

# SIMÓN BOLÍVAR'S REPUBLIC: ABULWARK AGAINST THE "TYRANNY" OF THE MAJORITY

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## RESUMO

*Based on Bolívar's speeches, decrees, and correspondence as well as on Gran Colombia's constitutions and laws, this essay examines the tensions within Bolívar's vision of Venezuela's and New Granada's society produced by his republican, yet authoritarian and hierarchical ideas, his concern for keeping the lower classes of African descent in check, and his denial of Indian agency. It shows that even in Peru, Bolívar's main concern was to prevent the racial war and social disintegration that allegedly slaves and free Afro-descended people would bring to the newly independent nations. To prevent such an outcome, he advocated all along legal equality through the abolition of the colonial privileges and, since mid-1816, the abolition of slavery, but simultaneously the preservation of the monopole of power by the white creole elite. He secured the perpetuation of the socioracial hierarchy inherited from Spain by a two-edged citizenship: an active citizenship restricted to a tiny literate and skilled minority and an inactive citizenship for the immense majority of (mostly nonwhite) men.*

KEYWORDS: *Simón Bolívar; independence; citizenship; nation building; race relations; slavery.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Estamos autorizados, pues, a creer que todos los hijos de la América española, de cualquier color o condición que sean, se profesan un afecto fraternal recíproco, que ninguna maquinación es capaz de alterar” (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 181).

“Nosotros somos el compuesto abominable de esos tigres cazadores que vinieron a la América a derramarle su sangre y a encastar con las víctimas antes de sacrificarlas, para mezclar después los frutos espúreos de estos enlaces con los frutos de esos esclavos arrancados del África. Con tales mezclas físicas; con tales elementos morales ¿cómo se pueden fundar leyes sobre héroes, y principios sobre hombres?” (*idem*, p. 1390).

These two antagonistic assessments were written by Venezuelan Libertador Simón Bolívar 11 years apart. He addressed the first one to the editor of a British newspaper from his precarious exile in Jamaica in September 1815. He wrote the second one to the Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia (comprising Venezuela and New Granada), Francisco de Paula Santander, from the Palace of La Magdalena in Lima in July 1826. Although in both statements, Bolívar had the Haitian Revolution in mind, in the first one he anticipated by several decades José Martí's arguments of crossracial fraternity aimed at convincing white readers of the impossibility of

another Haiti in the new multiracial nation that the independence war would engender (HELG, 1995, p. 45-46). In 1826, despite being at the pinnacle of fame and power, he predicted to Santander a revolution along Haitian lines during which “Guineans” would massacre almost all whites.

Although these two selections from Bolívar's abundant writings are well known, no study has attempted to examine them in their context and as representative of the tensions within the Libertador's social thinking. Some insightful analyses of specific aspects of Bolívar's ideas have been published at the time of the celebration

of the bicentennial of his birth in 1783 (BUSHNELL, 1983; COLLIER, 1983; LYNCH, 1983; TACOU, 1986). Yet, few works have focused on the Libertador's views on the multiracial majority of subalterns in the nations he struggled to form, with the exceptions of Favre's (1986) article and Yacou's (1990) edited volume. Since the mid-2000, the bicentennial of Latin American independences has prompted the publication of several new, if not always revisionist, studies, among which Lynch's (2006) biography of Bolívar and Collier's (2008) reflection on his political vision stand out. In addition, several social analyses of the wars of independence have shed new light on race relations and subalterns' agency in the construction of Venezuela and New Granada (ZULUAGA, 1993; THIBAUD, 2003; HELG, 2004; LASSO, 2007; BLANCHARD, 2008; VALENCIA, 2008).

## II. BOLÍVAR'S VIEW OF SPANISH AMERICA FROM JAMAICA (1815)

In September 1815, during his brief refuge in Jamaica, Bolívar wrote two open letters to British residents of the island, with the purpose of gaining British support to the cause of Spanish American independence (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 159-174, 178-181). In them, Bolívar reassured his readers by predicting a peaceful future for Spanish America, despite its racial makeup. To that effect, he used Haiti as a counterexample to posit that no revolution along the lines of Saint Domingue could happen in continental Spanish America.

First, Bolívar expressed his confidence that, despite being the smallest demographic minority among the "quince a veinte millones de habitantes que se hallan esparcidos en este gran continente de naciones indígenas, africanas, españoles y razas cruzadas [...] la raza de blancos [...] posee cualidades intelectuales que le dan una igualdad relativa" (*idem*, p. 178)<sup>1</sup>. According to him,

whites' intellectual superiority would compensate for their reduced number and secure their socioeconomic dominance and control of government. Second, neglecting any mention of the 1780-1783 Tupac Amaru rebellion in the Andes, he portrayed contemporary Amerindians as isolated, family-centered, and peaceful: "Esta parte de la población americana es una especie de barrera para contener los otros partidos: ella no pretende la autoridad, porque ni la ambiciona, ni se cree con aptitud para ejercerla [...]" (*ibidem*).

If whites were added to Indians, Bolívar continued, three-fifth of the total population in Spanish America posed no danger (*idem*, p. 179). And third, "si añadimos los mestizos que participan de la sangre de ambos, el aumento [de la dulcura] se hace más sensible y el temor de los colores se disminuye, en consecuencia" (*idem*, p. 180). "Los colores", to Bolívar, meant Afro-descended peoples, who were the only ones likely to present a danger. Interestingly, in these two letters, he restricted his mentions of them to freedmen and slaves, passing over in silence their vast majority: the freeborn blacks, mulatos, and zambos (of African and Indian mixed ancestry) then collectively called *libres de color*, *pardos*, or *castas*. Furthermore, when he rejected the possibility of a revolution similar to Saint Domingue's in Venezuela, it was not on the basis of this major demographic difference, but on the basis of Venezuelan slaves' alleged tranquillity<sup>2</sup>. When the royalist army attempted to promote a race war by mobilizing pardo freedmen and fugitive slaves against the white proindependence elite, he claimed, "el siervo español, no ha combatido contra su dueño; y por el contrario, ha preferido muchas veces, la servidumbre pacífica a la rebelión" (*idem*, p. 180).

In order to "sublevar toda la gente de color, inclusive los esclavos contra los blancos criollos", Spanish royalist military leaders tried to imitate the example of Saint Domingue and lured men of African descent with the pillage and massacre of

<sup>1</sup> Around 1810, in Venezuela 12% of all inhabitants were slaves and nearly 50%, free people of partial or full African descent, or *castas*. In New Granada (today Colombia), 8% were slaves, and over 20% free Afro-descendants. In both countries, Amerindians comprised about 20% of all inhabitants, and mestizos some 25% in New Granada and 10% in Venezuela. In both countries, whites were the minority, generally clustered in the cities (ANDREWS, 2004, p. 41).

<sup>2</sup> Unlike in Venezuela and Colombia, in 1790 Saint Domingue slaves represented 88% of the 600 000 inhabitants of the small French colony, two-third of them being African survivors of the Middle Passage. Whites were no more than 7%, and free persons of African descent, 5% of the total (GEGGUS, 2002, p. 5).

whites, but they ended up having to offer absolute freedom to the slaves and to threaten with death those who did not join, forcing many into desertion (*ibidem*). According to Bolívar, this explained why, once Spanish general Pablo Morillo initiated his cruel reconquest in early 1815, “los mismos soldados libertos y esclavos que tanto contribuyeron, aunque por fuerza, al triunfo de los realistas, se han vuelto al partido de los [criollos blancos] independientes, que no habían ofrecido la libertad absoluta, como lo hicieron las guerrillas españolas” (*ibidem*).

This watered down description of the war’s first years allowed Bolívar to foretell that all the children of Spanish America, regardless of their color or condition, would always fraternally care for each other (*idem*).

Nevertheless, the Libertador still stated from Jamaica, given the limited “virtudes y talentos políticos” among the immense majority of these *americanos*, the failure of Venezuela’s and New Granada’s first attempts at independence in 1811-1815 had proven that neither federalism nor representative democracy were suitable for the region. Instead, Bolívar favored the formation a great nation out of the two former Spanish colonies, whose institutions would be half-way between the British parliamentary monarchy and a representative republic. The political system he envisioned comprised an executive power held by a president for life and a legislative power divided, like in Great Britain, into a hereditary Senate and an elected lower House (*idem*, p. 168-172). Despite these arguments, Bolívar failed to obtain British help and, after escaping murder, left Jamaica for Haiti in December 1815. His assessments, however, offer an ideal starting point to examine his views on Spanish America’s subalterns.

### III. SLAVES AND FREEDOM

Regarding slaves, neither in 1815, nor in his previous correspondence did Bolívar advocate or even allude to their emancipation as a logical outcome of independence. He made no mention of the debates on slavery taking place then, or of the laws of gradual manumission adopted by most states in the U.S. North and by Antioquia, in New Granada (NASH & SODERLUND, 1991; MELISH, 1998; BLANCHARD, 2008, p. 34-35). In 1813, when

he installed the Second Republic in Caracas, one of his main concerns was to return the fugitive slaves enrolled in the royalist armies to their patriot masters. In June 1814, he warned the British authorities of a possible “contamination of all English colonies” by the race war engineered in Venezuela by a Spanish army that freed slaves and encouraged people of color to hate whites. He also instructed his envoy to Barbados to ask for 2 000 British guns with ammunitions to be used exclusively to destroy bandits and capture the runaway slaves who brought pillage, rape, death, and desolation to Venezuela (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 97-100).

The following year, as the Second Republic collapsed under royalist attacks, Bolívar retreated from Caracas and recruited some plantation slaves, including fifteen of his own, to make up for the numerous death and desertions in his army. In doing so, he did not offer a new way out of bondage to male slaves but replicated a practice already used by various armies always short of able men in the French Caribbean, the British West Indies and Spanish America: the promise of manumission for these slaves and their families if they survived several years of faithful military service. Furthermore, Bolívar did not question the institution of slavery and, in his letter from Jamaica, reassured his British reader that in Spanish America, slaves were “degradados a la esfera de brutos” and “una raza salvaje” that would not revolt (*idem*, p. 181).

Bolívar began to promote the abolition of slavery only after his refuge in southern Haiti, where Alexandre Pétion, its mulatto president from 1807 to 1818, welcomed him from Jamaica, together with numerous refugees from Venezuela and New Granada. Pétion financed and equipped two successive expeditions that eventually allowed Bolívar and his followers to launch the final phase of their war against Spanish colonialism. In return, Pétion confidentially asked Bolívar to emancipate the slaves in the Spanish American territories he would liberate (*idem*, p. 189; O’LEARY, 1880, p. 343).

During his first and abortive expedition sponsored by Haiti, Bolívar fulfilled his promise to Pétion. On 23 May 1816, shortly after proclaiming the Third Republic of Venezuela from the island of Margarita, he declared to the inhabitants in the mainland: “No habrá, pues, más

esclavos en Venezuela que los que quieran serlo. Todos los que prefieran la libertad al reposo [*sic*], tomarán las armas para sostener sus derechos sagrados, y serán ciudadanos" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 2, p. 1092). Ten days later, he confirmed "la libertad absoluta de los esclavos" to the inhabitants of Río Caribe, Carúpano and Cariaco. He specified that freedom was a natural right stipulated by justice, politics, and "la patria." But, he explained, slaves' freedom was also a necessity because "la República necesita de los servicios de todos sus hijos". Therefore, only slave men between 14 and 60 years old who enrolled in the patriot army would gain their freedom and that of their families. Those able men who refused military service exposed themselves as well as their wife, children, and parents to continuing bondage (*idem*, p. 1092-1093). On 6 July 1816, Bolívar went one step further in a declaration to the inhabitants of the Caracas Province: "Esa porción de nuestros hermanos que ha gemido bajo las miserias de la esclavitud ya es libre [...] de aquí en adelante solo habrá en Venezuela una clase de hombres, todos serán ciudadanos" (*idem*, p. 1094). However, few slaves responded to his call, and two months later, after a catastrophic landing in Ocumare, on the Venezuelan coast, Bolívar had to take refuge in Haiti again, where Pétion agreed to finance and arm his second, and this time successful, expedition in December 1816.

After his return to Venezuela, Bolívar kept the same position on slavery as six months earlier: he implied that slavery had ended, but he offered freedom to male slaves and their family only if the former enlisted in the patriot army. As the war against Spain escalated in 1818, in several decrees Bolívar proclaimed martial law and ordered all able men from 14 to 60 years of age to enlist or face execution – a total mobilization that included "todos los hombres que antes eran esclavos" (*idem*, p. 1120). In the turmoil of the war, Bolívar's proclamation of 6 July 1816 had been lost, and now, perhaps facing slaveowners' resistance, the Libertador reminded the president of republican Venezuela's High Court of Justice of its content regarding slavery, to which he added: "Nadie ignora en Venezuela que la esclavitud está extinguida entre nosotros" (*idem*, p. 1123). This remains Bolívar's most explicit declaration on the abolition of slavery in his country. Remarkably, in all his decrees on the topic until 1822, he never mentioned the rights of

slaveowners over their human property or a possible compensation to them for the loss of their slaves – despite the fact that he belonged to the slaveowning aristocracy of Caracas, known as the *mantuanos*<sup>3</sup>.

In 1819, with Spain losing ground in Venezuela, creole slaveholders regained strength and representation at the Congress of Angostura, which was elected to debate the creation of a joint Venezuelan and New Granadan "Republic of Colombia" (referred to here as Gran Colombia). Bolívar attempted to have the "proscripción de la esclavitud" written in the Fundamental Law of the new republic. Although most of his long speech to the congress aimed at convincing the delegates of the necessity of a British-inspired parliamentary system with a hereditary Senate (see below), it was also a desperate appeal in favor of the confirmation of his decrees emancipating the slaves, which, he claimed, had transformed them into enthusiastic supporters of the new republic. Brandishing the scarecrow of the Helotes, Spartacus, and Haiti, he stated: "[...] vosotros sabéis que no se puede ser Libre, y Esclavo a la vez, sino violando a la vez las Leyes naturales, las Leyes políticas, y las Leyes civiles. Yo abandono a vuestra soberana decisión la reforma o la revocación de todos mis Estatutos y Decretos; pero yo imploro la confirmación de la Libertad absoluta de los Esclavos, como imploraría mi vida, y la vida de la República" (*idem*, p. 1141, 1152). Nevertheless, although the Congress of Angostura elected Bolívar as the president of the republic, the Fundamental Law it adopted did not mention abolition and ignored Bolívar's emancipating edicts (as well as his parliamentary proposals) (URIBE, 1977, p. 699-702).

The failure by the 1819 Fundamental Law to declare the abolition of slavery, added to the death of President Pétion in 1818, probably weakened Bolívar's commitment to the absolute freedom of the slaves. For example, in early 1820, as he struggled to fight the Spaniards with insufficient

<sup>3</sup> I have been unable to find how many slaves Bolívar owned, and whether he eventually emancipated all of those who had not been confiscated by the Spaniards. According to Lynch (2006, p. 151), he unconditionally freed over 100 slaves in 1821. Blanchard (2008, p. 81) mentions that in 1821 he liberated the last of his six slaves from his Santa Mateo hacienda.



troops in the south of Maracaibo, he did not call on slaves to join his army to gain freedom and citizenship but requested from Vice-President Santander “3 000 esclavos del Sur” of New Granada (a region of haciendas and gold mining) to reinforce the veterans “porque la gente de tierra fría se muere toda en Venezuela” (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 422). When Santander appeared reluctant to alienate the support for independence of Cauca Province’s creole elite by taking away their slaves, Bolívar remained ambiguous: he was not demanding the freedom of these slaves but their conscription. In the same breath, however, he reminded Santander of an article in the law that stipulated that slaves called to military service by the president of the republic (himself) “entran desde luego en posesión de su libertad” (*idem*, p. 424). In other words, the survivors of those 3 000 slaves would indeed become freedmen after the end of the war.

Bolívar justified his request to a recalcitrant Santander on three grounds. There were military reasons to order the recruitment of slaves: these were strong men used to hard work and ready to die for the cause of freedom. There were crude demographic reasons as well: should only free men fight and die for the freedom of the fatherland, he asked? Shouldn’t slaves too gain their rights on the battlefield, which would also reduce “su peligroso número por un medio poderoso y legítimo” (*idem*, p. 425)? But above all, there were political reasons: if slavery could survive under despotic regimes, it was “una locura que en una revolución de libertad se pretenda mantener la esclavitud” (*idem*, p. 435). It would lead to slave rebellions, which in turn could lead to the extermination of whites, Bolívar dramatically predicted. Indeed, according to him, in the case of Saint Domingue “la avaricia de los colonos hizo la revolución, porque la revolución francesa decretó la libertad, y ellos la rehusaron”. And once a revolution advocated freedom, nothing could stop its movement, the best one could do was to channel it in the right direction. Cauca’s slaveowners should understand this political rule rather than blindly follow their short-term economic interests, he explained (*idem*, p. 444). Bolívar’s arguments only lukewarmly convinced Santander and slaveowners: he had to renew his request of slave conscripts from Bogotá, Antioquia and Cauca several times between February and August 1820, and he recognized that

among those who arrived, many deserted, died, were wounded, or fell ill (*idem*, p. 413-495; THIBAUD, 2003, p. 74-81; BLANCHARD, 2008, p. 74-81).

Nevertheless, by the time of the 1821 debates of the Congress of Cúcuta on the constitution of the Republic of Gran Colombia, Bolívar had given up demanding the full abolition of slavery and was ready to reconcile “los derechos posesivos, los derechos políticos, y los derechos naturales.” He simply implored the delegates to decree at least “la libertad absoluta de todos los colombianos al acto de nacer en el territorio de la república” (free womb), in return for the blood the liberation army shed for the country’s freedom at the decisive battle of Carabobo, in Venezuela (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 576). This slow gradualism contrasted sharply with Bolívar’s vehement abolitionism in Angostura in 1819, when he drew a parallel between his life, that of the republic, and slaves’ freedom.

Not surprisingly, slavery was not contemplated by the 1821 constitution but by the Law of Manumission of 21 July 1821, which only foresaw abolition in the long term while attempting to reconcile the contradictory constitutional rights to freedom and property. This law declared that from now on all children born to slave mothers would be free but would have to work for their mother’s masters without pay until they reached the age of eighteen, theoretically in compensation for their upbringing. Freedom at the age of eighteen was conditional to the masters issuing a certificate of good conduct. Slaves denied such certificates would be destined by the government to useful work, thus becoming a kind of public slaves. The 1821 law also ordered the formation of manumission juntas that would buy the freedom of the most “honest and industrious” adult slaves from their owners, through funds financed by a portion of the value of bequests. In addition, although the 1821 law prohibited the importation of new slaves into the country, it allowed all kinds of transactions within Gran Colombia, except the sale of children below “the age of puberty” outside of their parents’ province of residence (REPÚBLICA DE COLOMBIA, 1924, p. 14-17).

In fact, up to 1827, the juntas realized no more than 300 manumissions in all of Gran Colombia, as a result of slaveholders’ foot-dragging and

evasion (BIERCK JR., 1953, p. 371-377). Moreover, after 1821, slaves lost the option of joining the army as a means of getting out of bondage. New regulations limited conscription to slaves who had the authorization of their masters and specified that the state would compensate the latter (CONGRESO DE CÚCUTA, 1971, p. 423). No promise of freedom was attached to enlistment. Regarding the slaves emancipated during the war, the Congress of Cúcuta declared perpetually and irrevocably free all slaves and newborn emancipated by republican governments and later returned to slavery by the Spanish occupation, but the slaves freed by the Spaniards "en odio de la independencia" were excluded from this measure (REPÚBLICA DE COLOMBIA, 1924, p. 16). The delegates in Cúcuta also rejected a proposal to distribute national lands to the most deserving freedmen, on the basis that they were not "la mejor clase de gente" (CONGRESO DE CÚCUTA, 1971, p. 195). No post-independence legislation aimed at easing the condition of the existing slave population. Moreover, as slaves continued to run away to gain freedom, new departmental ordinances focused on the repression of flight and assistance to fugitive slaves.

In sum, until 1820, Bolívar fulfilled his promise to Pétion to liberate the slaves not only to honor his commitment but also because he needed them as soldiers. In addition, as he said, he opposed slavery as fundamentally incompatible with a republic based on the freedom and equality of its citizens. Yet, his conviction emanated largely from the fear that if slaves were not freed, the Haitian Revolution and its extermination of whites could repeat themselves in Venezuela and New Granada. Haiti was for him the symbol of what Venezuela could have become, had the brutal Spanish reconquest launched in 1815 not turned its population of African descent against Ferdinand VII. After 1820, however, as the massive slave rebellion he feared had not materialized and did not seem to threaten Gran Colombia anymore, Bolívar ceased to demand the abolition of slavery there.

#### IV. FREE PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT AND LEGAL EQUALITY

In the 1820s, "el temor de los colores", or the fear of a free pardo takeover, became central in Bolívar's social thinking. In reality, although his two 1815 letters from Jamaica did not mention

the free Afro-descended majority in Venezuela in order to secure British support to independence, he never stopped worrying about Venezuela's demography and the racial dimension of the civil war that had devastated the country until Spanish reconquest. Unfortunately few letters from Bolívar predating 1813 are available to reconstruct his assessment of the failure of Venezuela's First Republic in 1812. Led by the creole aristocracy of Caracas, it adopted a constitution that declared the equality of the free regardless of race, but barred most nonwhite citizens from suffrage through property and other requirements. Moreover, the creole patriots adopted laws that promoted the expansion of private ownership in the vast cattle ranching plains of the Orinoco Basin at the expenses of the free *llaneros* (mostly pardo and mestizo cowboys). Thus the royalists, helped by the arrival of Spanish reinforcements from Puerto Rico, were able to capitalize on the socioracial resentment of pardos and *llaneros* to enlist some of them in their armies; they also forced or encouraged slaves belonging to patriot landowners to join royalist ranks (LYNCH, 2006, p. 56-57).

The Second Republic of Venezuela (1813-1814) did not rally the support of the pardo majority either. Bolívar attempted to stop what seemed to become a race war with his June 1813 decree of *Guerra a Muerte* that guaranteed forgiveness to any *americano*, regardless of race, caught on the royalist side, but summary execution to any *peninsular* (born in Spain) not actively supporting independence (BOLÍVAR, 1961, p. 5-9). Three months later, however, he issued a proclamation "A las naciones del Mundo" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 2, p. 1031-1038) that denounced "la revolución de los negros, libres y esclavos, provocada, auxiliada y sostenida por los emisarios de Monteverde [the Spanish general leading the royalists]. Esta gente inhumana y atroz, cebándose en la sangre y bienes de los patriotas [...]. cometieron [*sic*] los más horrendos asesinatos, robos, violencias y devastaciones" (*ibidem*).

Bolívar illustrated his denunciation of royalist crimes with vivid details in order to justify his War to the Death. Interestingly, he only provided the race or origin of the monstrous enemy – blacks, Spaniards, and Canarians – but never the race of their victims – "los hombres más honrados; los padres de familias; niños de catorce años;

sacerdotes [...]; viejos octogenarios; las infelices mujeres” (*ibidem*) – who, as a result, seemed to be all whites. Nor did he seek to understand the motivations of those who followed the Spaniards. Instead, he offered them an ultimatum, also letting his troops sack and commit massacres in the countryside and the towns they occupied. By 1814, violence and atrocities were at their peak, with both sides losing literally thousands of men, but the royalist troops controlled most of Venezuela and submitted its population to repeated abuse.

Weakened and marginalized, Bolívar escaped to Cartagena after issuing his Manifesto of Carúpano of 7 September 1814, in which he denied any responsibility in the failure of the Second Republic and, for the first time, described Venezuela’s war as a fratricidal conflict. Although he avoided any direct mention of “los colores,” he blamed all the current calamities and horrors not on the Spaniards, but on “vuestrros hermanos [...] esos ciegos esclavos que pretenden ligaros a las cadenas que ellos mismos arrastran” (*idem*, p. 1067). He and his army fought for the freedom of America, but they confronted popular masses degraded by the yoke of servitude, turned into idiots by religious fanaticism, and seduced by the prospect of voracious anarchy and undeserved honor and fortune.

The 1814 civil war and the loss of white creole control over Venezuela left Bolívar with a permanent fear and a deep sense of the vulnerability of his class (*idem*, v. 1, p. 97-99). Yet, as he pursued the struggle against Spain in New Granada and later went into exile in the Caribbean, events in Venezuela turned in his favor. Ferdinand VII, now back on the Spanish throne with an absolutist agenda, sent Gen. Pablo Morillo and a 10 000-men army to reconquer Venezuela and the Caribbean coast of New Granada in 1815. Morillo reorganized the llanero royalist units under his command, restoring racial discriminations and reducing slaves to non-combatant tasks. At the same time he brutally repressed alleged or convicted “traitors,” confiscated most creole haciendas, and submitted the population, already hurt by four years of war and a deadly earthquake in 1812, to high contributions and forced labor or enlistment. As a result, Venezuelans’ support for Spain declined rapidly, and some pardos and llaneros began to join the remaining liberation units (BUSHNELL, 2004, p. 63-69).

After the failure of the first patriot expedition from Haïti in mid-1816, Bolívar returned to Haiti, but other leaders stayed in eastern Venezuela. Still others were fighting the royalists since 1811 and never left the Orinoco Basin, such as the white aristocrat Santiago Mariño and Manuel Piar, the only mulato among the proindependence leaders. The son of a Spanish sailor, as a child Piar had immigrated from Curaçao to La Guaira with his mulato mother. Nine years older than Bolívar and already an experienced serviceman, Piar had joined his adoptive Venezuela’s liberation army in 1811. By late 1816, his 1 500 patriot troops were the best trained and organized of all. At that time, increasing numbers of llaneros also began to switch sides. Among them, the rancher and barely literate José Antonio Páez, the creole son of modest Canarians, passed from the royalists to the patriots, emerging as a powerful chief. Thus, when on 31 December 1816 Bolívar landed for the second time in Venezuela from Haiti, he faced several caudillos with mostly pardo troops who, with the exception of Páez, were not ready to bend to his supreme leadership (DUCOUDRAY, 1829, p. 109-110, 158-169, 182, 193-208; BUSHNELL, 2004, p. 81-91).

In early 1817 Bolívar fully realized that without the massive support of the free pardo majority, independence could not be won, yet, “el temor de los colores” still haunted him. His confrontation with Mariño and Piar, who both thought that he should assume a political role rather than the top military command, gave him the opportunity to tackle the pardo threat, as his response to their challenge varied according to their race. Whereas he tamed with geographical relocation the white aristocrat Mariño, he offered Piar a passport to leave. Many of Piar’s dragons then deserted, but Piar stayed, allowing Bolívar to have him tried for sedition and to annihilate him as his most serious rival in the struggle for military leadership. Piar was sentenced to death for allegedly planning a conspiracy against the principles of equality, liberty and independence at the basis of the patriot movement (DUCOUDRAY, 1829, p. 208-216; THIBAUD, 2003, p. 302-308, 317-319).

In his October 1817 address to justify the death sentence decided by the military court appointed by him, Bolívar accused Piar of being a foreigner, a poor military strategist, a promoter of anarchy, a tyrant, a profiteer, a profaner, a

conspirator, and a deserter. His principal accusation, however, was that Piar had proclaimed "los principios odiosos de la guerra de colores para destruir así la igualdad que desde el día glorioso de nuestra insurrección hasta este momento ha sido base fundamental." In order to prevent Venezuelan pardos' identification with the condemned general, Bolívar astutely insisted that Piar was born abroad from a Canarian father and a foreign mother, a mother he supposedly rejected for "no ser aquella respectable mujer del color claro que él había heredado de su padre." In other words, he alleged that Piar had no pride for his African roots and only valued his Spanish ancestry. According to Bolívar, this was all the more criminal since Piar had benefited from republican equality by being promoted to a rank that exceeded the level of his merits, whereas Spain continued to deny full citizenship to Africans and their full and mixed descendants<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, Piar owed his republican equality to the white, wealthy and noble creoles who initiated the Venezuelan revolution and voluntarily gave up all their privileges to promote "los sagrados derechos del hombre" and the freedom of their own enslaved property. Bolívar ended by expressing his conviction that Venezuelans knew better than to follow Piar's criminal designs, and concluded: "El general Piar [...] se ha puesto fuera de la ley: su destrucción es un deber y su destructor un bienhechor" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 2, p. 1101-1106).

Thus, after his return from Haiti, if Bolívar considered slave emancipation as the best antidote to slave revolt, he militated for a discrete legal equality comprising the abolition of racial privileges, racial integration into the liberation army under creole centralized leadership, and the promotion of the bravest nonwhite soldiers to officer ranks as the best means to prevent democratic "anarchy," majority rule, or a pardo takeover. As the troops showed restlessness after the execution of Piar, Bolívar shrewdly entrusted

their discipline to another pardo, José Padilla, from Riohacha in New Granada, whom he promoted to navy captain (or colonel) (TORRES, 1990, p. 44-50). Two months later, Bolívar issued a law that stipulated the distribution of part of the property taken from peninsulares or royalist creoles to officers and soldiers risking their lives for the country's freedom. Although the scale of the land's value ranged from 25 000 pesos for a general in chief to 6 000 pesos for a captain and only 500 pesos for a soldier, the decree showed his concern for the economic future of the mostly nonwhite rank and file<sup>5</sup>. But simultaneously, in his first ruling on suffrage, Bolívar restricted the right to choose the electors of the municipality of Angostura to the "padres de familia vecinos" of the city who could read and write, thus excluding the mostly nonwhite illiterate majority (BOLÍVAR, 1961, p. 87-92). More profoundly, he continued to believe that pardo men identified more with their race than their fatherland. As a result, after the execution of Piar Bolívar anxiously kept in check all military men of African descent who, through their higher rank, challenged the colonial socioracial hierarchy. This confronted him with a dilemma: his beliefs in the necessity of legal equality to consolidate the republic led him to promote a few men of color, such as Padilla, to higher military positions, yet as soon as these men acquired power and popularity, he suspected them of racial conspiracy. Indeed, in 1828 Padilla was executed at Bolívar's orders for the same reasons as Piar (HELG, 2003).

In his long and tortuous speech at the inauguration of the Congress of Angostura on 15 February 1819, Bolívar (1947, v. 2, p. 1132-1155) did not pronounce the words "pardos" and "colores." But the anarchy and the tyranny he repeatedly presented as the evils threatening the young republic were code words for a takeover by the free pardo majority in Venezuela. He lamented that the Spanish yoke had not prepared the "pueblo americano" for self-government. At the same time he claimed that democracy was

<sup>4</sup> The 1812 Constitution of the Spanish monarchy limited apportionment and the rights of citizenship to "Spaniards who on both sides draw their origin in the Spanish dominions of both hemispheres," purposely excluding free Africans and their full or mixed descendants (BARRERAS, 1940, p. 5-6). Legal restrictions on free persons of African origin in the Spanish colonies lasted until 1876.

<sup>5</sup> After the end of the war, several generals and many officers benefited from land and hacienda redistribution and became caudillos. However, few soldiers got small plots, many received instead vouchers of little value, and most got nothing at all, despite Bolívar's insistence (LYNCH, 2006, p. 147, 156-159).



the most perfect form of government, and that liberty and equality had been achieved in Venezuela: “Constituyéndose en una República Democrática, [Venezuela] proscribió la Monarquía, las distinciones, la nobleza, los fueros, los privilegios: declaró los derechos del hombre, la Libertad de obrar, de pensar, de hablar y de escribir” (*ibidem*).

However, in Bolívar’s eyes, a federalist democracy on the United States’ model was only adapted to U.S. people’s exceptional qualities and could not be replicated in Venezuela, due the low level of education and the mixed origins of its population. In 1819, he insisted on the need to invent a system of government corresponding to the specificity of his countrymen: “Tengamos presente que nuestro Pueblo no es el Europeo, ni el Americano del Norte, que más bien es un compuesto de África y de América, que una emanación de la Europa; pues que hasta la España misma, deja de ser Europea por su sangre africana, por sus Instituciones, y por su carácter. Es imposible asignar con propiedad, a qué familia humana pertenecemos. La mayor parte del indígena se ha aniquilado, el Europeo se ha mezclado con el Americano y con el Africano, y éste se ha mezclado con el Indio y con el Europeo. Nacidos todos del seno de una misma Madre, nuestros Padres diferentes en origen y en sangre, son extranjeros, y todos difieren visiblemente en la epidermis; esta semejanza trae un reato de la mayor trascendencia” (*ibidem*).

This obligation of atonement for the sinful origin of Spanish America (“reato”) required a system of government that would prevent the rapid dislocation of this “heterogeneous society.” Political equality was a key component of the solution, Bolívar acknowledged; but to ignore the profound physical and moral inequality existing between Venezuelan individuals would only prompt disasters. Therefore he corrected the British-inspired form of government presented in his letters from Jamaica: now the bicameral legislative power would comprise a House of Representatives elected by enfranchised adult men, and the hereditary Senate would be a sort of House of Lords, not made up of nobles but, for the first generation, of the most talented and virtuous patriots elected by the Representatives, and later on by their descendents who would be trained in a special college. In Bolívar’s words, the senators would be “una raza de hombres

virtuosos, prudentes y esforzados que superando todos los obstáculos, han fundado la República a costa de los más heroicos sacrificios,” and would transmit their virtues to their sons. They would act as arbitrators between the easily influenced popular masses and the Executive Power; they would be the warrants of the perpetuity of the republic. As for the Executive, it should rest entirely on a president elected by the active citizens of the Congress – not for life, as he had envisioned in 1815 – and on his ministers with broad centralized powers in order to maintain social order and to forge a united nation.

Undoubtedly, the “República Democrática” Bolívar designed in 1819 aimed at maintaining Venezuela’s socioracial hierarchy and safeguarding white creole patriots’ political domination through the hereditary Senate. This seemed to him all the more vital now that, with victory in sight, the number and percentage of whites would shrink after the departure of peninsulares and creole royalists. An indication of his preference for whites in political positions was his disparaging remark about Bernardo Rivadavia, the only patriot leader from Buenos Aires with some African ancestry: “La nota de Rivadavia [...] es abominable, de una redacción de Guinea” (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 506).

After his election as the president of the Republic of Colombia in 1821 and the slow restoration of peace in the country, Bolívar worried even more than before about the possibility of a race war launched by Venezuelan and New Granadan pardos. He struggled to find a way to restore the pre-1810 socioracial hierarchy despite the fact that independence had been won principally by men of color. Postwar society was, according to him, a “caos asombroso de patriotas, godos, egoístas, blancos, pardos, venezolanos, cundinamarqueses, federalistas, centralistas, republicanos, aristócratas, buenos y malos” that would be difficult to rule, he told Antonio Nariño (*idem*, p. 551). As he wrote in 1821 to another penfriend, “estamos sobre un abismo, o más bien sobre un volcán pronto a hacer su explosión.” The llaneros, who began by contributing to the defeat of the first and second Venezuelan republics and then secured the patriot victory, now represented a real danger: “Se creen muy beneméritos, y humillados y miserables, y sin esperanza de coger el fruto de las *adquisiciones*

*de su lanza*. Son llaneros determinados, ignorantes y que nunca se creen iguales a los otros hombres que saben más o parecen mejor" (*idem*, p. 560).

In late 1821, after he left Vice-President Santander in charge of the executive in order to carry on the war against Spain in Ecuador and Peru, Bolívar wrote many letters expressing his worry about the socioracial order in peacetime. During the war, he reflected, creole patriots had needed men to fight the Spaniards and they had recruited "blacks, *zambos*, *mulattos*, and whites" as long as they were brave. The only means to reward the most heroic ones had been military promotion, even though their only merit was often "brutal strength." But what has been useful during the war now imperilled the peace (LYNCH, 2006, p. 108). Moreover, he complained, the delegates writing the Constitution in Cúcuta only knew Bogotá and other cities and imagined themselves in Buenos Aires, without being aware that the next act in the independence process would be a repetition of "Guarico" (*i.e.* Haiti). He warned Santander, no doubt including him among the "gentlemen" he criticized: "Esos caballeros [...] no han hecho sus miradas sobre los caribes del Orinoco, sobre los pastores del Apure, sobre los marineros de Maracaibo, sobre los bogas del Magdalena, sobre los bandidos de Patía, sobre los indómitos pastusos, sobre los guajibos de Casanare y sobre todas las hordas salvajes de África y de América que, como gamos, recorren las soledades de Colombia" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 565).

The Caribbean context contributed to the Libertador's anxiety. In 1818 Pétion had died; his designated successor, Jean-Pierre Boyer, became Haiti's new President (1818-1843) and occupied the Spanish east of Hispaniola, imposing the abolition of slavery there. As the 1821 Constitution of the Republic of Colombia did not free the slaves and thus only partially fulfilled Bolívar's promise to Pétion, some politicians began to fear that Haiti would try to incite Afro-Caribbean Venezuelans and New Granadans to rebel. Rumors of veterans agitating "la cuestión de los colores" multiplied (RESTREPO, 1954, p. 222). Moreover, events in Cartagena seemed to confirm Bolívar's fears. In effect, as I have studied elsewhere (HELG, 2003), in November 1824, the only pardo general in New Granada, the already mentioned José Padilla, issued an incendiary broadside, "Al

respectable público de Cartagena", in which he warned: "La espada que empuñé contra el rey de España, esa espada con que he dado a la patria días de gloria, esa misma espada me sostendrá contra cualquiera que intente abatir a mi clase, y degradar a mi persona" (PADILLA, 1824).

Building on his experience in the royal Spanish Navy, Padilla had fought on the patriot side since 1812, winning major battles against Spain in Venezuela and on New Granada's Caribbean Coast, notably the naval battle of Maracaibo Bay in 1823 that sealed the independence of Venezuela. As a result, he gained broad popularity in the region. However, in a decision partly due to the fear of a pardo takeover, after 1821 the government in Bogotá did not appoint Padilla as commander in chief of the new department of Magdalena, but as commander of the Navy in Cartagena, a position below his expectations. Moreover, the creole aristocracy of the city submitted him to humiliating racial discriminations. In his broadside, Padilla claimed that those who had brought independence were not "las *antiguas familias* [...] que por sus atrocidades contra los desgraciados indios, su rapiña, su usura y su monopolio amontonaron riquezas" and now "minan el santo edificio de la libertad y de la igualdad del pueblo, para levantar sobre sus ruinas el tablado de la ambición, y sustituir a las formas republicanas las de sus antiguos privilegios y dominación exclusiva" (*ibidem*; original emphasis). They were those from his (pardo) class. Padilla's claims alarmed Cartagena's elite as well as Bolívar, who, from Lima in April 1825, warned Santander of "el espíritu que [Padilla] tiene con respecto al gobierno y al sistema [...] Yo creo que este negocio merece muy bien la atención del gobierno, no para dar palos, sino para tomar medidas que eviten en lo futuro los desastres horrorosos que el mismo Padilla prevé. La igualdad legal no es bastante para el espíritu que tiene el pueblo, que quiere que haya igualdad absoluta, tanto en lo público como en lo doméstico; y después querrá la pardocracia, que es la inclinación natural y única, para exterminio después de la clase privilegiada. Esto requiere, digo, grandes medidas, que no me cansaré de recomendar" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 1076).

Apparently, this is the first time that Bolívar used the term of *pardocracia* to define pardo takeover followed by their massacre of whites.

In this letter to the vice-president, he expressed his unwavering conviction that equality – and by extension, the power of prominent pardos – should have limits, otherwise people of African descent would dominate and annihilate whites. Yet, he did not sanction Padilla then, nor did he define the measures he estimated to be necessary to prevent pardocracia. But shortly after Bolívar opposed a joint Gran Colombian — Mexican expedition to liberate Cuba from Spain, in which Padilla would have played a chief role as head of the Navy in Cartagena, on the grounds that it would lead to “el establecimiento de una nueva república de Haití” in Cuba (*idem*, p. 1097).

In June 1826, Bolívar’s concerns for pardocracia became obsessive after he unveiled in Peru an alleged Spanish plan to invade Venezuela and New Granada and he received alarming letters from his sister, María Antonia Bolívar, mentioning slave and pardo unrest in Venezuela. From Lima, he also began to fear that Padilla would emulate in Caribbean New Granada the white general Páez, who had launched a massive rebellion in Venezuela (*idem*, p. 1323, p. 1365, p. 1371)<sup>6</sup>. Increasingly, race, conflated with class, dominated Bolívar’s social thinking. It was in this context that he wrote the pessimistic assessment cited at the opening of this essay, in which he described his fellow citizens as “el compuesto abominable de esos tigres cazadores que vinieron a la América a derramarle su sangre y a encastar con las víctimas antes de sacrificarlas, para mezclar después los frutos espúreos de estos enlaces con los frutos de esos esclavos arrancados del África” and predicted “el bello ideal de Haití”. However, Bolívar continued, it was impossible to return to the order Spain had maintained for so long or to build a new order through more laws, and it was dangerous to entrust it only to the army. “Guinea y más Guinea tendremos; y esto no lo digo de chanza, el que escape con su cara blanca será bien afortunado” (*idem*, p. 1390-1391).

<sup>6</sup> Padilla briefly took power in Cartagena in March 1828 to defend Santander and the 1821 constitution against Bolívar’s will to impose his Bolivian constitution. Imprisoned in Bogotá, he was entangled in the attempted murder of Bolívar, tried and executed in October 1828. Shortly after, Bolívar repented having ordered the execution of Piar and Padilla chiefly because they were pardos (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 2, p. 505-508).

## V. INDIANS AND THE LAND

Whereas the Libertador focussed his anxieties on Afro-descendants, he seldom referred to Amerindians in his speeches and correspondence. One of his earliest mentions of them appears in a letter addressed to the British governor of Curaçao in October 1813 stating that: “El español feroz [...] señaló su entrada en el Nuevo Mundo con la muerte y la desolación: hizo desaparecer de la tierra su casta primitiva; y cuando su saña rabiosa no halló más seres que destruir, se volvió contra los propios hijos que tenía en el suelo que había usurpado” (*idem*, p. 64).

By declaring that Spanish conquistadores were the original usurpers of the land and that they had rapidly exterminated the Native Americans, Bolívar silenced the existence of the latter in the 1810s and legitimized the landownership by creoles, whom he described as the new victims of Spanish barbarism. Here and elsewhere, he refused to acknowledge the presence of Indians and painted their territories as lifeless deserts, anticipating the name of the “Conquest of the Desert” given to Gen. Julio A. Roca’s genocidal wars against Argentina’s Native peoples begun in 1878. Although Bolívar never planned to eliminate the indigenous population, his denial of their existence and historical agency in Venezuela’s and New Granada’s early wars for independence was in sharp contradiction with a reality he knew well.

First, from the beginning of the struggle generated by Ferdinand VII’s abdication, Venezuelan Indians and mestizos played an active role in the turmoil – though in less important numbers than pardos and blacks due to their lower percentage in the population. Like many Afro-Venezuelans, in 1812 Indians turned against the mantuanos’ elitist First Republic. Among them was Juan de los Reyes Vargas, the son of a Canarian father and a Native American mother from Siquisique, in the south of Coro. In 1810, “el Indio Reyes Vargas,” as he was called, mobilized dozens of Indians and mestizos from his region to fight against the royalists in Coro. By 1812, the patriots had only promoted him to the rank of captain when some white creoles with less military achievements received higher promotions. Mantuanos’ haughtiness revolted him and his indigenous and mestizo followers. Reyes Vargas and his army of 300 riflemen y 100 archers switched sides and contributed to the fall of the First Republic in 1812

– a blow Bolívar could not have ignored (MADARIAGA, 1952, p. 164, 214-220). Moreover, shortly after “el indio”’s defection, Bolívar campaigned in Santa Marta Province, where he witnessed direct Native American participation in the conflict. Both the Wayúu from the Guajira Peninsula and several indigenous communities in Ciénaga played a decisive part in the royalist destiny of Riohacha and Santa Marta in early 1813. In the first case, the simple threat of a Wayúu intervention in the defense of the city contributed to Bolívar’s decision not to attack Riohacha. In the case of Santa Marta, whereas the surrounding indigenous villages did little to prevent its storming by proindependence soldiers and European mercenaries, their military participation was crucial in the liberation of the royalist port city from these brutal occupiers. In taking side, the region’s Indians realized that the Spanish king was their best protector against creole and foreign warriors eager to punish, sack, rape, and forcibly enroll them in their “patriot” armies (HELG, 2004, p. 143-144).

Nevertheless, in his first letter to the editor of *The Royal Gazette* published in mid-August 1815, Bolívar was silent on these facts and continued to imply that Amerindians had been exterminated. He drew a parallel between the on-going massacres committed by the Spanish army under General Morillo in the Cartagena Province and the bloody horrors of the conquest of Peru in the sixteenth century that left “las más opulentas ciudades y los más fértiles campos reducidos a horribas soledades y a desiertos espantosos” (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 152-153). He multiplied the descriptions of Spain’s atrocious destruction and overexploitation of the Native population, repeating the accusations of the Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas. Two dominant images of Bolívar’s “indios” emerged: either they had completely disappeared as a result of the conquest, or they formed scattered and peaceful families without ambition on the fringes of the nation. Only one original Native people deserved his admiration as surviving freedom fighters: the Araucanians of Chile (*idem*, p. 160-161, 179).

After his landing from Haiti, in 1817 Bolívar and other leaders attempted to recruit Indians in the Orinoco Basin with little success. Among the few who joined, probably under duress, most deserted. Desertion was not specific to Native

Americans but widespread among all troops. At the beginning, Bolívar seemed to have only ordered the ruthless repression of non-Indian deserters, but later they too were likely to be executed, harshly punished, or deported to far-away units if caught. As he had done with the pardos and llaneros following the royalists, he made no attempt at understanding indigenous motivations.

However, in his address to the 1819 Congress of Angostura, Bolívar recognized that independence posed the problem of who would be the rightful owners of the land after the patriot victory over the 1815 Spanish invaders: “Nosotros ni aún conservamos los vestigios de lo que fue en otro tiempo: no somos Europeos, no somos Indios, sino una especie media entre los Aborígenes y los Españoles. Americanos por nacimiento y Europeos por derechos, nos hallamos en el conflicto de disputar a los naturales los títulos de posesión y de mantenernos en el país que nos vio nacer, contra la oposición de los invasores; así nuestro caso es el más extraordinario y complicado” (*idem*, v. 2, p. 1134-1135).

He resolved the conflict between the *jus soli* and the *jus sanguinis* through several means. First, in Bolívar’s opinion, the proclamation of equality before the law and the end of privileges put Europeans born in America and their descendants on equal footing with “los naturales” (aborigine peoples) regarding the ownership of the land, although Indians belonged to the vast majority of passive citizens unable to influence the republic’s laws. Second, as all vestiges of the pre-Columbian past had disappeared and most of America’s original peoples had been exterminated by the initial Spanish conquerors, the land of Venezuela and New Granada now rightly belonged to those americanos who cultivated and exploited it. The intruders, the usurpers of the land were the peninsulares, not the white creoles or the free people of mixed descent who encroached on indigenous *resguardos* (communal lands). Moreover, the Spanish Crown’s and peninsulares’ lands had become “Bienes Nacionales” to be distributed among the military liberators according to their rank: Bolívar never thought of returning them to their original – supposedly exterminated – owners. And third, Bolívar supported active mestizaje: “para sacar de este caos nuestra



naciente República, [hay que] “fundir la masa del pueblo en un todo [...]. La sangre de nuestros Ciudadanos es diferente, mezclémosla para unirla”. As a result, indigenous peoples would dissolve themselves in the popular Colombian mass, he declared in 1819 to the Congress (*idem*, p. 1140, 1149, 1153).

As he left Angostura to conduct his military campaign southwards, Bolívar’s correspondence still rarely mentioned Native Americans. In May 1820, he did issue a decree protecting “los naturales” in the highlands around Bogotá from illegal appropriation of their *resguardos*, forced labor and abuse by *hacendados*, settlers, and clergymen. But at the same time as his decree theoretically returned the land property to the Indians, it divided their *resguardos* into private plots according to the size of each family; it also submitted them to the tribute and the authority of state agents, leading to the forced displacement and indigence of most Indians (BOLÍVAR, 1961, p. 194-197). As for central Venezuela, the hundreds of Indians and mestizos under “el indio” Juan de los Reyes Vargas fought in the name of Ferdinand VII until October 1820, when the Indian leader switched allegiance again. Reyes Vargas issued a manifesto announcing that he and his men now were Colombian patriots ready to die for the freedom of their fatherland. As Bolívar desperately needed men to compensate for the numerous desertions, death and disease in his troops, he welcomed this re-conversion without questioning Reyes Vargas’s patriotism: “Es un diablo el tal indio, y podremos sacar mucho partido de él”, he commented to Santander (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 506). Indeed, not long after, Bolívar ordered Reyes Vargas and his men to launch diverting attacks against the Spanish army in western Venezuela, which played a crucial role in the patriots’ victory at the battle of Carabobo. Still, some patriots resented Bolívar’s confidence in this fresh convert and assassinated Reyes Vargas in 1823, probably on Páez’s instigation (LYNCH, 2006, p. 137).

Bolívar’s 1820 decree anticipated the Indian legislation voted by the Congress of Cúcuta in 1821. According to the latter, Indians – now euphemistically called “indígenas” – would hopefully reach the equality the 1821 constitution granted them through the legal suppression of the tribute and personal service; the end of the

practice of public whippings; the division and privatization of their *resguardos*; the establishment of elementary schools in their villages; the admission of a few young Indians to colleges and seminaries; external influence, and *mestizaje* resulting from interracial marriages (REPÚBLICA DE COLOMBIA, 1823, p. 14-15). These policies were consistent with the process of land encroachment and *mestizaje* happening in central New Granada. Nevertheless, in many regions of Gran Colombia, Indians continued to live on remote autonomous territories, whereas others actively supported the royalist strongholds for a variety of reasons ranging from the protection of their freedom, their participation in contraband networks with the British and Dutch Caribbean, or their opposition to creole landlords.

In late 1821, Bolívar initiated his southern New Granada campaign from Bogotá to Quito, encountering fierce resistance in the royalist strongholds of Popayán, Pasto and Patía. There, Bolívar and his men faced an ever resurrecting opposition from the Catholic hierarchy, the peninsulares, part of the creole elite, and the general population made of mestizos and indigenous pueblos in the highlands, and *pardos* in Patía. To make matters worse, the patriot army lacked food, arms and ammunition as well as money to buy provisions from the peasantry – which led to discouragement, massive desertion, disease, and death. Nonetheless, although Bolívar repeatedly complained about “los bandidos de Patía” and “los indómitos pastusos”, he did not refer to them in racial terms, but in social ones: “Tanto el bajo pueblo del Cauca como el de Popayán son enemigos de servir [la independencia]; pero los ricos muy recomendables” (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 635).

As studied by Zuluaga (1993) and Valencia (2008), the loyalism of these men and women was principally motivated by their opposition to the region’s large land and mine *hacendados* and slaveowners who exploited them – and supported independence.

In the provinces of Riohacha and Santa Marta as well, Indians continued to be active royalists; together with pro-Spanish guerrillas and soldiers, they fought restlessly against independence until late 1823, when the patriots overcame them. Many supporters of Spain were killed; others fled to Venezuela. Still others, especially among the

Indians, were deported to fight with Bolívar for the independence of Peru (HELG, 2004, p. 160-163).

As for the independent indigenous nations living in New Granada's and Venezuela's vast, unconquered periphery, there was hardly anything Bolívar or the government could do to bring them into the republic as equal citizens. Although on several occasions the government discussed how to proceed with the "indios bárbaros" smuggling in the Guajira Peninsula and the Darién, it opted for the status quo, and not just for lack of funding. In effect, on the one hand, the Gran Colombian authorities feared that any action against the Indians would alienate them and incite them to launch a war armed by Spain. On the other hand, the government could not afford to displease Great Britain by attempting to curb the contraband trade between the British Caribbean and the Wayúu and Kuna Indians (*idem*, p. 172-173).

Bolívar's insistence on the quasi disappearance of the Indians after the beginning of the Conquest and his lack of mention of them as distinct protagonists in the independence wars remain enigmatic. Despite indigenous armed contribution to the resistance of several royalist strongholds in Gran Colombia, Bolívar stuck to his portrait of Indians as backward but docile victims of Spanish colonialism. At the same time, he increasingly perceived any gathering of individuals of African descent as a potential rebellion against the white minority. Quite likely, by silencing Native Americans' historical agency, he sought to legitimize the sovereignty of the republic on all the lands formerly included in the vice-royalty of New Granada and the captaincy of Venezuela at the expenses of their Indian dwellers.

## VI. THE MOST PERFECT FORM OF GOVERNMENT

By 1826, comfortably settled in the Palace of La Magdalena, near Lima, but increasingly fearing chaos and parricida, Bolívar announced that he had designed the most perfect political system of government to cure all the ills typical of the young, multiracial, and mostly illiterate Spanish American nations: his project of a Bolivian Constitution. To Gen. Antonio José de Sucre, he described it as a "perfección casi inespable [...] divina [...] la obra del genio" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 1, p. 1322). His principal means of preventing anarchy was to guarantee civil liberty, personal

security, property, and equality before the law of all Bolivian citizens. In conformity with these principles, slavery was to be abolished and all slaves freed as soon as the Constitution would be published. All hereditary occupations and privileges were banned, but at the same time all properties – thus, lands – were alienable. Although originally designed for the mostly Aymara and Quechua Bolivians, Bolívar's constitutional project made no mention of Indians, indigenous communities, or Native languages. It stated that all individuals born on the national territory were Bolivian and implied that they were Spanish speaking and Catholic, equally subjected to contributions and military service.

Sovereignty emanated from the people but its exercise resided in a complex division of power that represented for Bolívar the culmination of his original political thinking since 1815: the four Powers created by the constitution – Electoral, Legislative, Executive and Judicial. Although this final version of Bolívar's ideal system of government is complex, some points are particularly relevant to understand his vision of society. Although legally equal, citizens continued to be divided in two categories: active and passive. And to qualify as an active citizen, it was necessary to be Bolivian, and to have qualities and skills, regardless of fortune. As he summarized it in a letter to Santander: "El que no sabe escribir, ni paga contribución, ni tiene un oficio conocido, no es ciudadano" (*idem*, p. 1254). In 1826 in Bolivia, probably no more than 3% of the population qualified to be active citizens; in Gran Colombia, perhaps 5%. At any rate, as Bolívar thought that popular elections would only produce disorder and corruption, he restricted the Electoral Power, or democracy, to the active citizens who had the right to vote for one Elector to represent every ten of them. These Electors were to meet once a year to elect the members of the Legislative Power, the mayors and justices as well as most public servants at the local, regional, and national levels. The Legislative Power itself was divided into three bodies, with increasing requirements in terms of age for their members. First, the Tribunate was in charge of the interior, communications, transport, commerce, and war. Second, the Senate was responsible for all matters of justice; it also closely supervised the Catholic Church (including the diffusion of papal doctrine). And third, the Censors, elected for life, protected

civil liberties, arts and sciences, and guaranteed the respect of the constitution by the other Powers.

The Executive Power was headed by a President for Life, who was elected the first time by the three bodies of the Legislative Power, and who then chose alone his successor. In Bolívar's mind, "el presidente vitalicio" was his most important invention to protect the republic from both tyranny and anarchy – a proposal that in fact dated back to his 1815 Jamaican exile. The executive also comprised a Vice-President appointed by the President with the approval of the Legislative Power, and three Secretaries, respectively of government and foreign relations; finance; and war and the navy. Whereas the Censors could initiate procedures of impeachment against the Vice-President and the Secretaries, the President for Life was untouchable. Finally, the Judicial Power applied the laws at all levels, from the districts to the Supreme Tribunal (*idem*, v. 2, p. 1220-1229).

The irony of Bolívar's project of constitution, which he vainly attempted to impose on Gran Colombia between 1826 and 1828 (HELG, 2004, p. 202-206), was that it was inspired not only by the British parliamentary monarchy but explicitly by the 1816 Constitution of Haiti, a Haiti he presented for this purpose as "la República más democrática del mundo". In his May 1826 speech to the Constituent Assembly of Bolivia, he said: "El Presidente de la República viene a ser en nuestra Constitución como el Sol que, firme en su centro, da vida al Universo. Esta suprema Autoridad debe ser perpetua; porque en los sistemas sin jerarquías se necesita más que en otros un punto fijo alrededor del cual giren los Magistrados y los ciudadanos [...]. Para Bolivia, este punto es el Presidente vitalicio [...] Su duración es la de los Presidentes de Haití. Yo he tomado para Bolivia el Ejecutivo de la República más democrática del mundo" (BOLÍVAR, 1947, v. 2, p. 1223).

Bolívar clarified this last statement: since its independence Haiti had been in continuing turmoil, being successively an empire, a kingdom, and a republic, until "el ilustre Pétion" brought salvation. Haitians trusted Pétion, whom they had democratically elected, "y los destinos de Haití no vacilaron más. Nombrado Pétion Presidente vitalicio con facultades para elegir el sucesor, ni la muerte de este grande hombre, ni la sucesión

del Nuevo Presidente, han causado el menor peligro en el Estado: todo ha marchado bajo el digno Boyer, en la calma de un reino legítimo. Prueba triunfante de que un *Presidente vitalicio, con derecho para elegir el sucesor*, es la inspiración más sublime en el orden republicano" (*ibidem*).

Interestingly enough, Bolívar openly referred to Pétion and Haiti in Bolivia, a nation named after him to celebrate his role in its independence process, but whose population was indigenous (and passive citizens) in its immense majority. Although the comparison he made in his speech between the president for life and the sun around which the universe was organized might have alluded to the pre-colonial Inca Empire, he never referred to the Aymara and Quechua Bolivians. As previously, Bolívar continued to minimize Amerindians' historical agency – despite their demographic importance and the fact that several regions they controlled were the last ones to accept the new republican power.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

Evidently, from 1813 to 1826, Bolívar's ideas remained fundamentally shaped by Caribbean social representations. Moreover, the 1811-1814 war in Venezuela, in which he witnessed the fragility of the mantuano elite against the numerous pardos, blacks, and llaneros led by royalists, left a permanent impact on him. From mid-1816 on, he believed that emancipation and legal equality would satisfy the expectations of slaves and free people of color. But after 1821 he discovered that many pardos envisioned equality as full participation in the republic, not as a passive citizenship limited to the obligation of paying taxes and serving in the army's rank and file. By then, over a decade of military command over popular troops had given him an acute understanding that his socioracial class was a tiny minority surrounded by a large nonwhite population. He also sensed that all the men often forcibly mobilized in the patriot army who had survived the war expected concrete gains than legal equality and manumission for the conscripted slaves. And this was what he dreaded so much, as he believed that it would produce chaos and tyranny, *i.e.*, a socioracial revolution. Therefore, his 1826 project of Bolivian constitution embraced the absolute and immediate abolition of slavery and restated its commitment to equality. Simultaneously, however, it sealed off popular access to political

representation and power by promoting a two-edged, active versus passive citizenship. It also tightly secured the control of the four Powers in the hands of a very small caste of creoles and a President for Life charged to select his successor in order to secure socioracial order after independence.

Whereas fear of Bolívar's dictatorship largely explains why he failed to convince the new political elite that his constitutional project for

Bolivia was the panacea for Gran Colombia, few elite creoles opposed his conception of citizenship. Moreover, his proposal to abolish slavery encountered no support<sup>7</sup>. As hierarchical as it was, Bolívar's republic remained too free and egalitarian for most creole leaders and explains its longlasting appeal.

<sup>7</sup> In reality, slavery was only abolished in 1852 in New Granada, 1854 in Venezuela, and 1861 in Bolivia.

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SIMÓN BOLÍVAR'S REPUBLIC: A BULWARK AGAINST THE "TYRANNY" OF THE MAJORITY

*Aline Helg*

Based on Bolívar's speeches, decrees, and correspondence as well as on Gran Colombia's constitutions and laws, this essay examines the tensions within Bolívar's vision of Venezuela's and New Granada's society produced by his republican, yet authoritarian and hierarchical ideas, his concern for keeping the lower classes of African descent in check, and his denial of Indian agency. It shows that even in Peru, Bolívar's main concern was to prevent the racial war and social disintegration that allegedly slaves and free Afro-descended people would bring to the newly independent nations. To prevent such an outcome, he advocated all along legal equality through the abolition of the colonial privileges and, since mid-1816, the abolition of slavery, but simultaneously the preservation of the monopoly of power by the white creole elite. He secured the perpetuation of the socioracial hierarchy inherited from Spain by a two-edged citizenship: an active citizenship restricted to a tiny literate and skilled minority and an inactive citizenship for the immense majority of (mostly nonwhite) men.

**KEYWORDS:** *Simón Bolívar; Independence; Citizenship; Nation Building; Race Relations; Slavery.*

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LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE SIMÓN BOLÍVAR: UN PILIER CONTRE LA « TYRANNIE » DE LA MAJORITÉ

*Aline Helg*

Basé sur les discours, décrets et correspondance de Bolívar, bien comme sur les constitutions et lois de la Grande Colombie, cet article vérifie les tensions par rapport à la vision de Bolívar sur les sociétés du Venezuela et de la Nouvelle-Grenade, produite par ses idées républicaines, autoritaires et même hiérarchiques ; ainsi comme sa préoccupation de maintenir les classes les plus basses d'ascendance africaine incapables d'agir librement, et son refus de l'agence indienne. On montre que même au Pérou, le principal intérêt de Bolívar c'était de soi-disant prévenir la guerre raciale et la désintégration que des esclaves et des afro-descendants en apporteraient aux nouvelles nations indépendantes. Pour prévenir que cela en arrive, il a toujours prêché l'égalité légale par le biais de l'abolition des privilèges coloniaux et, à partir de 1816, l'abolition de l'esclavage, mais simultanément, la préservation du monopole du pouvoir par l'élite créole blanche. Il a assuré la perpétuation de la hiérarchie socio-raciale héritée de l'Espagne par une double citoyenneté: une citoyenneté active limitée par une petite minorité lettrée et compétente, et une citoyenneté inactive pour l'immense majorité d'hommes (la plupart n'étant pas blancs).

**MOTS-CLÉS:** *Simón Bolívar; indépendance; citoyenneté; construction de la nation; relations de race; esclavage.*

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