

The Venezuelan Sesquicentennial Celebration Publications

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The Venezuelan Sesquicentennial Celebration Publications. 20 vols. Madrid, n.d. Ediciones Guadarrama, S.L. Biblioteca de la Academia nacional de la Historia. Sesquicentenario de la Independencia, Caracas, Venezuela, 1959.

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The *Academia Nacional de la Historia* resolved to celebrate Venezuela's Sesquicentennial by beginning an editorial program which would fully express how Venezuelans were thinking during the period of the First Republic. The *Junta de Gobierno* (1958) cooperated with the *Academia* by its decree dated June 18, 1958, which ordered an official celebration of the Sesquicentennial and commissioned the *Academia* "para que prepare y organice un programa conmemorativo de índole histórica. . . ."

Thus it was possible for the *Academia* to publish the above listed twenty volumes, eighteen of which are official texts, acts of congress, constitutions (national and provincial), contemporary propaganda, and reproductions of important periodicals. The last two volumes are a reprint of C. Parra Pérez's outstanding *Historia de la primera República de Venezuela*, first published in 1939, but for many years out of print. This reviewer is especially pleased to see that an index of names and places has been added to this history. Only two other volumes of the twenty (VIII and IX) have such an index.

The *Academia* could not have selected two finer scholars than Pedro Pablo Barnola, S. J., and Ramón Díaz Sánchez to write the preliminary studies for *Textos oficiales* (I, II) and *Libro de actas* (III, IV). Like Thucydides, these two historians have been concerned about causes. The results of their research will be of great interest to scholars in America and Europe.

Father Barnola points out that the independence movement, according to proponents of the *tesis hispanista*, was due to an internal political crisis ("no head for the crown") and solved according to traditional principles of Spanish law. The Spanish American revolution was the finale of an evolution which began with the establishment

of the first colonies. It developed slowly but steadily through two centuries. Its origins are to be found in the professorships of philosophy, theology, and law that shaped Hispanoamerica when it was young, and in the writings of Spanish intellectuals. In these are found the great principle of the "Social Contract"—basis of the mechanics of revolution. When the Spanish government reached its dotage, it automatically returned sovereignty to the people. *Hispanistas* say this was the sole cause of the 1810 revolutions.

More liberal writers attribute a predominant influence to the doctrines of the encyclopedists and to the seductive magnetism of the principles of the French Revolution. The famous slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," and *The Rights of Man and the Citizen* circulated widely in America and electrified thinkers of the New World. Their impact upon men deprived of rights was the death blow to the peninsular regime.

Díaz Sánchez writes more specifically of Venezuela which had always had a subordinate character, a scarcity of precious metals, *un pobrísimo nivel de cultura*, and such a somber life that it was almost ascetic. There was no printing press until 1808, and then it was introduced as an instrument of Spanish political propaganda. The absence of building stone prevented architectural development such as occurred in more richly endowed colonies. The eighteenth century was already far advanced before there was any significant development in art and then it was influenced by France, not Spain. All these factors spurred Venezuelans to criticize and rebel.

The subterranean ideological current came to a head in the Declaration of Independence, a glorious and extraordinary moment in the long and accidental road to national revolution. Leaders were far from being uncultured and irresponsible. University men for the most part, some belonged to the Church, others to the courts, and others to education. Still others served in the armies and in various branches of the economy.

Influenced by the intellectual atmosphere of the eighteenth century, these men synthesized a cultural tradition that had been forming for more than two centuries under peculiar circumstances with elements different from those of more important imperial centers. Two parallel currents advancing at different levels are seen at the moment of separation from Spain. While *señores criollos* and *peninsulares* battled for political and economic domination, *el bajo pueblo* was stirred by its own particular motives. Historians have for the most part focused attention on the directing minority.

Élites criollas distinguished themselves by their initiative and

audacity. When and how was their character formed? Did the eighteenth century ideals alone create in the *mantuanos* that spiritual and mental climate in which emancipation incubated?

By a royal cedula in 1609, Philip III ordered suppression of books introduced into Spanish dominions by heretics because “los Hereges Piratas, con ocasión de las presas y rescates, han tenido alguna comunicación en los Puertos de las Indias, y ésta es muy dañosa a la pureza con que nuestros vasallos creen y tienen la Santa Fé Católica, por los libros heréticos y proposiciones falsas, que esparcen y comunican a gente ignorante.”

This cedula shows the sovereign's concern over the intellectual and moral penetration that was being felt as early as the seventeenth century. Catholic by tradition but curious and disturbed by nature, the creoles, and above all the young ones, listened with interest to what Protestants (Netherlanders) had to say about religion, politics, society, and philosophy. One should not forget that after their independence from Spain the Netherlands became a center par excellence of European culture.

As the seventeenth century passed into the eighteenth, what did the creoles and those blond men talk about—those men who brought such excellent cloth, wine, and cheese and who paid good money for cacao and tobacco? They must have related their own fight against Spanish tyranny and intolerance, their conception of freedom and equality and respect, their schools and universities, their scientists and intellectuals and artists.

Moreover, intellectuals of other countries (Descartes, Scalígero, Voltaire) had found in the free cities of Holland a climate of respect and admiration that had been denied them in their own countries. Creoles and Dutchmen also discussed reformers (those who denounced the evils of the Roman Church). In Erasmus' idea of free will they found the germ of liberalism: “The true Christian,” said Erasmus, “found his strength in the spirit of the scriptures”; that is, not in the spirit of the Spanish inquisitor or champion of medieval imperialism.

Not only heretics but Spanish intellectuals brought revolutionary ideas to America. In the sixteenth century Padre Mariana published radical ideas about the land. He pointed out that the accumulation of vast haciendas by a few men was the principal cause of social disorder: “si se distribuyese más la propiedad, si se procurase templar así los males que habían de nacer forzosamente de romper una comunidad impuesta por la razón y la justicia, no veríamos como ahora crecer numerosas familias de pobres junto a los mismos palacios de los poderosos, en el mismo seno de la abundancia y la riqueza.”

Mariana concluded his revolutionary popular doctrine by saying: "Todo poder que no descansa en la justicia no es un poder legítimo y es de todo punto indudable que no descansa en ella el que no ha recibido su existencia del pueblo o no ha sido a lo menos sancionado por el pueblo."

When liberals in Spain were writing the Constitution of 1812, they thought to win the allegiance of Spanish America by declaring that the New World lands had not been colonies nor dominions but integral parts of the nation. American intellectuals rebutted this with the older concept (that of Padre Mariana), "Sovereignty resides in the people."

Díaz Sánchez has entitled one section of his preliminary study "*El Pueblo y el Nuevo Sentimiento de la Nación.*" Here he explains that a dominant idea in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that of empire—the *metrópoli* and its dominions. In the nineteenth century a new concept was apparent due to reaction against injustice. When this originated cannot be definitely stated but it appeared simultaneously in the white (direct heir of the Spaniard) and in the *pueblo llano* (formed by the amalgam of three pigments).

It was not by chance that the first popular manifestations were in the provinces of Caracas where the Negro element predominated. The Indian had practically disappeared. The Negro had proliferated. His plasticity, *mimetismo*, capacity to adapt to all circumstances, happy nature, *euforia sexual*, vivid imagination—all these caused the *pardo venezolano* to strike his own peculiar blows in the social struggle. Through three centuries a human mosaic had been forming which more and more manifested egalitarian impulses. In 1795, mantuanos presented a series of complaints against a royal cedula by which pardos were to pass as whites as a reward for certain services. Indignant at this invasion of their privileges, mantuanos protested to the monarch, saying: "se franquea a los pardos y se facilita por medio de la dispensación de su baja calidad la instrucción que hasta ahora han carecido y deben carecer en adelante. Hormiguarán las clases de estudiantes mulatos; pretenderán entrar en el Seminario; rematarán y poseerán los oficios concejiles, servirán en las oficinas públicas y de Real Hacienda, tomarán conocimiento en todos los negocios públicos y privados, etc."

Ideas advanced, while prejudices and vested interests tried to detain them. The best proof that the movement for independence included concern of a social character is found in the congressional debates of 1811. In discussing pardos, the question was asked whether or not this was a concern of Congress or of the provinces. Francisco Javier Yanes declared that Congress must decide the question, that it

was just as inconceivable to suppose that some provinces would favor equality of classes and others oppose it as to suppose that Barinas would establish monarchy, Mérida oligarchy, Trujillo theocracy, Cumaná aristocracy, and Caracas democracy. He said: “Los pardos están instruídos, conocen sus derechos, saben que por el nacimiento, por la propiedad, por el matrimonio y por todas las demás razones, son hijos del país; que tienen una patria a quien están obligados a defender, y de quien deben esperar el premio, cuando sus obras lo merecieren.”

When Charles III came to the throne rebellions had already occurred in Venezuela against the *Compañía Guipúzcoana*, and the Family Compact was soon to involve Spain in war against England. These two movements were isolated but succeeding ones united Spanish America in common hopes and ideals. The true revolution began in the last twenty years of the eighteenth century.

Venezuelan mantuanos were thinking in terms of independence in 1781 and 1782. Fifteen years older in 1797, they were cautious during the La Guaira rebellion (perhaps because of the excesses of the French Revolution), and in 1806 they were suspicious of Miranda. Díaz Sánchez gives a brief biography of twenty-three of these men and relates their actions in 1808, 1809, and 1810. Some of them were then in their 80's. It was their sons, the youth of Venezuela, who discreetly guided movements so as not to alarm the timid, the conservatives, and the royalists. This younger generation began to act in 1808. It brought Miranda back to Venezuela, exhumed the ideas of Juan Picornell, and published William Burke's articles.

The problems of the Constituent Congress of 1811 were many. The most difficult one was to give an honest appearance to the oath of allegiance to Ferdinand VII, since plans for independence already existed. There were two aspects of this problem: (1) to create an internal approval for independence and (2) to convince international opinion, especially that of England, that the movement involved inherent rights.

Intense propaganda was spread through Caracas periodicals—especially *El Publicista de Venezuela*, the organ of congress (volume VIII); *El Semanario* (volume IX); and *Gaceta de Caracas* (source of volumes X, XI, XII).

Agusto Mijares in his preliminary study for vols. X and XI, and C. Felice Cardot in his preliminary study for vol. XII, make clear the role of the Irishman William Burke who arrived in Venezuela shortly after April 19, 1810, and became an assiduous collaborator of the *Gaceta*. He wrote with the purpose of popularizing immediately

the idea of independence, of convincing Venezuelans they had a right to independence, and that they were able to win and maintain it. His articles were entitled *Derechos de la América de Sur y México*. The first article appeared in the *Gaceta* of November 23, 1810, and the last in that of March 20, 1812. These articles were collected and published in two volumes, the first in March of 1812, the second in July of that year. After the fall of the First Republic, royalists destroyed them. Only one copy, volume I, is known to have survived and it is in the Library of Congress at Washington. The text of the sesquicentennial edition (X, XI) was put together from the volume in Washington and from the *Gaceta de Caracas*.

Leaders of the revolution did not want to initiate debate on the issue of freedom of religion, for this might destroy unity of effort. But a foreigner could do this, and so on February 19, 1811, Burke's "*Tolerancia de Cultos*" appeared in the *Gaceta*. This stirred up tremendous commotion but the controversy was kept within the bounds of discussion and analysis.

Burke's article was a plea that foreigners of all creeds and races be treated with tolerance because they would increase the population, bring industry and wealth to the nation, and make the land fertile and beautiful.

Within twelve days two refutations were signed: one in Valencia by the clergy of the Convent of San Francisco, and the other in Caracas by Doctor Antonio Gómez, *miembro del Claustro de la Real y Pontificia Universidad*.

The Franciscans retorted that tolerance was not the miraculous panacea that Burke claimed. On the contrary, it was the source of ruin and misery. They asked: "¿Cuáles serán las felicidades que nos traerá la tolerancia religiosa? ¿La perfección de las artes y ciencias? ¿El aumento de la población, agricultura y comercio? Pero qué, ¿únicamente los herejes y sectarios pueden proporcionarnos estas ventajas? ¿No hay ingleses católicos? ¿No los hay irlandeses, polacos, italianos y hasta entre los turcos de quienes podemos recibir los mismos beneficios? ¿Qué necesidad tenemos, pues, de traer a nuestra compañía a los enemigos de la Esposa del Cordero sin mancha? Que ¿por el mezquino interés de algunos provechos temporales hemos de resolernos a tener parte de sus malas obras y poner en riesgo el tesoro inestimable de nuestra fé católica?"

Doctor Gómez asserted categorically that history teaches the exact opposite of Burke's contentions. It shows that tolerance was invented by false prophets to destroy learned institutions and law, turn peoples against each other, and cover the earth with blood. Soon other writers

pro and con were heard from and the writings of these along with those of the Franciscans and Gómez are included in volume XII.

When the Constitution was sanctioned in December, 1811, it was evident that Burke had lost the polemic. The very first article of the 1811 Constitution states: "La Religión Católica, Apostólica, Romana, es también la del Estado, y la única y exclusiva de los habitantes de Venezuela. Su protección, conservación, pureza, e inviolabilidad será uno de los primeros deberes de la Representación nacional, que no permitirá jamás, en todo el territorio de la Confederación, ningún otro culto, público ni privado, ni doctrina contraria a la de Jesucristo."

There was an odd by-product of all this ferment. Toward the end of 1809 Joaquín Infante, native of Bayamo, was discovered in a plot to free Cuba. He fled to the United States and then to Venezuela where he joined the patriots. In 1812 he published a proposed constitution for Cuba (volume XV) based on the one Venezuelans had just promulgated. In addition to the three usual powers he added a fourth, the military. This power was necessary because Cuba, an island, could easily be invaded. This oldest Cuban constitution conceived by a Cuban was destined to be of interest only to historians.

Guillermo Morón in the preliminary study for volume XVIII has a nice definition of a demagogue. He points out that the revolution was the work not only of conservative intellectuals but also of intellectuals who qualify as demagogues because "se encendían con la palabra, se emocionaban con la acción y tomaban el juego político como un fuerte aguardiente."

The *Academia Nacional de la Historia* can well be proud of the twenty volumes it has published to commemorate Venezuela's sesquicentennial.