

Chust, Manuel; Serrano, José Antonio (Hrsg.): *Debates sobre las independencias iberoamericanas*. Madrid: Vervuert Verlag 2007. ISBN: 978-8-484-89317-2; 340 S.

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In the first decades of the 19th century most Latin American countries achieved independence from Spain and Portugal. As was predictable the forthcoming Bicentennials of these events have triggered a wave of studies on the crises of the Hispanic empires and the emergence of new national states. Historians are revisiting the crucial events seeking to revise established perceptions on the topic. However, what they intend to revise is not always clear. In effect, the contribution would be hardly innovative, if it is understood as the questioning of conventional nationalistic histories, meaning the epic views of long-lasting nations that finally came to recover the right to self-government they were entitled to (the saga of liberty against despotism). In the 1960s a series of studies, propelled by the diffusion of Marxist thought and social history in Latin America, as well as by the increasing presence of American and European historians in the field, had already destabilized those Manichean approaches (albeit, without completely eradicating them from the academic milieu); these studies introduced a number of nuances that would set at stake the very essence of the nations that had emerged from the dissolution of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, revealing, in sum, the contingent nature of their origins and foundations.

Debates sobre las independencias latinoamericanas represents a fundamental contribution to clarify this point. In its journey through the different countries of the region and through the different time periods of historiographical production about the Latin American independence, it delineates a picture, although inevitably partial, of the „state of the art“ and hence on the basis on which current attempts of historiographic revision hinge, thus permitting us to assess its contributions, as well as the kinds of problems these contributions face.

The emergence of historical revisionism

Although the attempts at generalization are always problematic, given the fragmentation of national historiographical traditions and the diversity of schools and orientations in the field, we may detect some general trends of historical research in different historical periods. Regarding the first wave of revisionist studies initiated in the 1960s, Manuel Chust and José Antonio Serrano observe five main paths: A first impulse for critical revision of the nineteenth century's evolutionary - nationalistic interpretations of the revolutions of independence derives from the proliferation of the regional perspectives, which, although often imbued with some kind of irredentist vocation, would, nonetheless, serve to reveal a much more complex and heterogeneous picture than that portrayed in the „official histories,“ demonstrating the presence of projects alternative to those which would finally define the contours of the emerging national states. Studies in the field of social history, exploring the social basis of the insurgent movements, would point to the same direction. In the last instance, even though this was not what these revisions originally intended, both tendencies would undermine the idea of independence as an ineluctable destiny. And this is closely associated, in turn, with the emergence of the so-called „dependency theories.“

In effect, these theories would question the idea of the self-generated character of a revolutionary process, indicating the impossibility of explaining it exclusively on the basis of the forces at work within the local context. Yet, they would not take this verification to its logical consequence: the need to interpret Latin American independence in a broader setting, that is to say, within the Atlantic World. Instead, they would limit themselves to criticizing the role of the ruling elites (a criticism which would contribute to take away the „sacred aura“ from those figures, who until then had been considered as the national founding fathers). However, at this point, Marxist interpretations would part ways.

One current would diminish the revolutionary character of the rupture with the metropolis (Spain and Portugal), and rather emphasize the post-independence continuity of the social and economic structures inherited from the colony. Some interpretations, based

on its vision of local societies adhering to traditionalistic cultural patterns, will also question the assumedly enlightened/liberal character of the ideological framework of the revolutions. Some interpretations, not exclusively of a marxist, but also of a broad range of a so-called „culturalist“ bias, would emphasize, perhaps paradoxically, something that up to that moment had been one of the central topics of conservative historiography: the persistence of the hierarchic and corporative vision of society, which was much closer to the Neoscholastic doctrines – deeply rooted in Spain and Portugal – than to the modern Enlightened (individualistic) social ideal. Another current would instead insist on the modern and revolutionary character of the process initiated by the crises of the Iberian colonial empires. In some of its versions, this view was associated with an attempt to appropriate the patriotic legacy and symbolism by leftist thinkers. Regardless, all the visions of the epoch would naturally converge on the topic of the „unfinished revolution.“ The Creole elite, who shortly would assume control of this process by marginalizing the other social forces that, as they affirmed, had set it originally into movement, would manage to dissolve their democratic and revolutionary potential, which, nevertheless, would remain as an unfulfilled promise awaiting its future redemption.

Recent reorientations

From the 1980s on, the most remarkable phenomenon in Latin America has been the affirmation of the scholarly historical profession, which, combined with the expansion of area studies in American and European universities and research institutions. This led not only to a much more systematic exploration of the documentary reservoirs, but also, and fundamentally, to the diversification of the themes and objects under study. Regardless, behind this variety, we can again detect some common trends. These are summarized in Chust's and Serrano's introduction, who simultaneously emphasize the differences to the former revisionist wave in terms of a „return of the agent.“ The focus would now switch from structures to social agents. And it is this turn to the „agency“ in historical processes that would make room for a

new and variegated range of strategies to approach the process of decomposition of the colonial order.

The renewed prominence gained by political history might be the best expression for these changes in historians' interests. Despite the contradictions and obstacles the shift from subjects to citizens would face in Latin America, it would re-define the whole system of social and political relations in the region, that is, the ways in which the different components of society interacted with each other and responded to the strategies of the ruling elites. This renewed interest in political history is more clearly observable in the increasing number of studies dedicated to analyzing electoral processes and other forms of collective participation, as well as the emergence and affirmation of new ambits for political sociability.

A phenomenon which is even more indicative of the recent historiographical reorientations is, however, the dissolution of clear-cut thematic classifications. In effect, in most of the recent works, political history will overlap with regional, social, and cultural histories. They will show not only the plurality of lines of antagonism tearing apart Mexican society, which would be expressed in the co-existence of political projects in mutual conflict, but also how, in the midst of this complex web of particular situations, a set of new political practices expanded, giving room for the political participation of a myriad of extremely heterogeneous (both in their material conditions of existence and the ways in which they symbolically related to them) social groups besides the narrow circles of the elites, thus allowing them to articulate their grievances in the political arena.

The overlapping of political, social, regional, and cultural histories not only paved the way for the study of the actions of different social agents, including the so-called „subaltern groups.“ A particularly productive development has been the widening of perspectives to include areas hitherto ignored by historiography. The most remarkable case is that of the royalist camp. We now have a clearer idea of the complex web of problems at work behind the counter-insurgency forces, and to what extent their attempt to preserve the tra-

ditional order would lead its very defenders to dislocate the whole system of social hierarchies and political and economic relations on which that order rested.

However, the most decisive development in this process of historiographic renewal is the emergence of studies approaching the dissolution of the Iberian colonial empires from a global perspective. This has produced an innovative view of the crisis of independence as the result of a revolutionary process that encompassed the entire Spanish and Portuguese empires and had its epicenter on the Iberian Peninsula (a perspective that had so far been blocked by the traditional, epic vision of independence founded on the antinomy between Hispanic despotism and Latin American liberalism).

The elaboration of this perspective is closely associated with the shift of focus toward the analysis of the conceptual dimension of historical processes, more precisely, in trying to understand how political categories (like representation, sovereignty, public opinion, and so on) at this juncture shifted their meaning. Ultimately, only the rise of a modern system of conceptual references would explain why, unlike what happened in other occasions as during the War of Succession (1700-1711), the royal vacancy this time would not threaten the monarchical institutional order but would also jeopardize monarchy as such: that is, only the development of a new social and political vocabulary would now allow people to imagine the constitution of a political community which did not have at its basis that which so far had constituted its nucleus and generating center: the royal authority. And this conceptual shift would be related, in turn, to the changes at the level of the material premises for the articulation and circulation of ideas (which will give room for the emergence of an hitherto unheard-of phenomenon, namely, the formation of an incipient „public opinion“), as well as new loci of public sociability (clubs, literary salons, etc.) that will provide a model and thus help to alter the older idea of society which is organized exclusively on the basis of conventional (voluntarily agreed upon) ties.

Balance and perspective

The texts gathered together by Chust and

Serrano generally conclude by balancing the present situation of the historiography on the topic, which eventually includes suggestions regarding possible directions for future historical research. Basically, they agree that there is need to expand studies in some of the above-indicated fields, which, allegedly, have been mostly neglected (such as the action of the so-called „subaltern groups“). However, the reflection on what João Paulo Pimenta calls the „premises of analyses“ (p. 146) underlying historiographical developments (and their eventual shortcomings) is, instead, rather cursory, if not absent. One misses a more general assessment as to what extent the affirmation of the professional orientation of local historiography resulted into an authentic renewal of perspectives regarding the revolutions of independence; on the other hand, it may have simply deepened tendencies already at work in the previous revisionist wave that began in the 1960s. According to what we have seen, the problem is not so easy to solve. As we observed, the goal of dismantling the nationalistic, epic views, which lies at the core of the revisionist enterprise, including the most recent one, is not really an original project, nor does it mark a radical departure from what different authors have been doing since the 1960s. The difficulties in understanding how recent studies distance themselves from preceding revisionist ones become more evident at the moment we address current debates about whether or not independence in Latin America marked a true rupture with the old colonial regime.

In effect, at this point the new revisionist studies appear, in principle, less innovative than most of their authors would be willing to accept: the currently dominant views that, in opposition to the epic ones, seek to emphasize the continuities after independence regarding social and economic patterns (that is, that the revolution was merely a political phenomenon, which did not alter the more profound, and well established, social and economic structures), simply replicates one of the central topics of the first wave of revisionism. And the same can be said regarding the supposedly „modern“ („contingent“) character of Latin American nations: the idea that, in the region, the formation of the national states

preceded that of the nation was already commonplace in the literature of the field long before recent works came to corroborate it. In sum, *Debates sobre las independencias latinoamericanas* is, at the same time, the most systematic picture available today of the present situation in terms of the historiography on the revolution of independence in Latin America; it is also an invitation to reflect not only on what we already know and what we still do not know but also, and more fundamentally, what we want to know.

HistLit 2009-4-108 / Elías José Palti über Chust, Manuel; Serrano, José Antonio (Hrsg.): *Debates sobre las independencias iberoamericanas*. Madrid 2007, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 04.11.2009.