the colonials and the anti-progressive nature of the rural population.

There was also Mexico’s revolt, which was led by a multi-ethnic population of free men, unlike in Haiti. These men were driven by a desire to overturn the economic oppression of the Spanish colonials. There was also a religious component to the Mexican revolt, which also fell under the umbrella of freedom.
Stories of Tradition

Modem, as a whole, have a democratic, populist bias against the hierarchical orders of the past. It is important to understand, nevertheless, that this system factored into Latin America’s narrative of independence. The indigenous populations were more often concerned with preserving what rights had been granted them within the framework of colonial domination. More often than not, it was this effort at preservation, and not liberal ideals, that maintained the social equilibrium in colonial regimes. Moreover, it was tradition that was the foundation of almost all aspects of Latin American life. It was also, de facto, what ensured its smooth operation.

Stories of Nationhood

There was a move from defining Latin American as colonial subjects to defining them through national community. This happened through things such as literary revolt with, for instance, its creation of a mythical cultural identity for Latin Americans pre-dating the colonialists.

There was also a shift from European identity to “American” identity brought about by the economic nepotism of the European powers who favored their home-grown to the natives of the Latin American soil. Nevertheless, this shift in identity and allegiance did not help stamp out the incipient social inequalities existing all across the Latin American peninsula.

With the Napoleonic invasion of Spain came a destabilization in the balance of power between the Royal authority and the local elites. Criollos from La Plata (Argentina) for instance, took advantage and fought for both financial and national independence. However, the discrepancy between the Latin America criollos’ vision of national independence and its achievement led to internal strife. This was further aggravated by the distance between criollo elites and the core of their armies.

The Documents: Bolivarian Dreams

1. Simon Bolivar’s Letter from Jamaica: This letter reveals to us Bolívar as a Latin American in the prime position, place and time (post-Napoleonic invasion) to be the military, literary, and philosophical engine of a project to assert national independence from Spain.
2. A speech by Guyanese diplomat Odeen Ishmael: As a companion piece to the Letter from Jamaica, this speech rereads the legacy of Bolívar 170 years after his death.
3. A speech by Hugo Chavez: Chavez uses the memory of Bolívar in conjunction with poet Pablo Neruda to invoke a pan-Latin Americanism.

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