

***The Ideology of Creole Revolution (Imperialism and Independence in American and Latin American Political Thought)* by Joshua Simon, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2017. 276 pp. ISBN 978-1-316-61096-1**

by Roberto Breña

There are few books that are comparative studies on the Age of Revolution in the Americas. *The Ideology of Creole Revolution* by Joshua Simon is now one of them. The comparison in this case is between the Revolution of the Thirteen Colonies and the Spanish American independence movements. More specifically, between Alexander Hamilton on the one hand, and Simón Bolívar and Lucas Alamán on the other. The main thesis of this book is that there is a category, called by the author “anti-imperial imperialism”, that unifies the history of the two movements in question from an institutional view, but also from the perspective of the history of ideas. According to Simon, this ideological convergence “prompts us to reconsider the causes of the United States and Latin America’s subsequent political and economic divergence, raising a broad set of questions about the long-term legacies of the America’s transition to independence.” (3) This reconsideration is important, no doubt, but as I will try to show in what follows it is very difficult to base it in the notion of “anti-imperial imperialism”.

The author thinks that the aforementioned comparison is possible because all the revolutions in the Americas were *Creole* revolutions. In this regard, he mentions Benedict Anderson’s book *Imagined Communities*, as the only one that has used the term “Creole” to structure a comparative account of the Americas. Simon considers this book a “masterpiece.” (8) This may be the case in general terms, but the chapter devoted to Latin America has been criticized for a long time now and at present I would say it is academically discredited among some of the best historians of the region.[1]

The aspect that from the author’s view unifies the three authors considered in the book (Hamilton, Bolívar and Alamán) is the category “anti-imperial imperialism.” In his opinion, this category defines the ideology of the Creole revolutions in which they participated. “I argue that these three important figures converged in this sense because they all address background problems structured by the common institutional context that each occupied as a Creole revolutionary.” (14) The problems with such a term begin with the term itself, due to the fact that the adjective used is a denial of the noun. How does the author explain such a contradictory expression? He says that the ideology of the Creole revolutions was anti-imperial because it was against the inequalities upon peripheral populations that the metropolis imposed on them, but at the same time it was imperial in the sense that the Creoles aimed to preserve their privileges at the expense of Indigenous and African American populations. (32) The Creole ideology was also imperial in the sense that the three political leaders considered in the book defended internal colonization and territorial expansion.

The main problem that I perceive in this category is referring to “imperial” as something that in my view is a simple social fact: Creoles wanted to maintain their social superiority and the control they had exercised over the other groups during the colonial period. Once the Spaniards were ousted from the preeminent position they occupied in Spanish American societies for nearly three-hundred years, the Creoles did what they had to do in order to maintain the new social hierarchy, with them at the top instead of the Peninsular Spaniard minority (the same applies of course to the American Creoles *vis-à-vis* the British elite). This is a natural and perfectly logical desire on the part of Creoles; to define it as “imperial” and to erect this category as the heuristic pillar of the whole book seems to me debatable. I think there are less complicated formulas to refer to social aims that appear to me as natural from a socio-historical perspective. I think new categories should be illuminating in order to be justified.

However, if the categories in question are accepted, the chapter devoted to Alexander Hamilton shows without any difficulty that he was anti-imperial and imperial at the same time. However, following the main argument of the preceding paragraph, it may be added that *all* of the Creole leaders of the North American and South American independence movements were “imperial” and “anti-imperial” in the sense that Simon understands these terms. How could it be otherwise?

I agree with the author when he writes that Bolívar was “an exemplary ideologist of Creole Revolution” in the Americas “as well as its most influential intellectual,” but I do not think that all the theoretical tensions that permeate his thought “were directly related to the contradictory institutional position he occupied as an American Creole.” (93) These contradictions stem from many sources; among them, the lack of political experience of Spanish Americans in republican government, the role of the military in the politics of that historic moment, the disastrous economic situation that the new nations faced once independence was achieved, and an international situation that proved to be of very little advantage for the new Spanish American countries. Regarding Bolívar’s anti-imperialistic attitude, it comes as no surprise that Simon himself recognizes the limitations of his “anti-imperialism.” (97) Bolívar, like all the other Creole leaders of the Spanish American revolutions of independence, wanted to evict the Spaniards, but at the same time he wanted to keep the social advantages that his social group had enjoyed until then over the Indigenous and African American populations. In my view, this fact does not make him “imperial.” It is, I insist, the position that *all* the Creole leaders adopted in practical terms (notwithstanding the political rhetoric they sometimes used to justify their fight against the Spaniards or the British). The discourse of universal and inalienable human rights was used by both the North and South American Creole leaders of the independence movements, but as it is well-known, this was an ideological device to maintain a *de facto* dominion over all the other social groups. That is why Bolívar did not “clearly betray[ed] the entwined imperial and anti-imperial strands that characterized Creoles’s revolutionary ideology.” (99) He was not betraying anything (except a certain political rhetoric); he was responding to the interests of the social group he belonged to (a group that, as expected, would not do anything to weaken its position and standing within the new societies).

If the aforementioned tendency on the part of the Spanish American Creoles was something “natural,” the insistence by Simon in the sense that all of the tensions and ambiguities in Bolívar’s thought and political practice stems from his “anti-imperial imperialism” sounds a bit odd (see, for example, 121 and 124). Exactly the same can be said regarding the chapter on Alamán. I do not think that the 1847 war between Mexico and the United States was a “clash between competing Creole empires,” (131; the Mexican polity could hardly be considered an “empire”) or that the critique of Hidalgo in Alamán’s famous *Historia de Méjico* was “a particular sharp instance of the anti-imperial imperialism that characterized patriotic Creoles political thought throughout the hemisphere.” (132) As the author himself writes in this chapter: “Ultimately, like his counterparts in both continents [that is, North America and South America], Alamán sought a path towards Mexican independence that would minimize disruptions of New Spain’s internal social hierarchy.” (132) Here is, expressed with briefness and clarity, the point I have been trying to convey in the preceding paragraphs. This tendency on the part of Creoles was so matter-of-course that there is no exception to the rule.

As the author writes in chapter 6, “the most prominent pattern in the subsequent history of the Americas is divergence.” (168) However, it is difficult to agree with him when he says that fortune, rather than fate, “decreed that the United States should persist and even expand after independence.” (171) In my opinion, aspects that cannot be considered “fortune” were at least equally important. Among them, a political history in which representative institutions were part of political life in the Thirteen Colonies for more than 150 years before the revolution of independence began. This element is essential from my perspective to explain the divergent history of the Americas after the Age of Revolution. As can be inferred, this element is in close relation with political stability (something that Spanish American societies were not able to attain for many decades after independence). The fact that Creole ideology was shared in the North and South of the Americas but that the United States diverged dramatically from Latin America in several aspects from independence onwards suggests that the elements that explain this divergence reside somewhere else, not only or mainly in Creole ideology.

In the Conclusion of his book, Simon writes: “When we recognize that preserving and justifying hierarchy was the aim of our Creole founders, we will be less enchanted by their ideas and thus less apt to be permanently enchained by their institutions. We will be better prepared to propose and undertake reforms that can contribute to dismantling the persistent inequalities of our American societies.” (196) I agree with the author’s diagnosis regarding the preservation of hierarchy; however, I would nuance his statement because, important as it is, this was not the only objective of the Founding Fathers, both North and South. Regarding his invitation to be less enchained by the institutions they created, and therefore to try to diminish the inequalities that currently pervade the Americas, I could not be more in agreement with him. It should be noted that the author establishes here a relationship between the independence of the Americas with the present situation in the region. This is a relationship that almost always gets lost among the laudatory rhetoric that we often hear about the Founding

Fathers (both North and South). In fact, what Simon is saying in the last part of his book is that the Founding Fathers are partially responsible for the inequalities that have persisted since independence and that are evident in all contemporary societies of the Americas. I think the author is right in pointing out this often forgotten aspect, although it is needless to add that this “responsibility” should be distributed, if I may put it this way, throughout the entire history of the continent.

Despite my doubts regarding the usefulness of the categories “imperial” and “anti-imperial,” *The Ideology of Creole Revolution* is an ambitious, interesting, and well-written book. The pages that Simon devotes to Hamilton, Bolívar and Alamán are full of useful information and of arguments worthy of consideration. The author’s mastery of the period under study, but also of the history of political thought (something pretty uncommon among historians in general) give him the necessary resources to develop pertinent and sometimes profound analysis throughout his book. Besides, as noted at the beginning of this review, there are very few comparative studies of the Thirteen Colonies revolutionary process *vis-à-vis* the Spanish American one. This fact, by itself, gives this book by Joshua Simon a special place in the ever-increasing bibliography on the Age of Revolutions.

Roberto Breña, El Colegio de México

[1] An example that may suffice regarding this aspect is the article “Nationalism as a practical system (Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism from the vantage point of Latin America)” by Claudio Lomnitz, in *The Other Mirror (Grand Theory through the Lens of Latin America)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 329-359.