

LIBERTY AND PEOPLE
Ideological Analysis of the Political Writings
of Simón Bolívar

by

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– Geoffrey Fox, New York, 2003 February 12

Libertad y Pueblo: Síntesis en español

El pensamiento de Simón Bolívar pertenece a una época ya desaparecida, y no es fácil o siquiera posible entenderlo sin reconstruir el contexto ideológico y la realidad social en que operaba. Su concepto de la palabra más estrechamente asociada con su nombre, *libertad*, dista enormemente del significado moderno de esa palabra. El análisis del concepto bolivariano de la libertad puede servir de clave a las premisas de toda su ideología política. Esto se hará mediante un examen riguroso de la retórica bolivariana en sus principales escritos políticos, siempre ubicando los textos en el desarrollo de las relaciones políticas en América durante las guerras de independencia.

Los países libertados por el Libertador se hallaban arruinados al terminar las guerras de independencia, y poco o nada se había hecho para restaurar sus antiguas riquezas durante el último sexenio de su vida, años que fueron de relativa paz para estos países. Una gran parte de la población había desaparecido, las fuentes de producción estaban poco menos que destruidas, y la producción futura se había hipotecado a los bancos ingleses y otros prestamistas internacionales. Tras tan enormes sacrificios, hechos en espera de una nueva prosperidad que acompañare la libertad, los pueblos libertados se encontraban en la miseria más abyecta.

Políticamente, las cinco repúblicas (Venezuela, Nueva Granada, Quito o Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia) mostraban cuadros variados, correspondientes a las distintas relaciones internas de cada cual, pero en todas bullían los conflictos originados en las aspiraciones frustradas de las masas y la incapacidad de los dirigentes ni de satisfacerlas ni de suprimirlas. En ninguna de estas repúblicas se podía decir que imperaba la libertad, si por ésta se entiende la oportunidad garantizada a todo ciudadano para participar en el poder y el goce de la riqueza. Sin embargo, los países habían sido libertados.

Para entender este fenómeno, que no es propiamente dicho la tragedia de Bolívar sino la tragedia de América, partimos del concepto de la libertad tal como Bolívar lo recibiera de los grandes escritores de la Ilustración. Estos autores elogiaban la razón y combatían con todo su espíritu – porque no disponían de más armas que el verbo – la irracionalidad del poder monárquico, o sea de la tradición que sostenía en el trono a un individuo cuya ascendencia no tenía ninguna relación con su idoneidad.

Bolívar aparece en la historia cuando ya la autoridad real está socavada, no solamente por los filósofos, sino también por las grandes revoluciones sociales creadas por la colonización de América, el creciente mercantilismo y los comienzos de una nueva industrialización europea, y los demás acontecimientos que simbolizaban el desmoronamiento del sistema feudal. El joven Bolívar, como es sabido, está profundamente influenciado por las ideas de la Ilustración, pero es una influencia algo particular, filtrada por su propia experiencia de aristócrata colonial – *mantuano* – y las frustraciones de su clase, que consideraban el atraso

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español como un estorbo para ellos disfrutar el auge comercial del resto de Europa.

De todas maneras, el concepto de libertad que él adopta es una actitud de guerra más que una piedra angular para una nueva república. Libertad quiere decir, más que nada, la oposición – para Bolívar, específicamente la guerra – contra la monarquía. La monarquía se identifica con el despotismo, la tiranía, y hay que destruirla; después, se puede hacer una “república”, pero nadie tiene una idea muy clara de cómo hacerlo ni que estructura tendrá, solamente de que no puede estar gobernada por un rey.

Ahora bien: si no va a mandar el rey, decía la ideología absorbida por Bolívar en sus estadas en Europa y en sus lecturas de los autores franceses, tiene que mandar el pueblo. Pero “pueblo” en Venezuela significaba no solamente gente como Bolívar, o sea mantuanos, más los comerciantes canarios, sino también las “castas”, las personas libres de color (ya sea de color cobrizo o café-con-leche o chocolate, pero en ningún caso blanco), y los esclavos. Por su propia experiencia como dueño de esclavos e hijo de la élite, Bolívar asumía que en Venezuela, los intereses del pueblo tendrían que ser manejados por la gente que sabía, gente culta, como él. La masa era demasiado ignorante para tomar decisiones sobre cuestiones complejas.

Los principales escritos políticos de Bolívar son el Manifiesto de Cartagena (1812), las Cartas de Jamaica (1815), el Discurso de Angostura (1819), y el Discurso ante el Congreso Constituyente de Bolivia (1825). Cada documento corresponde también a una distinta etapa de política y de guerra, así que no es precisamente el mismo pueblo al que Bolívar alude en 1825 y 1812, ni son los mismos problemas institucionales que se plantean.

Sus referencias al pueblo en 1812 son muy despectivas – habla de “los pueblos estúpidos que desconocen el valor de sus derechos” y niega explícitamente “la teoría de que todos los hombres, y todos los pueblos, gozan de la prerrogativa de instituir a su antojo el gobierno que les acomode.” Sin embargo insiste mucho sobre su tema de la libertad, que es el objeto de la lucha contra España. Es evidente, tras el examen de cada mención de “libertad”, que esta palabra no significa aquí otra cosa que la independencia política, sin ningún cambio en el orden jerárquico interno de las ex-colonias. Los criollos que antes mandaban seguirán en el mando, pero sin el inconveniente de tener que acatar las órdenes del rey. Se trata, pues, de una libertad de la oligarquía criolla.

En las cartas de Jamaica, Bolívar – ya “Libertador” – pone mucho más atención en su análisis del pueblo. Consideramos que esto se debe a una lección que le enseñó su más temible contrincante, el asturiano José Tomás Boves, que junto con otros jefes realistas había aglutinado guerrillas compuestas de pardos y esclavos, principalmente de los llanos, para arrollar los pequeños ejércitos patriotas y masacrar a los criollos blancos, que eran los principales defensores de la causa de los independientes. La victoria en las futuras campañas dependería de la actitud y la acción del pueblo común, o sea, los pardos y los esclavos. Así que habría que tomarlos en cuenta.

No obstante su reciente experiencia, incluyendo la terrible derrota en la Puerta, Bolívar mantiene que el esclavo “ama y respeta” a su amo y que fue incorporado en las guerrillas realistas sólo por la fuerza y el terror. Nosotros sin

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embargo creemos que los esclavos, libertos y mulatos tenían motivos propios para combatir a los blancos que eran sus amos en actualidad o en potencia.

En general, las expresiones de Bolívar respecto al pueblo en las cartas de Jamaica son más paternales que despectivas. Pero deja claro en ellas que la libertad no es para entregársela a un pueblo que no sabrá manejarla.

Como Bolívar ha observado en estas cartas, los libertos y esclavos ahora “se han vuelto al partido de los independientes”. Bajo el liderazgo de Manuel Piar, arrasan las fuerzas realistas en las grandes extensiones de la Guayana, que será donde Bolívar establecerá su nueva base de operaciones. Cuando éste hace ajusticiar a Piar, acusado de traición y deserción, elimina a un potente rival y asegura que la suya será la voz que interprete la libertad y las necesidades del pueblo. Entonces en 1819 dicta su discurso en Angostura.

Hablando de la terrible violencia de los últimos años, Bolívar dice que “no he sido más que un vil juguete del huracán revolucionario que me arrebató como una débil paja”. Pero si es cierto que no podrá suprimir la fuerza popular, tratará de encauzarla en contra de sus enemigos los españoles. El problema es que simultáneamente tiene que atender a las exigencias de los criollos blancos, en quienes pretende confiar el gobierno. Esta contradicción da lugar a ambivalencias e inconstancias en su acción política.

En el discurso, su concepto del pueblo es sumamente despectivo, y su gran preocupación parece ser crear instituciones para controlarlo, incluyendo un Senado hereditario compuesto de los “Libertadores”, o sea, sus generales. Sin embargo, Bolívar quiere elecciones populares. ¿Por qué? Posiblemente porque considera que le darán más libertad a él cuando quiera refrenar a alguno de esos Libertadores en el Senado. Desde luego, la frase más extraña y más llamativa sobre la relación entre pueblo y libertad es: “Y si el pueblo de Venezuela no aplaude la elevación de sus bienhechores, es indigno de ser libre, y no lo será jamás.” Para el pueblo, entonces, la libertad es para estar de acuerdo con sus dirigentes.

Seis años más tarde, después de la victoria decisiva de Ayacucho y cuando ya no hay más españoles para combatir, Bolívar crea una constitución para el país que llevará su nombre, y la presenta en su discurso ante el Congreso Constituyente de Bolivia. Su ambivalencia respecto a la ingerencia del pueblo en el ejercicio de su propia libertad está expresada claramente: “¡Legisladores! Vuestro deber os llama a resistir el choque de dos monstruosos enemigos que recíprocamente se combaten, y ambos os atacarán a la vez: la *tiranía* y la *anarquía*...” Entre las dos, él parece considerar más peligrosa la anarquía, que es la que imagina será el producto de las olas y huracanes populares. Así que la constitución de Bolivia puede ser vista como un proyecto para contener la fuerza del pueblo.

Está claro que “libertad” para el Libertador nunca conllevaba la idea de la soberanía popular real. Funcionaba como un grito de guerra, y después de la guerra significaba nada más que el recuerdo de, y la expectativa de gratitud por, la liberación. O sea la victoria sobre los españoles. No era un concepto que pudiera servir como premisa de un moderno estado democrático. Éste tendría que fundarse sobre un concepto muy distinto, de una libertad que permitiese su continua redefinición por el pueblo.

LIBERTY AND PEOPLE

In the Political Writings of Simón Bolívar

Introduction

Foreigners have always viewed with irony Simón Bolívar's appellation, *Liberator*. What, at the end of his career, had he liberated? The vast territory that was his theater of action lay smoldering from the flames of ravaging armies, tens of thousands of its most heroic and its not so heroic sons and daughters were slaughtered or had died of want, agriculture and industry were disorganized and destroyed to below the subsistence level for the former population, the produce of generations to come had been mortgaged to the British and other great foreign lenders and, bitterest of all to the Liberator himself, his cherished union of the former Spanish colonies was rent into five tumultuous pieces – this was his immediate legacy at his death in 1830.

How was it possible that such a titanic struggle, in which ordinary men and women had drawn on every inner resource until they seemed to act like giants against the Spaniards, the mountains, the climate and the wretchedness of their own condition – how was it that such collective heroism, sustained over fourteen years of war with Spain and six more of civil strife, could fail to bring great rewards to the ultimate victors?

Posed in this way, the largest part of the question answers itself. There were no great material rewards, because most of what would have been the spoils of victory had been destroyed in the conflict itself. But there is another part of the answer that is not so obvious. That is that, although the Spaniards had been defeated, the Americans had not won – or rather, their larger, deeper conflict had not been, and still has not been, decided. This could not have been understood by many at the time. In fact, no one then could have understood it in our sense, because our ways of knowing the world have changed vastly since 1830 and especially since 1810, when the Juntas of Caracas, Buenos Aires, Mexico and Chile laid the groundwork for an independence struggle. Still, there must have been those, not celebrated in the official histories, who had inklings of a better path not taken, and there were anguished inarticulate men who knew no other way to make their claims to dignity than with sword or lance, soldiers turned brigands. It seemed at the end as though what Simón Bolívar had liberated – and he himself came close to saying this in his last days – were the savage passions of the “unbridled multitude” that would turn three hundred years of brutal, but effective, colonial domination into “primitive chaos.”¹

¹ Letter to General Juan José Flores, 9 November 1830, in Simón Bolívar, *Escritos políticos*, Selección e introducción de Graciela Soriano. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1971, p. 169.

But Simón Bolívar was not the best judge of his own legacy. The world he understood, he had done more than any other man to destroy, and by 1830 his terms of reference no longer made sense in America or anywhere. For this same reason, it is not easy for us to understand him or what he meant when he called on men to die for “liberty,” “equality,” “democracy,” or “glory.”

Did Bolívar fail? To answer this, we have to step inside Bolívar, to know what he was trying to do, his project.

Did Bolívar, or the struggle he led, cause the devastation of the South American republics, their internal dissensions, their vulnerability to foreign penetration and domination? To answer this, we have to step back from Bolívar, to see him in the context not only of America but of the world, not only in his day but through the longer historical period that begins before his birth and is, perhaps, just coming to an end in our time. Bolívar knew, at least from the time of his youthful oath on Monte Sacro (1805), that he was to play a critical role in world history: he could not have known that his death would conclude the first act, not the last, of the American struggle for liberty, and that later actors would come on stage impersonating his ghost.

To understand Bolívar’s mind, we must use our human capacity of empathy, or projection of ourselves into another’s thinking, what Max Weber called *Verstehen*. It is very difficult to perform this operation properly, for the temptation is always great to imagine that someone of another culture or another time saw or valued things as we see or value them. In the case of a great man—and anyone who was able to hold so much power, over such a vast territory, for so long a period, is doubtlessly great, regardless of whether he is good or bad – his later admirers will pretend to recruit him as a partisan of causes that had not even been defined in his day. The operation, of empathy or projection into another’s mind, is especially difficult in the case of Bolívar because his is a mind of uncommonly quick and broad intelligence, capable of great subtlety as it considers simultaneously phenomena of the most diverse orders. It is also – and this is true of anyone, but it is easy to forget this fact – a mind that is not self-sustaining, nor sustaining itself only from ideas and images current in its epoch, but a mind that grapples with a stubborn reality that it must account for or despair; and as we have said, the reality that confronted Bolívar’s intelligence was rapidly changing even as he acted on it.

This means that we must start by trying to get inside Bolívar, to know his mind, but that we cannot get far before we must step outside him, to understand what that mind was facing. The two operations are interdependent and mutually necessary; managing the two, knowing when to look from inside and when from outside, is tricky and, if not carried out with scrupulous adherence to the rules of sociocultural investigation, will produce only a more-or-less ornate re-elaboration of our preconceptions.

The first rule is that we shall make no moral evaluation of Bolívar, we shall not ask whether he was good or bad. This “good or bad” question always invites us to judge motivations by effects (and vice versa), to confuse the subjective and the objective, which are precisely the two planes we are trying to keep separate. The

reduction of Pasto at Bolívar's orders was certainly a terrible thing for the people of Pasto, many of whom were killed or exiled or lost their property. Was it a "bad" act of Bolívar's for this reason? Or was it "good" because it contributed in some way to the final republican victory? Is it one of those deeds that show a "baseness" in Bolívar's character, as Madariaga suggests?² Or was it in fact a noble act because inspired by noble motives? Such quasi-religious disputation is irrelevant here. Had you or I been men of Pasto, we would have thought Bolívar evil; had we been members of Bolívar's army, we would have thought something different (just what is difficult to say). The point, however, is what we would have thought had we been *Bolívar*. And the second, related but autonomous, point is what such ferocity as that at Pasto and other places has meant for history.

The intellectual context

Bolívar's formal and informal education, like everything else about his life, is unusually well documented for a person of his period. This is because, of course, he was a member of that class on whom most documents are made and kept, and because of the great zeal with which investigators have ferreted out every available scrap of information on the man. Most Venezuelans—the majority of the *pardos*³ and slaves, who were the majority of the population, and probably many of the Spanish immigrants as well – had no very exact idea of when or of whom they were born, but for Bolívar we have the most detailed (if debatable) genealogy and records of his movements, conversations and readings from almost every period of his life.⁴

The North American historian David Bushnell has helpfully summarized what is most relevant to us in this regard:

Despite the somewhat bizarre variety of opinions that have been expressed concerning him [Bolívar], there are things on which everyone, or almost everyone, can agree. To begin with Bolívar was very definitely a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in intellectual formation and political outlook.⁵

In a diluted form, some of the ideas of the Enlightenment may have reached him even before he traveled to Europe, especially through his Rousseauvian tutor, Simón Rodríguez. Later, in Europe, and especially on his second European trip, when he traveled with Rodríguez, he gained a more direct acquaintance with the Enlightenment, not only through readings but also by participating in social

² Salvador de Madariaga, *Bolívar*. New York: Pellegrini & Gudahy, 1952, pp. 417ff..

³ This term was used very broadly, to cover persons who could not claim "pure" European descent—"abarcaba a todos aquellos habitantes que no eran ni 'blancos', ni indios, ni esclavos." Miguel Izard, *El miedo a la revolución*. Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1979, p. 130.

⁴ "En ocasiones es tanto lo que se hace para acreditarlo como de pura raza blanca que en el afán de hacerlo representante de 'la raza' pareciera subyacer un complejo racial de los venezolanos cultos." Germán Carrera Damas, *El culto a Bolívar: esbozo para un estudio de la historia de las ideas en Venezuela*. Caracas: Instituto de Antropología e Historia de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1969. P. 211

⁵ *The Liberator, Simón Bolívar: Man and Image*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970. P. xv.

milieux (especially in Madrid and Paris, then in London) where such ideas were debated.

He himself later composed a list of authors with whom he claimed to be thoroughly familiar: Locke, Condillac, Buffon, D'Alembert, Helvetius, Montesquieu, Mably, Filangieri, Lalande, Rousseau, Voltaire, Rollin, Berthot "and all the classics of Antiquity, such as philosophers, historians, orators and poets; and all the modern classics of Spain, France, Italy and a large part of the English writers."⁶

Even if there is some exaggeration in this boast, we have frequent observations of people not necessarily friendly to Bolívar that show him reading Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu – all of whom he read in French – and he was at least acquainted with the thought of Bentham (although O'Leary, who should have known, reports that Bolívar barely read English).⁷

He cannot be said to have been a disciple of any of these authors, especially since his theater of action was the real America, not the fantasy America that had inspired so much of the imagery of Voltaire (for example, in *Candide*), Rousseau and the others. He may more or less consciously have imitated Voltaire and his other favorite authors in the pungent phrasing of his writings, as he is supposed by some to have imitated Napoleon in some of his military strategy, political tactics, and even his dress style.⁸ But Bolívar was obliged by his situation to be original, to find original solutions to the unprecedented problems of warfare and independent governance of South America.

The Enlightenment is not one school of thought but many. It is a label for a period of intellectual ferment that was both symptom and agent of the final crumbling of feudal power in Europe, and along with it the traditional ideological basis for the authority of kings. Bolívar, as his reading list indicates, was exposed to many currents of the Enlightenment. He was also profoundly impressed (this statement must surely be beyond dispute) by Napoleon, who knocked over monarchies already undermined by the philosophers and who established his more sweeping, efficient power on principles of "rationality" – the Napoleonic Code and the modern bureaucracy.

The discovery and conquest of America had themselves been responses to the crisis of European feudalism – or so, at least, it has been cogently argued.⁹ And with the Conquest, the introduction into Europe of large quantities of precious metals and of new, or more abundant, agricultural products, and the creation of new commercial enterprises, especially the lucrative trade in slaves,¹⁰ accelerated

⁶ Letter to Francisco de Paula Santander, May 1825; quoted in *Escritos políticos*, p. 19

⁷ In Bushnell, *op. cit.*, p. 92. There are both direct and indirect references to Bentham in Bolívar's writings, and some rather lengthy correspondence from Bentham to Bolívar. For Santander's comments on Bolívar's readings, see Bushnell, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁸ Madariaga, who was eager to make this point, has collected the relevant references. See entries under "Napoleon" in the index to his *Bolívar*. Cf. also Karl Marx, "Bolívar y Ponte," in *Revolution in Spain*.

⁹ For example, in Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

the economic changes that were soon (in historical terms) to bring the whole structure down.

In short, Europe's transformation of the Americas had in turn transformed Europe in ways that were shaking the scaffolding from beneath the European thrones. And since Spain's colonies had been constructed as nothing more than a scaffold, and were nailed to the throne rather than to one another, the task facing the Spanish Americans would be to improvise new bonds out of the materials at hand, or collapse. Given the originality of the materials – *pardos* and slaves, "Indians" and Creole whites, in a wild and sparsely settled land – the solution could only be original.

Now, in all of this – the intellectual ferment in Europe and America and the great historical shift in the location and bases of power – what could the concepts of the Enlightenment mean to the wealthy young Creole from Caracas? And how did those meanings change, or become clearer, in the course of his historical action?

The main thing, one of the few things common in the thinking of his favorite authors as well as in the thought and action of Napoleon – the thing that more than any other identified the "Enlightenment" as an intellectual epoch – was a will to destroy a system that arrogated absolute power to a monarch, no matter how capricious and ignorant, with no better justification than unreasoning and mystical tradition. Voltaire, Rousseau and the others had rediscovered the revolutionary insight (it is always revolutionary when it is rediscovered) that the power of a sovereign depends entirely on the willingness of others to obey him. Thus the power of stupid and malicious sovereigns (as they were most often depicted in this philosophical propaganda) could not last against the power of the people, aroused and enlightened.

The destruction of power based on stupidity and mysticism was only a dream during most of the eighteenth century, and this dream was called "Liberty." What was to be built upon the rubble had not been, could not be, worked out in detail until it had been actually tried.¹¹

It is important to understand this ideological heritage, because otherwise the rhetoric of Bolívar and his contemporaries may seem cynical, misguided, or simply incomprehensible. "Liberty" and "liberation" have other connotations today, the product of over two hundred years of experience of non-monarchical government. Bolívar could and did, in perfect good faith, assume dictatorial powers without thinking himself any less a "liberator" – because the *essence* of liberation was the destruction of classical monarchy. And although he believed that what replaced the monarchy should be "democratic," "democracy" had no precise institutional meaning either; rather, it meant only that the power of the ruler – whether a committee or a single dictator – should be derived from the

¹⁰ Cf. Eric Williams, Capitalism & Slavery. New York: Capricorn Books, 1966 (1944), for evidence of the contribution of the slave trade to the accumulation of capital in Great Britain.

¹¹ Locke had offered vague proposals, and Rousseau thought the Geneva city-state could be a model, but such ideas were appealing mainly to Protestant bourgeois (based as they were on a great deal of voluntary restraint on the part of the citizens). Bolívar, who was neither Protestant nor, in the European sense, bourgeois, would find such schemes interesting intellectually but quite unworkable in South America.

people rather than from an irrational, mystic “right” to rule. In practice, this might mean nothing more than that the ruler’s authority had been acclaimed by a more-or-less sizable crowd of “the people,” for example, his army.

Nothing makes clearer the distance between Bolívar’s concept of liberty and the modern notion of “national liberation” than Bolívar’s obsession with “glory.” As Germán Carrera Damas has put it,

In Bolívar there stood out one fixed idea, a constant inclination that was enthroned in his psyche to the point of becoming the guide of his historic acts. That fixed idea is represented by the pursuit of glory, by his consciousness of his own grandeur.

The sense of one’s own grandeur and the ambition for glory, present to an especially intense degree in the Father of the Country [*Padre de la Patria*, i.e., Bolívar], become confused, in this set of ideas, with his originality, which grows when compared to the lesser intensity of those traits in those who surrounded him, and with their almost total absence in those who followed him. Raised to the degree of obsession, the ambition for glory makes the Father of the Country a great practitioner of the vice defined by Saint Augustine when, in explaining the grandeur of the Roman Empire, he saw it as entrusted by God to “men impassioned by praise and honor, who based their glory on that of the fatherland and were always prepared to sacrifice themselves for its salvation, triumphing in this way over their greed and over all the other vices thanks to this sole vice: the love of glory. For we must not hide it from ourselves, the love of glory is a vice” ...¹²

Whereas Bolívar was always talking about his glory and the glory of his officers and men, modern practitioners of “national liberation” go to great lengths to *deny* a desire for glory. The most striking example is Ernesto (“Che”) Guevara, who fought secretly in Africa and again secretly in Bolivia, and whose posthumous glory for these exploits came to him despite his best efforts. There have been many thousands of national-liberation warriors who have been more successful at avoiding glory, that is, have died in a desired-for anonymity. The anti-glory sentiment is so strong that, today, accusing someone of seeking glory is a way of discrediting that person as a true national liberation fighter – for example, this accusation is leveled by the Sandinistas against Edén Pastora, their former collaborator and now an opponent.

The French revolutionary and Napoleonic epoch in Europe, and the independence and Bolivarian epoch in America, were the final dazzling burst of honest glory. The absence of glory in those who followed Bolívar, noted by Carrera Damas, was a phenomenon not limited to South America. Glory had died in Europe, too, and attempts to revive it – for example, by the international confidence man who styled himself Napoleon III – were pathetic and laughable to the intelligent bourgeois and intellectuals.

Furthermore, that epoch – 1789 to 1815 in Europe, 1810 to 1830 in South America – was the unprecedented and unrepeatably moment when “liberty” and “glory”

¹² El culto a Bolívar: esbozo para un estudio de la historia de las ideas en Venezuela. Caracas: Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1969. Pp. 87-88.

together inspired great masses of men to uncommon effort.¹³ It could not be repeated because “liberty” and “glory” correspond to two incompatible understandings of social life, one rooted in ancient feudal warrior culture, the other just emerging as the ideology of the bourgeoisie. And of course in Europe, it was the bourgeoisie that was triumphant. In the Americas, the outcome was less clear-cut, but at least the old Creole aristocracy that clung to the ancient traditions was greatly weakened.

Future wars (that is, those run by Europeans) would be directed more or less like large-scale business operations, with great concern for administrative control (evidenced by, among other things, the rapid multiplication of regulations) over the army and great attention to the material profit and loss of the interested parties. “Glory” survived chiefly as a local stimulus, used instrumentally, to get more effective output from the officer corps, or as the aberration of insubordinate generals (for example, the pretensions of General Douglas MacArthur during the United States’ war in Korea); it could no longer be accepted as the rationale for the war effort as a whole. Nor could “glory” be proposed as a reward to the common troops. *They* would henceforth be expected to fight out of “loyalty” or “patriotism,” which is quite the opposite—“loyalty” (by whatever name) is the surrender of personal to the collective interests, whereas “glory” makes the individual the focus of the collectivity.

Throughout the nineteenth century and down to our own day, the ways people understand their worlds have been changing rapidly. These changes have been uneven, occurring at different paces here and there, even among different sectors of the same populations. The confrontations of different cultures and subcultures make the ideological contradictions seem sharper than in the more slowly changing societies of the past. Our psychological existence is further complicated by the fact that we all dwell as much in fantasy – that is, by imagining things that are not immediately apparent to our senses – as we do in material actuality.

Thus hoary symbols whose material referent has long-since expired still have the power to evoke strong feelings. So, for example, “glory” and “honor” may still inspire momentary exertions from the many or even protracted struggle from a few. But no one since Bolívar could expect to agitate a whole continent around the pursuit “of glory. And even Bolívar could not do it without simultaneously raising that other call, for liberty.

Julio Casares gives these definitions of *gloria* in his *Diccionario ideológico*:

Bienaventuranza. | Cielo. | Fama y honor que resulta [sic] de grandes hechos y excelentes cualidades. | Gusto y placer vehemente. | Lo que enaltece o ilustra en gran manera una cosa. | Majestad, magnificencia....

Bliss. | Heaven. | Fame and honor that result from great deeds and excellent qualities. | Delight and vehement pleasure. | That which extols or makes illustrious something in a grand manner. | Majesty, magnificence...¹⁴

¹³ It is striking the number of times Bolívar coupled the two terms in his public statements, as, for example, in the Angostura address, when he denounced those who “preferieron su fatua ambición a la libertad y a la gloria.” *Escritos políticos*, p. 133.

¹⁴ Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, S.A., 1959.

Words bear echoes of past meanings. The connotation of “heavenly bliss” cannot be entirely separated from “glory” even when we are dealing with a man as little concerned about conventional religion as Bolívar.¹⁵ The word “glory” carries with it connotations of existence in some other world, in heaven; this may be what led Unamuno to observe that the essence of the yearning for glory and renown “is in leaving a name for the centuries, in living in the memory of peoples. The essence is in not dying! In not dying! Not dying! This is the final root, the root of the roots of the Quixotesque madness.”¹⁶

If this was Bolívar’s aim, he has succeeded eminently. Whether the pursuit of such immortality makes Bolívar, or Unamuno, or any of the rest of us “mad” is another issue. Bolívar may have been obsessed by glory, but he was not only obsessed by it; he also knew how to use it for political ends. His well-attested¹⁷ concern that other politicians acknowledge his glory was not merely an expression of vanity, any more than it had been in the court of Louis XIV or for any of countless political chiefs of all cultures from the most remote beginnings of human history. Glory was an effective instrument of political power, one that Santander, for example, recognized as the one weapon that made Bolívar politically unbeatable, especially since it assured Bolívar’s hold on the army.¹⁸

“Liberty” is a more complex notion than “glory,” and far more complex for us today than it seems to have been for Bolívar. The modern ambiguities of the term were just emerging during his career and were to contribute greatly to his final resignation and disgrace. For his opponents styled themselves “liberals.” How could the Liberator be opposed to liberalism? Because this whole family of words – *libertad*, *libertar*, *libre*, *liberal* – had undergone a transformation of meaning as the class commitments of the contending groups became more clearly defined.

In one of his fascinating explorations into Venezuelan history, Enrique Bernardo Núñez wrote of Bolívar’s “precursor”:

The evocation of [Francisco de] Miranda requires us to ask what he understood by liberty. Today we are still asking ourselves this question. We have not been able to form for ourselves a clear concept of liberty. We try to explain it to ourselves by means of insurrections, risings and the change of one government for another. Liberty is overthrowing the established government which for its part has made a mockery of liberty. Starting from independence our history has been one long conspiracy. People conspire within the government and outside of it. The great problem of that epoch was not only to cast out the intruding government, to change a regime that adopted such alien measures for a government of fourteen or eighteen million inhabitants, but to give solid bases to the new order with the greatest possible degree of liberty, to substitute for a

¹⁵ Bolívar’s general attitude seems to have been that, since other people believed in it, religion was of some importance politically, but should never be allowed to interfere with his own will. In his last dictatorship, he deliberately sought to use the church as a conservative political institution.

¹⁶ Quoted in Carrera Damas, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁷ For example, by his aide, Daniel Florencio O’Leary. See Bushnell, *op. cit.*, p. 92; Carrera Damas, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹⁸ Santander’s tract, written in 1829, is excerpted in Bushnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-156.

regime of absolutism a regime of liberty. We have not achieved that regime of liberty. We have not, in short, established anything. Miranda passes on and leaves us his theme of liberty.¹⁹

The fact is that the ambiguity of the term is essential to its attraction. If we always knew what the other man meant when he promised us “liberty,” we would not be so eager to follow him. Miranda himself, reports Núñez (apparently quoting from Miranda’s diary), traveled to “acquire the science of liberty.” He said he liked Locke’s formulation best, that the basis of “every civil liberty” is “property and personal liberty, guaranteed ‘by a government of laws.’” Of course, a formulation that the basis of liberty is liberty still leaves us without knowing what liberty is. Anyway, Miranda decided that liberty for him would be whatever the English meant by it. “For him, the English are the monopolizers of liberty,” wrote Núñez. “No government like theirs, even though he calls them ‘mercenary nation.’ They have the secret of Liberty.”²⁰

Perhaps. This conclusion Núñez derived from his study of Miranda’s diary and correspondence and is consistent with Miranda’s overall strategy for the liberation of the Spanish colonies—specifically, his heavy reliance on English funds, English ships and even English troops. But in order to clarify a concept, we need a contrast. And Núñez’s contrast of Miranda with Bolívar is not quite on the mark. As usual with this author, the insights are clear and provocative, but not sufficiently sustained to examine their own contradictions. It is worthwhile again quoting him at length, because he introduces several themes that will be essential to understanding Bolívar’s concept of liberty.

Miranda considers himself vested with a providential mission. Thus he tells Hamilton “that the establishment of liberty in the new world has been entrusted to him by Providence.” But the slaves of Barlovento, the men of Coro who follow Monteverde, the plainsmen of Boves or of Páez have not read Locke, or Montesquieu, or Voltaire, or Rousseau. They have not read their own Constitution that grants the people of color the same rights as the whites. For them liberty is something different, or it is found in open opposition to that of their masters. The same thing happens to the other founders of the first Republic. They have emancipated their spirit – for them liberty is an effect of their spiritual emancipation – but those who hearken to the call of the royalists [*realistas*] consider them impostors. On his way through Zurich, Miranda jots in his *Diary*: “A people without philosophy and without enlightenment cannot be free.” This conviction is the first link in his chain. It prevents him from operating freely in the hour of decision. It is this that he does not pass on to Bolívar, a great realist [*realista*] in the other sense of the word [i.e., a “realist” rather than a “royalist”]. He [Bolívar] reads the philosophers but he is above all a Venezuelan, an American. Miranda, however, has a horror of the ideas of the French Revolution as they had developed from 1793.²¹

19 “Miranda, o el tema de la libertad,” in *La tierra roja y heroica* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores C.A., 1971), p. 80.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Thus, according to Núñez, Miranda turned down an opportunity to “liberate” the Indies from a base in the French colony of Saint-Domingue – not because he knew of the revolution already underway there, but because of his “horror of Jacobin ideas.” This, writes Núñez, is “another difference from Bolívar. To Bolívar, who does not belong to the family of Hamlet, ideas do not matter, or they do not matter as much as deeds.”²²

Ideas not matter to Bolívar? Or not matter as much as deeds? Then what were the great deeds for? No, Núñez’s highly compressed statement is an approximation of a truth, but is not quite right. Bolívar had a passion for ideas – as he had a passion for other things, for women and for dancing as well as for glory, passions which he tried to harmonize by the power of his intellect, that is, by subordinating them to his grand ideas. “Glory” became a component of his concept of liberty, and women and dancing – well, these were strong but secondary passions with him, and he did not need to intellectualize them to himself (as he might have, especially since women saved *his* life and liberty on more than one occasion).

The contrast between Bolívar and Miranda was rather that for the younger man, the relationship between ideas and deeds was what we might today call dialectical, whereas for Miranda (if we accept Núñez’s portrait as a faithful one), the deeds had to conform more closely to his preformed ideas. Worse, these ideas were those of an alien – European – environment quite unlike his chosen field of action. Madariaga put the point cruelly: “Miranda,” he wrote, “would indeed be admirable for his refusal to acknowledge failure had he been more capable of learning from it.”²³

But even as unflattering and irreverent a biographer as Madariaga could not say that of Bolívar. Bolívar *did* learn from his failures, although he may not always have learned the right lessons.²⁴ That is to say, he modified his behavior and even re-evaluated his strategy in the light of experience. His deeds were impelled by a great idea – like Miranda, he called it “Liberty” – but this idea and others related to it (democracy, equality, independence) evolved as he attempted to adapt them to the hard realities of the western continent. Thus *hechos* – deeds and facts – informed his ideas, as ideas guided his deeds; this was the dialectic I spoke of. This dialectical process developed through a succession of choices among what appeared to him to be the real possibilities of the moment – with frequent consultations of his volumes of Voltaire and Rousseau in his respites from frenzied activity – and would eventually take him to a practical definition of liberty that diverged greatly from the imaginings of his favorite authors and the aspirations of the groups whose support he most needed to stay in power. This process can be traced through his career and writings. First, we need to examine this word “liberty.”

Eduardo Haro Tecglen, in his highly idiosyncratic, always interesting and frequently useful *Diccionario político*, explains the word this way:

²² Ibid., p. 82.

²³ Op. Cit., p. 85.

²⁴ Cf. the opinion of Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, regarding Bolívar’s “baseless criticisms” of the First Republic. Cited in Carrera Damas, op. cit., p. 82.

Abstract term taken from philosophy and which, entering into politics, appears as the programmatic objective of all ideologies or parties. There is one great principal division to be found: those groups that believe that there is an evil or pernicious nature in man, whether for biological reasons – aggressivity, competitiveness – or for mythic or religious reasons, and that therefore it is necessary to repress or channel *liberty* to avoid the development of these supposed instincts, and those others that consider that situations of violence or aggressions are a consequence of repression and that only the re-establishment of *liberty* as an absolute value can resolve the general problem of society, whence is deduced a whole series of political shades of gradation of *liberty* in one of whose extremes would be anarchism or the negation of all authority and in the other the tyrannies or totalitarian States, that assume the right to control, dominate and repress the activities of each citizen. Some doctrines consider that the first conquest of *liberty* is that of man over nature, while others understand nature to be the definitive and imperfectible divine work and, therefore, any action against it must be prohibited...²⁵

Bolívar seems to have wavered between the two sides of the “great principal division” of philosophical and political opinions, wanting to believe that “liberty as an absolute value can resolve the general problem of society,” but having continually to take into account evidence that seemed to him to show “an evil or pernicious nature in man.” He found a peculiar and ultimately untenable way of resolving this dilemma, as we shall attempt to demonstrate, in his political writings. In the bitterness of his last days, when he had lost both political and physical power, and even before, in his last dictatorship, he was much more conscious of the perniciousness of men than of their capacity for liberation.

Liberty, liberal and liberate all come from the Latin *liber* meaning a man who is free (that is, not in bondage). The most persistent meaning of “liberty” in English (and remember, it was the English who were thought to be the “monopolizers of liberty,” according to Bernardo Enrique Núñez) has been, “Exemption or release from captivity, bondage, or slavery.”²⁶ The earliest citation in the most authoritative reference work, the Oxford English Dictionary, for this use of the word is 1386, which is about as early as anything in what is recognizable as English.²⁷ This meaning is still active, and was one of the senses in which Bolívar understood the term – although in this connection he was more likely to use the much newer term “equality” (for example, in the eloquent passage denouncing slavery in his *Discurso ante el Congreso Constituyente de Bolivia* of 1825²⁸).

A more recent meaning is closer to Bolívar’s usual use of the word “liberty”: “Exemption or freedom from arbitrary, despotic, or autocratic rule or control.”

25 Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1975. P. 199.

26 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 240ff.

27 Modern English evolved from the fusion of Norman French and the older Germanic languages of the Angles and Saxons. Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) is generally credited with having established in literature the dialect that is the ancestor of today’s English.

28 *Escritos políticos*, pp. 136-137. On the evolution of the meaning of “equality,” see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 101-102.

The earliest Oxford (OED) citation in this sense is from Locke, one of the authors in Bolívar's list, and it dates from 1690: "The Liberty of Man, in Society, is to be under no other Legislative Power, but that established by Consent in the Commonwealth."

Liberal appears not to have been used in English in any sense relevant to politics before the sixteenth century, when it meant "Free from restraint; free in speech and action...often in a bad sense: Unrestrained by prudence and decorum, licentious," according to the OED. Williams gives an example from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Who hath indeed most like a liberall villaine
Confest the vile encounters they have had.²⁹

By the late eighteenth century, "liberal" was being used to mean "Free from narrow prejudice; open-minded, candid," and by 1801 was used in political discourse in this sense. The first citation offered by the OED where the meaning is "Free from bigotry or unreasonable prejudice in favour of traditional opinions or established institutions" is from 1846, but Bolívar's opponents were using it in something close to this sense some twenty years earlier, as were the French liberaux – in that period when Bolívar was seeking to strengthen the "established institutions" to protect what he called "liberty."

This then was some of the ideological context. It is now time to analyze in detail the evolution of the central ideas in Bolívar's rhetoric and practice.

The writings

At the end of 1812, Colonel Simón Bolívar (then 29 years old) arrived in Cartagena as a refugee from the collapse of Venezuela's first Republic – which, already beset by internal dissensions and a disastrous earthquake, had crumbled with startling speed before the tiny army of Domingo Monteverde. The Republic's dictator and military commander, Miranda, had been hustled off to Spain in chains, after having been arrested and handed over to the Spaniards by four of his supposed subordinates, including Bolívar. Bolívar's personal contribution to the defense of the Republic had not been a notable success – he had lost his only important command, the city of Puerto Cabello, when the prisoners of war in his charge had escaped and seized the town. Now he sought to explain some of these events (though not the arrest of Miranda nor the loss of Puerto Cabello) in a *Memoria dirigida a los ciudadanos de La Nueva Granada por un Caraqueño*; the document, known as the Cartagena Manifesto, also elicits support from the Granadinos for a new campaign in Venezuela.

This is Bolívar's first important political writing, considerably simpler in both language and conceptualization than his later works. It is short, under 4,000 words. "Liberty" occurs seven times by my count, and "free" (*libre*) twice; the word "glory" appears three times, "people" four. "Anarchy," which will later become a more insistent Bolivarian theme, is mentioned twice. Although the word "democracy" does not appear, there is a mention of "popular elections" which is helpful in understanding Bolívar's view of the "people."

²⁹ Williams, op. cit., p. 149. These lines are from Act IV, Scene i of the play.

These words occur in the course of an argument that the causes of the downfall of the Venezuelan republic were five. The most important of these was that the government was excessively “liberal,” here meaning generous and open-handed – for example, in refusing to apply the death penalty to its internal enemies. Other contributing causes were, he says, the corruption in the government, opposition to setting up a professional military corps, the earthquake of 26 March 1812, and internal factionalism. All in all, except for the fortuitous earthquake (whose importance Bolívar plays down), they add up to a case for a very strict government under professional military control and with scant regard for individual protections against the arbitrary power of the state. The purpose of such an authoritarian government is to win and defend “liberty.”

Bolívar condemns the Republican Government’s “decided opposition to raise veteran troops, disciplined and capable of reporting on the battlefield, already trained, to defend liberty with success and glory,” and the word “liberty” is repeated in a similar context on the same page (p. 49).³⁰ Later he says that if Caracas had only established a “simple” (i.e., non-confederal) government, “thou wouldst exist, oh Venezuela! and wouldst today be enjoying your liberty.” (p. 53)

He mentions “the peoples of southern America, who aspire to liberty and independence.” (p. 54) Then, in an extended metaphorical figure, he speaks of a “flood” of Spanish clerics and functionaries who will threaten to “tear out the seeds and even the roots of the tree of liberty.” (p. 56)³¹ He urges the Granadinos to help “shake off the yoke of our tyrants, and to unite your forces with ours [the Venezuelans’] in defense of liberty,” and closes with: “Go rapidly to avenge the dead, to give life to the moribund, ease to the oppressed and liberty to all.” (p. 57)

Thus “liberty” is something that must be defended by force of arms, it is threatened by the presence of Spaniards, and is associated with “independence” and “shaking off the yoke of our tyrants,” meaning again the Spaniards. “Liberty” is, quite simply, political independence from Spain. That it has nothing to do with protections against the state (often called “civil liberty”) is clear from Bolívar’s strictures against the “liberality” of the fallen government; that it has nothing to do with popular sovereignty is clear from his references to the “people” and things “popular.”

His attitude toward the “people” is clear from his first reference: the Supreme *Junta* of the Venezuelan Republic, he fumes, had established “its policy on principles of humanity poorly understood, which do not authorize any Government to make free by force those stupid peoples who do not know the value of their rights.”³²

³⁰ Page numbers in parentheses refer to Simón Bolívar, *Escritos políticos*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1971.

³¹ Spain was at this time engaged in its own popular war of national liberation against Napoleon. Bolívar expected Spanish resistance to Napoleon to collapse, and feared “revolutionary clerics, capable of subverting” the new states, as well as Spanish soldiers and bureaucrats, would arrive as refugees in such numbers as to overwhelm – whom? The Creole aristocracy, apparently. Thus “liberty” is opposed to “revolution” and “subversion” in this passage.

³² “...para hacer por la fuerza libres a los pueblos estúpidos que desconocen el valor de sus derechos.” Op. cit., p. 48.

Of course, not all peoples are equally stupid, for prudent men are well aware of “the immense difference that exists between the peoples, the times and the customs” of other republics (he mentions Greece, Rome, Venice, Genoa, Switzerland, Holland and North America) and “our own.” (p. 49) But the government of Venezuela, failing to take into account that “immense difference,” adopted the “federal form,” thus “following exaggerated maxims of the rights of man, which by authorizing him to govern himself breaks the social pacts, and sets up nations in anarchy.” He heaps scorn upon “the theory that all men, and all peoples, enjoy the prerogative of instituting as they please the government that suits them.” (p. 51)

Popular elections made by rustics from the countryside, and by the intriguing city-dwellers, add one more obstacle to the practice of federation among us [writes Bolívar]: because the ones are so ignorant that they do their voting mechanically, and the others so ambitious that they turn everything into factions; for this reason there has never been in Venezuela a free and accurate election; which placed the Government in the hands of men either disaffected with the cause, or inept, or immoral. (p. 52)

Given all this, it seems odd that he declares “the peoples of southern America...aspire to liberty and independence.” (p. 54) If we accept what he has written earlier, we would think they aspired only to anarchy and license. But in any case, whatever they may aspire to, the peoples he refers to are too stupid to know liberty when they see it or to defend it when they have it.

This position so strongly taken by the colonel from Caracas is perfectly understandable, given his background of wealth and aristocracy, the utter lack of education of the Venezuelan masses of the time, and the fact that Bolívar was accustomed to dealing with other members of the ruling class and not with the general populace. The political and military conditions were soon to change, however, and he would be obliged to re-examine his views.

Three years later, Bolívar was both far more experienced and far better known. He had got his men and munitions from New Granada and won his “*Campaña Admirable*” – a string of rapid victories from the Granadine-Venezuelan border all the way to Caracas – and had established the Second Republic (1813). Along the way, he had been proclaimed “the Liberator.” Yet, although he governed as a dictator (using both titles, “Dictator” and “Liberator”), thus following his own precepts from the Cartagena Manifesto, he and his Republic had been overthrown, this time by the *pueblo estúpido*. Bolívar was going to have to find a way to work with the “people” or he was not going to get anywhere.

Briefly – too briefly – what had happened was that the disaffected *castas*, the “brown” (*pardo*) common people of the plains and the slaves, had revolted against numerous restrictive laws imposed upon them by “white” aristocratic landowners, who were also those who constituted the government of the Republic.³³ They had rallied around nominally royalist chieftains, the most famous and most terrible (from the patriots’ point of view) being José Tomás

³³ This interpretation generally follows Miguel Izard, *El miedo a la revolución: la lucha por la libertad en Venezuela (1777-1830)*. Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1979.

Boves, an Asturian ex-sailor who had taken to the life of the Venezuelan *llanos*. The *llaneros*, half-naked and armed with primitive lances, swept the patriot armies from the field and plundered their cities, massacring civilians in the cities that resisted.³⁴

Bolívar's forces were completely routed by Boves in the battle of La Puerta (15 June 1814) and, on 7 July, the patriots abandoned Caracas. Organized resistance by the patriots was mostly over by the end of the year, and Bolívar personally was out of Venezuela and engaged in a civil war between the United Provinces of New Granada and the state of Cundinamarca (around Bogotá). Not finding the support he wanted in factious New Granada, he embarked for Jamaica on 9 May 1815 and there reviewed his situation.

Although Bolívar had proclaimed "war to the death" against "Spaniards and Canary Islanders" in June 1813, until the arrival of Morillo's 15,000 Spanish troops in March 1815 the war had been fought almost entirely among native-born Americans. Spain until then had not been able to spare troops from its own war of liberation from Napoleon's forces, and even some of the officers of the "royalist" armies in America were not Peninsulars but Americans.

Morillo's presence was to change the nature of the war drastically, but Bolívar's experience with Boves, Morales, and all the other "royalist" chiefs of llanero forces had already demonstrated the vital importance of winning the non-white masses to the patriots' side. Morillo, as it turned out, would help him, as the exiled Liberator had already begun to perceive when he wrote two letters in Kingston, Jamaica, in September of 1815. His "Answer of a Southern American to a gentleman of this island" and "Letter to the editor of the Royal Gazette of Jamaica," totaling some 10,500 words, will here be analyzed together.

"Liberty" appears no fewer than a dozen times in these letters. "Close to a million inhabitants" of the provinces of Río de la Plata and Upper Peru "enjoy their liberty," he informs the Jamaican gentleman; that is, they are freed from Spanish rule. (p. 64) A free (*libre*) people is the opposite of a slave people, he points out, and then goes on to explain how actual slave-owners like himself and others of his class could be said figuratively to have been enslaved by Spanish rule:

a people is enslaved when the government, by its essence or by its vices, tramples and usurps the rights of the citizen or subject. Applying these principles, we find that America was not only deprived of its liberty, but also of active and dominant tyranny. (p. 70)

By which, it turns out, he means to complain that the trampers and usurpers of the citizens' rights were peninsular Spaniards rather than Americans – in contrast, he reminds his Jamaican correspondent, to the despotic rulers of Turkey, Persia and Tartary, who at least were of the same nationality as those they oppressed.

³⁴ On the plundering of cities as policy, see Germán Carrera Damas, "Sobre el significado socioeconómico de la acción histórica de Boves." Pp. vii-clxiv in Materiales para el estudio de la cuestión agraria en Venezuela (1800-1830), Vol. I. Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1964.

The suggestion that tyranny is less objectionable if practiced by the victim's own kind, or – to state Bolívar's position more exactly – that the Americans would have been happier had they been able to participate in tyrannizing their own people, seems like a most peculiar one for a Liberator to make. It is obvious that he is here voicing a very special frustration of the Creole oligarchy; the poor American masses had already demonstrated that the *nationality* of their oppressors was a matter of complete indifference to them.

Further on, he speaks of "civil liberty, of the press and others," as characteristic of the "democratic and federal government" established in Venezuela and then in New Granada (p. 73); he simply reports this, without indicating whether he approves or not, but the context is a passage in which he is denouncing Venezuela's constitution as "the most exaggerated federal system that ever existed." And a little later, "Can one conceive that a people recently unchained should hurl itself into the sphere of liberty without, as with Icarus, having its wings fall apart and plunging into the abyss?" (p. 76) Heady stuff, this liberty.

"I desire more than anyone else to see formed in America the greatest nation in the world, not so much because of its breadth and riches as for its liberty and glory." (p. 76) However, he explains, a "great republic" with a perfect government is "impossible," as impossible as "a universal monarchy of America." "The American states must have the care of paternal governments that will cure the scabs and wounds of despotism and war. The metropolis, for example, would be Mexico...." (p. 76) Still on the subject of creating one great nation of the former Spanish colonies, he remarks, "the interest, properly understood, of a republic is circumscribed in the sphere of its conservation, prosperity and glory. Since empire does not exercise liberty, because it is precisely its opposite, no stimulus excites the republicans to extend the bounds of their nation, to the detriment of their own resources, with the sole object of making their neighbors take part in a liberal constitution." (p. 77) He considers, therefore, but rejects the option of extending liberty by reducing neighboring states to colonies, since this would in the end "convert its free form into another tyranny" (p. 77) – an unexceptionable statement. That the option should even occur to him suggests some distance between his concept of liberty and those versions that base themselves on some form of popular sovereignty.

Liberty requires rather special conditions to thrive. Thus, "only a people as patriotic as the English is capable of containing the authority of a king and of sustaining the spirit of liberty under a scepter and a crown." (p. 79) In the Americas, Chile has the best chance of maintaining its "spirit of liberty," because its territory is limited and remote from corrupting contacts with Europe or Asia (p. 80); he apparently is not here thinking of England as part of Europe. Peru is least likely to achieve liberty, he believes, because that country contains "two elements inimical to every just and liberal regime: gold and slaves. The first corrupts everything; the second is corrupted in itself. The soul of a serf rarely can appreciate healthy liberty: it becomes enraged in tumults or humbles itself in chains." (pp. 80-81)

The word "people" has already appeared in at least two senses in the above quotations. One is, the whole collectivity of persons in a particular nation – as

the American people enslaved by Spanish rule, or “a people as patriotic as the English.” The other is, the common people or “plebeians,” as distinguished from those groups with special powers or privileges. This second, somewhat derogatory sense of *pueblo*, which predominated in the Cartagena manifesto, is here implicit in the reference to “a people recently unchained” that hurls itself into the “abyss.”

When Bolívar complains of the colonial regime that if “only we had been managing our own affairs in internal administration...we would have enjoyed the personal consideration that imposes on the eyes of the people a certain mechanical respect that is so necessary to maintain in revolutions,” (pp. 70-71) he is clearly making a distinction between “we” and “the people,” that is, between the Creole landowning class (in Venezuela, called *mantuanos*) and the common folk. We should especially note the importance he gives to projecting an image of power in order to impress the common people. This supports the earlier suggestion that “glory” for Bolívar was not merely Unamuno’s Quixotic dream, nor a mere weakness for triumphal processions and resplendent uniforms (as some of his contemporaries imagined), but a deliberate political strategy.

Bolívar always uses the adjective *popular* (“of the people,” here to be translated as “popular”) in the sense of plebeian, that is, referring to the common people. We remember how dangerous Bolívar considered “popular elections” when he wrote the Cartagena manifesto; he remains critical.

The events of Tierra Firme [the old name for the Venezuelan coast] have proven to us that institutions which are perfectly representative are not adequate to our character, customs and present understanding. In Caracas the partisan spirit sprang from the societies, assemblies and popular elections; and these parties have returned us to slavery [i.e., to reconquest by Spain]. ... In as much as our compatriots do not acquire the talents and political virtues that distinguish our brothers in the North [i.e., the United States of North America], the systems which are entirely popular, far from being favorable to us, I greatly fear will be our ruin. (p. 75)

Later he speaks of his fear of “a popular upheaval [*conmoción*]” (p. 78) and the need for a hereditary chamber or senate to interpose itself “between the popular waves and the rays of the government.” (p. 79)

We cannot leave off our discussion of Bolívar’s concept of the *pueblo* without commenting on his rather detailed analysis of the political psychology of the major population groups in his native Venezuela. Such an analysis had not seemed to him necessary when he had written to the citizens of New Granada three years earlier, but the masses had forced themselves upon his attention in the most dramatic way.

The white American of Spanish descent, according to Bolívar, treats his servant as a companion and is boundlessly pacific and easygoing. Bolívar attributes this peaceableness to the abundance and great extension of the soil, which have made competition unnecessary. The Indian is also peaceable and totally without ambition for power, so that he is a kind of buffer between the other groups. Together, these and the products of their unions, the *mestizos*, who are equally

good-natured, make up three-fifths of the population. He then turns to the blacks, slaves and freedmen (*libertos*). It was these who had turned their lances against the Republic, but Bolívar claims that they too are essentially passive and easy-going, and that they had to be bullied and tricked by Boves, Morales, Rosete, Calzada and the others to rise up against their white Creole masters.

All were incited to pillage, to the murder of whites; they [the royalist generals] offered them employment and properties; they bewitched them with superstitious doctrines in favor of the Spanish party, and, despite such vehement incentives, those incendiaries [Boves et al.] had to resort to force, establishing the principle *that those who do not serve in the king's arms are traitors or deserters* and in consequence, those who were not enlisted in their murdering bands were sacrificed, they and their women and children and even whole settlements. (p. 88; emphasis in the original)

Now that Morillo has brought fresh troops to complete the subjugation of Venezuela, writes Bolívar, a most singular thing has begun to occur: “the same black freedmen and slave soldiers who contributed so greatly, although obliged by force, to the triumph of the royalists have turned around to the party of the independents, who had not offered absolute liberty as had the Spanish armed bands. The present defenders of independence are the same partisans of Boves, united now with the white Creoles, who had never abandoned this noble cause.” (p. 88)

Something like this was indeed happening in Venezuela at the time. But if Bolívar was suggesting that it was because the blacks had been happier in servitude than as warriors, there is a stronger explanation available. Morillo and his regular Spanish troops had taken the war out of the hands of the fierce llaneros and in the effort to restore royal authority, were seeking to again reduce them to a subordinate status. Whether under Boves or under Páez – the patriot warrior who was soon to emerge as their most outstanding leader – the black and brown llaneros were warring against their immediate class enemy.

It was of course in Bolívar's interests to deny such an interpretation. The conclusion of his analysis of the people is:

We are justified, then, in believing that all the sons of Spanish America, of whatever color or condition they may be, profess a reciprocal fraternal affection, which no machination can alter. We will be told that the civil wars prove the opposite. No, sir, the domestic conflicts of America have never originated from the difference of castes: they have been born of the divergence of political opinions and of the personal ambition of certain men, like those that have afflicted other nations. No one yet has heard a cry of proscription against any color, status or condition, except against the European Spaniards, who are so deserving of universal detestation. Up to the present one admires the most perfect harmony among those who were born on this soil, with regard to our question; and there is no need to fear that the contrary will occur in the future, because by then order will be established, the governments fortified with arms, opinion,

foreign relations and European and Asiatic emigration [i.e., to America] which should necessarily augment the population. (p. 89)

Thus Bolívar: there are no caste conflicts, only political differences agitated by self-interested and ambitious men. This should be contrasted with the observations of another participant in the events, José Manuel Restrepo, writing some years later:

Almost all of them [royalist soldiers of 1814] being Indians, zambos [mixed Indian and black], blacks and mulattoes, Boves had unchained the lowest class of society against that which possessed the country's wealth. The white, black and bronzed races were going to carry out a combat of destruction and death in the plains and mountains of Venezuela...

And later, in the same *Memorias*, Restrepo writes:

the repeated disasters of the patriots were due, not so much to the horrors and excesses that without doubt they committed in the midst of the conflagration produced by the exaltation of revolutionary passions, but more to the almost general rising of the *castas* against the white Creoles.³⁵

Bolívar returned to his country at the end of 1816. Boves was dead – killed, appropriately, by a lance on one of his reckless charges; the war against the independents had become a European Spanish affair, fought mainly by Peninsular troops; and the llaneros in arms were now thundering across the plains behind patriot generals – Piar, Páez, Mariño.... And then Manuel Piar, reconqueror of vast stretches of the Guayana from the Spaniards, had been executed by authority of General Simón Bolívar on 16 October 1817.

All of this – except the death of Boves, which seems natural enough, considering the way he fought – needs explaining. Why was Bolívar now in the Guayana rather than in the plantation-lands of the north? What was behind the change in the character of the war and the loyalties of the llaneros? And what about Piar?

And all of this is a necessary prologue to Bolívar's address of 15 February 1819 before the Congress of Angostura, on the Orinoco River in the Guayana. It is part of the address's historical context, the intractable reality that continued to change the content of Bolívar's terms of "liberty" and "people."

Throughout this exploration of Bolívar's thought and action, we have avoided reducing him to a mere agent of his social class. He was exceptional, in fact unique, among the *mantuanos* and often acted against what they perceived to be their interests. This uniqueness was due not just to his possessing a farther vision, a broader education and a quicker intelligence than his class-brethren – although by and large this was true. But even if we should find among the *mantuanos* another man as brilliant and as widely-read as Bolívar (does no candidate come to mind?), we could not expect him to behave as the Liberator. This is because nobody but the Liberator had assumed responsibility for reconciling so many contradictory interests: as military chief over disparate and sometimes quarreling armies, as founder of a state which he expected to stretch over plains and mountains and fertile coastland, as ultimate leader of shepherds

³⁵ Quoted in Izard, op. cit., p. 147.

and miners and cowboys and merchants and landowners, as uniter of all those diverse people whose only common characteristic was that they had all been born somewhere in Hispanic America.

Everything that can be said about Bolívar's personal idiosyncracies has been said, by critics or defenders or the simply curious, to explain his twists and turns of policy. Everything, that is, except that his personal idiosyncracies may not be particularly relevant. To a greater extent than is usually appreciated, it was true what he said of himself at Angostura in that famous address: "In the midst of this ocean of afflictions, I have been but the base plaything of the revolutionary hurricane that has carried me along like a fragile straw. I have been unable to do either good or ill: irresistible forces have directed the march of our events: to attribute them to me would be to give me an importance I do not deserve." (p. 94) His strategy was to keep himself at the center of the hurricane, and in this he was successful, but he could not control its force.

That force came from the long-suppressed rage of the peoples who had been dominated by Creoles and Spaniards alike and who, when their force had been released by the wars between their two enemies, had vented their fury first against one, then the other. Bolívar's view of the harmony among the "castes" in his Kingston letter was simply false, as he must have known. This popular rage, and the completely contrary demands of the Creole aristocracy, were what Bolívar had to manage, along with the war of both against Spain. Only by making concessions first to one and then the other, by a policy of tactical switches and reverses and an attempt to smother all differences in "glory" could he hope to ride out the hurricane.

The Venezuelan writer Héctor Malavé Mata has sketched the opposing ideologies sharply:

The autonomist consciousness of the *mantuanos*, concealed under a false adherence to the Spanish authorities [in the original Junta 1810], was inspired by an ideal of political independence that would reaffirm them in their personal privileges and assign them exclusive faculties in the administration of the new order. Proprietors of the wealth, they aspired also to be the lords of power.

The landowners and wealthy merchants, furnished with an ideology opposed to the aspirations of the people, were prepared to reject forcefully any independence movement of a revolutionary character that might propose, beyond secession from the metropolis, the establishment of a system founded on the inversion of the existing structure, since otherwise they would have had to attend the entombment of the [existing] relations of production and of property – by which they enjoyed the use of the surplus product from exploitation and displayed the exclusive privileges of their social rank – with the consequent abolition of slavery, the native Indian tributes and the monopoly of territorial property.

The subject population, on the other hand, did not desire the Colony's political independence without the cancellation of the relations of

production that submerged it in the most degrading poverty and supplied the owning class with the profits of its alienated labor.³⁶

The “subject population,” to use Malavé Mata’s phrase, or the *castas* in contemporary Venezuelan parlance, consisted of several different population groups that would not necessarily be expected to act in concert. They included *pardo* craftsmen and merchants, some relatively prosperous, as well as day laborers and slaves among the townsmen, and in the countryside more slaves and laboring freedmen, tribal Indians, and runaway slaves. Of all of these the group that was to play the most critical role in the wars of independence and in subsequent Venezuelan history for several generations were the llaneros, who had become a special social formation with peculiar characteristics of its own.

The *llanos*, broad rugged plains cut by dry gorges that turn into raging rivers during the wet season, have been the symbol of freedom to the men who live there and the novelists who celebrate them. Not of the kind of *libertad* Bolívar represented, though, but rather *libre albedrío*, the right to do as one pleases, limited only by individual strength and courage, freedom from civilization rather than in civilization. From early colonial days, cattle, horses and men had escaped from law and order into the llanos, and all had multiplied. Runaway slaves, Indians clinging to old ways, mestizos and mulattoes and black *libertos* had all been drawn to the llanos, where cattle and horses abounded and a man could ride for days without the irritating sight of a mission or government outpost of any kind. Naked or nearly so, tough, ignorant, and with the mingled superstitions of Africa and indigenous America and Spain, the llaneros rode as though born on horseback and would kill or die rather than give up the only life they knew.

Other men too were drawn to this life, men like Boves who had their own reasons for wanting to escape civilization. And in the early eighteen-hundreds, the Creole aristocracy, the *mantuanos*, were also turning their attention to the llanos, not to live its life but to exploit its wealth. Cattle now appeared more profitable than the cacao of their lush northern plantations. Exploiting the resources of the llanos meant fencing in, not just land and cattle, but the men as well. This, Izard argues, was why Boves and the other Spanish *guerreros* had little trouble raising armies of marauders to destroy the Creole armies of Bolívar.

To accept Bolívar’s characterization of the llaneros as reluctant royalist conscripts would make the savage effectiveness of Boves’s hordes incomprehensible. To claim, as is often done, that they fought only for booty is to demean and misunderstand what was essentially a social rebellion, as deeply rooted in the emotions as the Liberator’s own struggle. The llanero warriors did not sack towns and plantations out of a desire to amass wealth – although this may have been the aim of some of their generals, such as Morales – but rather the wealth was a kind of trophy of the war. Why else would they have destroyed what they could not immediately consume, wear or carry?

But a shift of momentous consequences had occurred between the defeat of the patriots at La Puerta and the Congress of Angostura, a shift that has still not been

³⁶ *Formación histórica del antidesarrollo de Venezuela*. Havana: Casa de las Americas, 1974, pp. 80-91.

adequately explained. The llaneros were fighting with the Creole cause rather than against it. Had they simply come to their patriotic senses, as Bolívar had implied in Jamaica?

Was it luck, that Boves had died and so Piar and Páez could rally the llaneros around their own impressive personalities? Or was it the coming of Morillo and his Spanish army that was the decisive factor?

If our explanation of the llaneros' war against their white compatriots is valid, then the loss of a caudillo is not sufficient to explain their shift to the other side. We need to know more than we now do about the social composition of these cavalries. Were there many among them who had acquired some property and now saw their economic interests as linked to those of the Creoles of the north? Were these new patriots by and large the very same men who had fought for the royalists? Or were there significant new class or regional groups being mobilized for the first time, groups with their own reasons for opposing the royalists?

In the absence of such data, only a tentative hypothesis can be advanced. This is that, in the course of the war of 1813-1814, the llaneros had experienced their own strength and become aware of themselves as the most terrible military force in Venezuela; they had destroyed or at least diminished the threat of being returned to peonage by the Creoles and in fact had slain or driven out of the country great numbers of these. Now Morillo's policies renewed the threat of subjugation, but this time from a different quarter, from the re-imposition of royal authority in the especially reactionary form demanded by Fernando VII, now restored to his throne. In summary, both in 1813-1814 and in the later period, the llanero strategy had been to side with the less immediate enemy against the more immediate. The more immediate enemy after Morillo's landing was Morillo.

It was a new war now. The Creole resources had been so depleted by the sackings and the massacres and now by the Spanish reconquest of the cities, that the whole force of the patriot army would be in the hands of whoever controlled the llaneros. For a while this was Manuel Piar, himself a man of color and a gifted leader. It was he more than any other patriot who made possible the establishment of Republican power on the Orinoco. And so it was he more than any other patriot – since Páez had not yet achieved ascendancy – who controlled a power base independent of Bolívar.

How and why Piar was arrested, tried and executed, and whether he was guilty of any or all of the charges against him (which included "treason" and "desertion"), are questions beyond the scope of this essay. What is important here is that Piar's execution in 1817 eliminated not only a potential rival for the loyalty of the "people" but also the potential for an alternative expression of their needs.

Now, in 1819, Bolívar convoked a Congress in Angostura, and he used the occasion to set out his thinking on the proper form of republican government to reconcile his concept of "liberty" with those "people."

The word "liberty" appears at least 43 times in the approximately 10,500 words of this address, without counting the several occurrences of "free" (*libre*) and

related terms. It appears often in the same passage as the word “glory.” Thus, “Legislators! ... in your hands is the scale of our destinies, the measure of our glory: they will seal the decrees that secure our *Liberty*.” (pp. 94-95)

This passage is typical in that “liberty” is not explained, but rather is invoked as that well understood, deeply felt essence that explains all else. “A just zeal is the guarantee of Republican Liberty,” he says (p. 95). He does not mean to distinguish “Republican Liberty” from some other kind, but simply to double the impact of what is not an analytical observation but a magical incantation. He does this by joining two sacred words of approximately equivalent associations.

He repeats, in very similar words, his argument from the Jamaica letters that “we” had been deprived not only of “Liberty, but also active and domestic tyranny.” (p. 96) And again he stresses that, for this reason, “we did not enjoy the personal consideration that the glow of power inspires in the eyes of the multitude, which is of such importance in great Revolutions.” (p. 97) The distinction between “we” and the “multitude” is as sharp as ever.

We can no longer treat *pueblo* and *libertad* as separate themes, for now Bolívar constantly refers to one to explain or describe his concept of the other. Carrera Damas has already analyzed the references to “the people” in this address. A critical reading, he writes,

permits us to conclude the following:

1. The concept of people in the thinking of Bolívar in this case is not clear: it fluctuates between the concept of “citizen-people,” essentially liberal (corresponding to the “inhabitant-people” [*pueblo-vecino*] of colonial tradition) and the concept of “mass-people” [*pueblo-masa*].
2. The Venezuelan people is perverted and thus not qualified to exercise liberty. It must be regenerated under firm guidance constituted by a strong Executive that will contain it, plus a Senate which will restrain it and a Moral Power that will instill in it virtues and good manners.
3. One does not find in the address expressions of praise, not even restrained ones, regarding the people. On the contrary, it does not seem excessive to consider the address almost as a demand [*requisitoria*] against the “mass-people.”³⁷

A few examples will suffice to demonstrate that Carrera Damas’ interpretation is essentially correct. *Pueblo* appears at least thirty-four times, by my count, and *popular* at least seven. The only favorable references are to peoples other than the Venezuelan, especially the North Americans: “that People is a singular model of political virtues and moral enlightenment” (p. 100), and is also “unique in the human race....” (p. 100) In fact, this may be construed as *the* only favorable reference, for when Bolívar says that “The Roman Constitution is that which has produced the greatest power and fortune to any people in the world,” he is not praising the Roman people but pointing out that a “monstrous and purely

³⁷ *El culto a Bolívar*, p. 59, footnote. Unfortunately, Germ&n Carrera Damas’ essay, “El discurso de Bolívar en Angostura: proceso al federalismo y al pueblo” (Anuario del Instituto de Antropología e Historia de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 718, 1970, pp. 65-94) was unavailable to me.

warlike government lifted Rome to the highest splendor of virtue and of glory..." (p. 106) His argument is that the Roman people benefited, despite imperfect institutions, because of the "political virtues" of their leaders, not because of any virtues of their own.

The Venezuelan people are "perverted" (p. 97) and thus apt to lose their "liberty" as soon as they acquire it. Denouncing slavery, Bolívar says that "an ignorant People is a blind instrument of its own destruction: ambition, intrigue, abuse the credulity and the inexperience of men removed from all political, economic or civic knowledge: they adopt as realities what are pure illusions; they take license for Liberty, treason for patriotism, vengeance for justice." He is talking about "the American People," that is, the people of his continent, subject "to the triple yoke of ignorance, tyranny and vice." (p. 97)

Bolívar has little faith in peoples in general. He observes that although many in history have "shaken off oppression," hardly any have enjoyed "any precious moments of Liberty...because it is the Peoples rather than the Governments that drag tyranny behind them." (p. 99) He proposes the creation of a hereditary Senate to resist "the invasions that the people attempt against the jurisdiction and authority of its Magistrates," in the same passage in which he proposes a Chamber of Representatives to express "the will of the People." (p. 108) "Not everything should be left to the chance and happenstance of elections: the People is more easily fooled than is nature perfected by art..." (p. 109) – which seems to mean that the educated élite ("nature perfected by art") should have the final word.

It is in the context of his description of the proposed hereditary Senate, whose founders are to be the Liberators (that is, outstanding military officers in the independence war), that Bolívar makes one of the most startling remarks in the entire address, one that suggests much about his "liberty" and his view of the "people": "And if the people of Venezuela do not applaud the elevation of its benefactors, it is unworthy to be Free and never will be." (p. 110)

I see no other way to interpret this. Bolívar has just said that only if servile are the Venezuelans worthy to be free. They must not only accept the rule of men whose only qualification is their success in war, they must *applaud* it. This is an echo of the old theme, already expressed in the Cartagena manifesto seven years earlier: Freedom for the masses is the right to be tyrannized by members of one's own nationality.

Why, then, permit popular elections at all? Bolívar's only answer is that without them, the new regime could not qualify as a republic. I suspect there were two rather more cogent reasons. One is that influential civilians, whose support he needed, demanded them. The other is that they seemed to him to represent a potential force, which he could invoke as needed, to check the ambitions of possible rivals among the officer class. That is, they were an instrument to protect his liberty to act as he chose. Since he viewed the masses as stupid and ignorant, he could expect to keep them dazzled as long as he monopolized glory.

Signs of ambivalence

Six years passed before the last of what are generally considered to be Bolívar's major political writings, his 1825 address to the constitutional convention (Congreso Constituyente) of the country newly named for him, Bolivia. The battle of Ayacucho, 10 December 1824, had finally decided the political independence of all of Hispanic America except Puerto Rico, Cuba, and a few such holdouts on the mainland as Puerto Cabello in Venezuela. Bolívar's whole concern now, and the only way he could justify his continued authority now that the war was behind him, was the establishment of stable civil government.

We shall not linger over the peculiarities of the constitution he drafted for Bolivia, other than to say that its complicated tripartite division of the legislature (into Tribunes, Senators and Censors), and its President-for-Life with the power to name his own successor, reflect his continuing ambivalence regarding popular sovereignty and in any case were never put into effect by those who actually ruled the new country.

This same ambivalence is amply evident in the address. Of the President's power to name his successor, Bolívar declares, "By this provision we avoid elections, which produce the great scourge of republics, anarchy, which is the luxury of tyranny and the most immediate and most terrible danger of popular governments." (p. 133) At the same time, he insists on the privileges granted to "the immediate Representatives of the people," which give the government "more guarantees, more popularity and new titles, so that it may stand out among the most democratic [of governments]." (p. 129) These representatives are to be elected, but indirectly: that is, the "people" elect electors who in turn elect Legislators, Magistrates, Judges and Pastors.

The clearest statement of ambivalence is his cry, "Legislators! Your duty calls you to resist the clash of two monstrous enemies that make war on one another, and both of which will attack you at the same time: *tyranny and anarchy* form an immense ocean of oppression, which surrounds a little isle of liberty, perpetually battered by the violence of the waves and hurricanes, which pull it ceaselessly to submerge it." (p. 128)

"Waves" and "hurricanes" are familiar Bolivarian metaphors for mass actions or, what in fact amounts to the same thing, civil disorders. The war in the llanos had been described as a "revolutionary hurricane" in the speech at Angostura, and in the same speech Bolívar had expressed fear of "popular waves," that is, uncontrolled actions by the populace. Although we have not sought to trace it as meticulously as "liberty" and "people," the word "anarchy" is also recurrent in Bolívar's rhetoric. It is the product of the waves and hurricanes; it is what the people will create if left to their own devices. And, he says in Bolivia, "Without responsibility, without repression, the state is a chaos." (p. 136)

The problem, as Bolívar frankly puts it, is "the way to manage free men." (p. 127) To manage free men. To manage, control, and yes, he has said it, to repress them so that they do not reduce all to anarchy and chaos, and yet to keep them free.

And what does liberty mean now, in 1825, when it is no longer a battle cry against the Spaniards? "Liberty from today onward will be indestructible in

America," because "the savage nature of the continent" itself repels "the monarchical order.... And if the great Napoleon did not manage to maintain his rule against the league of the republicans and of the aristocrats, who can succeed, in America, in founding monarchies, in a soil blazing with the brilliant flames of liberty, which consumes the boards they put on it to raise those royal scaffolds?" (p. 132)

Thus liberty is the opposite of monarchy. But it is not opposed to dictatorship, repression or the self-perpetuation of one-man rule.

The flames of liberty, of the war against the monarchy, had consumed much more than Fernando's royal scaffolds; they had also consumed a large part of the *pueblo* and the productive capacity of the continent. The trick would be to hold the popular demands in check while persuading the people that, through their republican institution, they themselves were in power and therefore had only themselves to blame for their distress.

Conclusions

Bolívar lived for five more years after the Congress of Bolivia, five years in which he tried, ever more desperately, to hold together in peace the five countries he had liberated through war. It could not be done. The forces he had used for war were not those required to govern, and even the army could not remain an army without civilian support, especially economic support.

Most historical writing on this period focuses on Bolívar's temperamental contradictions, which are supposed to have undermined his own attempts to impose his grand vision on the petty, shortsighted and personally ambitious politicians in the five republics. Thus Belaúnde:

Within the bounds of a general orientation, the thought of Bolívar displays moments of hesitation and even contradiction, due to the fundamental feature of his mental make-up, a duality caused by two elements which compose his character. He is a dreamer and a realist, a poet and a man of action. Bolívar being thus constituted, his thought will not have absolute logic or harmony; but it will not be less great on this account. On the contrary, this conflict in his make-up will emphasize the human element and lend us the key to the tragedy of his life. This duality and this conflict in Bolívar's ideology make it more representative of the land and of American history.³⁸

No doubt Bolívar, like all of us, was a man of contradictory impulses – although calling him a "poet" is a hyperbole that the Liberator himself would not have admitted.³⁹

No doubt he sometimes vacillated, sabotaging political initiatives that he himself had set in motion. But it was not his temperament that explains his failures or, as Belaúnde has it, his tragedy. Rather, he was undertaking an impossible task with pitifully inadequate resources.

³⁸ From Víctor Andrés Belaúnde, Bolívar and the Political Thought of the Spanish American Revolution, Baltimore, 1938; quoted in Bushnell, op. cit., p. 205.

³⁹ Cf. Bolívar's charming letter to a poet in Bushnell, pp. 75-78.

The task was a fantasy, based on a historical misconception. Bolívar and many of his contemporaries liked to imagine that the colonies had been united under Spanish rule and could remain united, or be re-united, with Spain gone. In fact, the colonies had never been organically joined to one another. Instead, each separately had been subject to Spain. There was no significant commerce between one colony and another. Such resources as had been developed in the Americas were for production for export either to Spain or (more or less legally, depending on the time and place) to other European powers via their Caribbean colonies.

The basic structure of colonial America consisted of an urban commercial and administrative center (Caracas, Cartagena, Guayaquil, Lima, etc.) and its nearby hinterland (e.g., the plantations near Caracas); wealth was extracted from this hinterland to be exported and exchanged for goods demanded by the local élite. A few Spanish troops and a tiny colonial militia policed this system internally, primarily to prevent slave revolts, and defended it from British, Dutch, French, Danish and even Swedish armed incursions. The colonies of course were expected to pay for this protection, and for the maintenance of a civil administrative bureaucracy from which their sons were mainly excluded.

This common dependence on Spain was the only material link between the colonies. Other bonds were of a purely ideological, or “spiritual,” nature: common language, religion, certain traditions, and so on. But such common understandings are not really bonds at all. They simply make it easier for one person to recognize the intentions of the other, and quicker therefore for him to draw a sword when the other makes an aggressive gesture. The fury of the independence wars attests to this, as do the subtle and intricate conspiracies of the postwar period. It was absurd to think that Bolívar could reinvent in the Hispanic Americas a metropolis that would substitute for Europe. The former Spanish colonies had nothing to offer one another, especially after the devastations of the wars. The only thing that might have been done towards unity was to try to restore the economies of the separate ecological regions and then to foster economic links among them.

But this too is a fantasy, for even if such an economic policy could have been conceived in those days – the first massive application of it was not to come until the late 1920s and 1930s, in Russia – there was no influential group who would have thought it in their immediate interest to put it into effect. Bolívar, in any case, knew nothing and cared less about economic science. He had no hesitation to try to raise needed funds by any expedient means, from heavy military taxes and confiscations to huge loans from British banks, without regard for longer-range consequences. His instruments remained military and political.

The many interest groups in the five republics could no longer be held together by the promise of Liberty, because Liberty – the expulsion of Spain – had been achieved, without bringing the promised rewards. So the Liberator now tried to maintain his authority by his prestige, his “glory,” which now came to mean ostentatious gratitude by the people for their liberation. But, as Carrera Damas has remarked about this period in the Liberator’s life, “Glory in combat is less

vulnerable than glory in repose, because the former defends itself whereas the latter can only feed itself on the past."⁴⁰

He also counted on his prestige to give him continued ascendancy over the army. But an army cannot be maintained without civilian production, and the civilians were much more reluctant to support an army that no longer had a credible external enemy. And, in the wake of the painfully hollow triumph of liberty, the sickening awareness that the reward for all their efforts was a ruined country, even segments of the army began to conspire against him.

As I believe the analysis of texts has demonstrated, Bolívar's concept of liberty was not one that could serve as the foundation of a state. It was tied up in his mind with war, and therefore with the ancient notion of glory. Liberty had a narrow range of meanings for him, turning on the core meaning of the expression of one's free will and therefore the emancipation from subjection by a foreign power. It did not imply, was not even compatible with, "civil liberties" – i.e., rights of individuals against the state.

The liberty he sought was originally the liberty of his class, the liberty to exercise "active and domestic tyranny" over the masses, but in his later writings he insists that tyranny is a great evil. Precisely what he understood by tyranny is unclear, especially since his own last dictatorship was so harsh.

More than tyranny, he was afraid of "anarchy" and "chaos." And what did these words mean? "Invasions by the people" – of their own government; "popular waves"; "license." Anarchy meant direct rule by the people.

Yet, after his defeat at the hands of Boves, it was apparent not only to Bolívar but to everyone that only with the people on their side could the patriots hope to achieve victory. Bolívar did not again call the people "stupid" after 1813 (at least, not in the texts examined). Ignorant, yes, and easily fooled, and difficult to control, but a force to be reckoned with and respected, as one respects a hurricane.

It might be said then that Bolívar's project was to induce the people to fight for liberty – to guide the force of the hurricane – without surrendering liberty to the people. The idea of the Angostura government, and even more clearly marked in the constitution of Bolivia, was that the people should enjoy their liberty vicariously, that liberty should be held for them by their wiser leaders. In practice, Liberty now meant little more than the memory of triumph in wars now past. Liberty was glory congealed.

But who was there now to keep liberty safe from the people? Bolívar's own class, the *mantuanos*, had been decimated in the wars and had lost their cohesion and their power as a class, so they could not be relied on for tutelage over the common people. Liberty would have to be safeguarded by a new class of rulers, made up of the remnants of the *mantuanaje* and the new Liberators, the patriot generals who were mostly of humble origin, that is, had risen from the people. But, with a ruined economy and with no external armed power to guarantee their authority, these new rulers could neither satisfy the popular demands nor

40 El culto a Bolívar, p. 88.

suppress them, and the order Bolívar dreamed of became ever more impossible to achieve – much as he feared in his last days.⁴¹

Bolívar's actions and the whole course of the wars had changed the societies of the New World to such an extent that the old battle cry of "Liberty!" had become a relic of another time, another consciousness, of meaning now only as an incantation in a tribal myth. In the future every tyrant, great and small, would claim Bolívar's heritage (Juan Vicente Gómez would go so far as to make his official birth date coincide with the Liberator's) and invoke a liberty that bore no relation to civil rights or due process but merely provided a verbal adornment to the arbitrary power of the ruler and his circle.

The Liberator had not foreseen the needs of the people in the postcolonial epoch, nor could he have been expected to. To the end of his life, he thought of the people as a force to be feared. And so it was that, after his death, official hymns to the Liberator could be used "to disguise a failure and to delay a disillusionment,"⁴² to distract the people from a liberation that they themselves would define and continually redefine according to their own needs.

41 "...este país caerá infaliblemente en manos de la multitud desenfrenada para después pasar a tiranuelos casi imperceptibles de todos colores y razas;...si fuera posible que una parte del mundo volviera al caos primitivo, éste sería el último período de América." Written by Bolívar on 9 November 1830; p. 169 in Escritos políticos.

42 Carrera Damas, El culto a Bolívar, p. 42.

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