

history make it unlikely that many scholars will emulate Simon's efforts, collective comparative work is possible and should be encouraged. *The Ideology of Creole Revolution* shows that U.S. historians are certain to see the history of their nation in new light when placed in the context of pan-American experiences.

[Review by David C. Hendrickson, Colorado College](#)

This excellent work brings together two subjects invariably considered apart—North American and Spanish American political thought in the age of revolution and independence (roughly, the 1770s to the 1830s). These conflicts posed issues not only of “home rule” but of “who should rule at home.”<sup>[7]</sup> That dual task, as Carl Becker once suggested, was emblematic of the struggles over the American Revolution, but the same challenges were posed in Spanish America during its long struggle with Spain. The heart of this book is an examination of that dual task as it was confronted in the thought and action of three formidable figures—Alexander Hamilton of the United States, Simón Bolívar of Gran Colombia, and Lucas Alamán of Mexico. Each of these men, according to Simon, embodied an ideology of “anti-imperial imperialism” and took similar approaches to revolution, constitutional design, and foreign policy. They were attracted to strong presidential powers and greatly inclined toward centralism. After two beginning chapters laying out the parameters of the general problem, Simon offers successive portraits of the political thought of these three men while expertly summarizing their times. He then asks, in chapter six: “If the Americas were so similar at the time they achieved independence, why are they so different today? (15-16). Each of these chapters is very well done, as the reader acquires not only a coherent narrative through time but also engagement with a host of interpretive issues. Simon's prose style is incisive, concise, and powerful; his organization for the presentation of these complicated materials is exemplary. *The Ideology of Creole Revolution* is a superb piece of scholarship.

Simon stresses that Creole political thinkers embraced an ideology that incorporated both anti-imperialist and imperialist positions. They rejected imputations of inferiority and sought equality with their former rulers, while at the same time consolidating Creole rule over the Americas, to the exclusion of enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples. Territorial expansion and internal colonization followed as twin imperatives of a policy that resisted the metropolis “by expanding their new states' frontiers and consolidating their control over often resistant populations” (2-3). Objecting to the ways in which scholars have framed the issue—“the revolutions thesis” and “the incipient nationalism thesis”—Simon argues that these American independence movements were more like one another than is often assumed, and very different from “the European, Asian, and African revolutions with which they are usually compared” (7). Despite profound philosophical divergences in their education, Hamilton, Bolívar, and Alamán's ideas often ran on very similar tracts; they all fought the inequalities of European empires; they all proposed “constitutions designed to protect Creole privileges within independent societies by unifying former colonies and granting executives extensive authority” (12); they all urged centralization and internal colonization over an extended territory. Simon explores thoughtfully the ways that institutions impinge upon a political thinker's life, and the book artfully navigates between philosophic speculation and the response to concrete historical predicaments in explicating the outlook of these three figures.

Simon sets out a general interpretation of Creole political thought in chapter two, setting up an illuminating dialogue between “ideology and evidence” in the chapters to follow. In both North and South America, he argues, “the most proximate impetus to rebellion were not reforms that modified either imperial or colonial constitutions, but shifting balances of power in the metropolises” (29). Constitutionally, the Creoles invented both union and presidentialism, each of which offered a means of “resisting reconquest and establishing internal order within heterogeneous American societies” (42). Also fulfilling that requirement were foreign policies of territorial expansion and internal colonization. Noting the similarity of these ideas of ‘anti-imperial imperialism’ to ‘liberal imperialism,’ Simon rejects the notion that “the imperialistic urge is internal to liberalism” and that “inherent in the very structure of liberal rationalism and abstraction is a propensity for

colonial domination.” In contrast, Simon argues that the contradictions are not a result of the ideas themselves, “but of the interests that they were developed to defend, and of the institutions that structured those interests” (46).<sup>[8]</sup>

As Simon notes, his general argument regarding the “imperialism of anti-imperialism” has various antecedents. William Appleman Williams offered a version of it (as has Niall Ferguson in *Colossus*).<sup>[9]</sup> Among more recent works, *The Ideology of Creole Revolution* is similar in basic argumentation to Eliga Gould’s *Among the Powers of the Earth*, though Gould confines his (enlarged) attention to North America and its borderlands.<sup>[10]</sup> In comparing disparate cases and partly in its choice of subject matter, it resembles David Armitage’s *The Declaration of Independence*, though Simon offers a much denser level of detail and interpretation.<sup>[11]</sup> It does for this particular epoch something like what Anthony Pagden accomplished in *Lords of All the World* and other works (bringing Spanish and Anglo-American thought into comparison with one another).<sup>[12]</sup>

Though Simon enters into a broad range of historiographical disputes, he offers his work as an entry in comparative political theory, a discipline dedicated to exploring the contributions of thinkers outside the traditional western canon. Such studies of East and South Asian, Islamic, African, and Latin American thought, he argues, disclose elements of surprising consensus where we might expect difference, and difference where we might expect consensus, making for a highly fruitful interchange (9). One of the features of Simon’s work I like the most is the attention given to political thinkers who were also actors, proximate to power and preoccupied with concrete choices, as opposed to philosophers in their closets. The comparative turn, as it engages the Global South, seems likely to encourage that change of focus, one that could beneficently reorder the canon of western international thought as well. (To understand liberalism as it really was, ought we not consult Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and William Seward, in preference to Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill?)

Though Latin America is often seen as “Third World” today, the two Spanish thinkers featured in this work were deeply versed in the western corpus. Alamán’s inspiration was Edmund Burke, and Bolívar looked to Machiavelli and Montesquieu. The work succeeds in part by directing attention to a rich tradition in Spanish American political thought that is broadly unfamiliar to North American readers, but also because the comparative context allows new questions and perspectives unlikely to arise if seen singly. Comparative political theorists, Simon writes, have focused on what these thinkers said and whether that corpus of thought teaches important truths, whereas he wants also to explore *why* these thinkers thought as they did. How ideas are ‘caused’ raises difficult questions, but Simon offers a straightforward framework for understanding this. “Political ideas are caused by the background problems that their thinkers set out to solve. Explaining why political thinkers thought what they did involves reconstructing the background problems that they aimed to address when they wrote or spoke” (10). We cannot make sense of it without seeing both an institutional and an intellectual context—the one reflecting a political community’s enduring commitments and *problematiques*, the other the array of preexisting arguments and conceptual frameworks that make up an intellectual tradition.

While Simon’s general approach is certainly fruitful and should multiply (his method and organization being especially exemplary), I do have some reservations. The first is that a materialist interpretation can only take us so far, and especially when considering figures of such extraordinary ability. A class interpretation, even if rid of Marx’s binary choices, understates the sheer individuality that each thinker brought to their consideration of “the background problems,” making it problematic to speak of causation. Bolívar and Hamilton were impetuous characters, ones of a kind, hosts within themselves, rising to heights of creative energy seldom seen before or since. All three men, too, thought of themselves more as devotees of their country than the representatives of any class, suggesting not the eclipse but the limited reach of a purely class-based interpretation.

Though Simon shows the utility of a hemispheric comparison, he need not claim to have shown that the hemispheric thesis is more important than the ‘revolutions’ thesis. Both, surely, are relevant to understanding the cases at hand; both, surely, illuminate some dynamics while failing to illuminate others. It is insightful to see American thought generally as displaying features of both imperialism and anti-

imperialism, but also true that the imperial features were from the outset often subject to ferocious critique, and that such critiques rested on the same principles of natural right, national equality, and anti-imperialism developed in the contest with the metropole. That made ‘revolution principles’ directly relevant to the treatment of indigenous peoples or enslaved Africans. (Everyone came to know Samuel Johnson’s taunt of 1775: “How is that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”<sup>[13]</sup>) Simon himself makes this point indirectly in his critique of those who see imperialism as embedded in liberalism—salvaging, as it were, the emancipatory potential of liberalism—and it is also suggested by his sympathetic treatment of José Martí. If so, however, we should want a hemispheric interpretation to join the revolutions thesis on the stage, not to put it in the shade.

A similar point may be made with regard to the “incipient nationalisms” thesis. If it errs, it is by failing to problematize nationalism—in other words, by seeing as fixed rather than fluid the bevy of incipient nationalisms embedded in the institutional setting North and South Americans confronted. That put them both in what I called in *Peace Pact* a “federal situation,” in which separation from the metropole inevitably meant a search for union among themselves, with twenty obvious questions immediately coming to the fore, all to be addressed in less than promising circumstances.<sup>[14]</sup> Simon’s criticism of the “incipient nationalisms” thesis in relation to South America seems persuasive to me: his point is that we should not assume as an historical inevitability the distinct nationalisms that did develop and that broke up the political configurations of the Spanish Empire into smaller fragments. That means closer attention to South American experiments in union, failures though they mostly proved to be. Whether attached to larger or smaller political formations, however, nationalism was still a potent force.

There is no mistaking the similarity in argumentation among North and South Americans, as they wrestled with the problems of independence and union. As I put it in *Union, Nation, or Empire*: “There were manifold variations on the federal idea in Latin America in this fermentative period, each mutually related to the others, with no fixed conception of the boundaries of the states that might come to exist, and within which, and among which, variations of the federal idea were considered. The idiom in which South Americans considered these issues was very similar to that which had unfolded in North America, even in the midst of circumstances that were vastly different. Anarchy and despotism formed the rival specters, decentralization and centralization the rival solutions; the fear of foreign intervention lay in close embrace with the danger of internal discord.”<sup>[15]</sup> So there is a strong sense in which the institutional setting, of needing to cooperate amid dissension, ‘causes’ the ensuing *problematique* and structures the discourse in a certain way, but at the same time the institutional setting leaves considerable latitude for choice and does not point to a preordained outcome. The institutional setting causes the questions, as it were, but does not cause the answers.

The “internationalist” interpretation I advance in *Peace Pact* and *Union, Nation, or Empire* should not be identified, as Simon seems to do, with what I would call an “imperialist” interpretation, which emphasizes from the outset a U.S. program “of territorial expansion and global power projection more successful than any previously attempted in history,” and which sees the founding purpose as establishing “a government possessing the ability and willingness to regularly mobilize and project powers of coercion on an enormous and unprecedented scale beyond the nation’s pale” (51). My argument, in decided contrast with that of Max Edling, is that the Founders were trying to avoid an outcome such as this.<sup>[16]</sup> These depictions, surpassing even the most inflated apprehensions of the Anti-Federalists, would never have passed the lips of a Federalist in 1788.

It is understandable why Simon chose Hamilton as his representative North American, as his thought does at times show a remarkable similarity to Bolívar and Alamán. At the same time, the features of Hamilton’s thought that are most Bolivarian—his proposal of an executive with life tenure at the federal convention, his 1798 approval of Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco de Miranda’s scheme, in conjunction with Britain, to strip Spain of its new world possessions—are least representative of broader North American thought. Simon cites a letter from Hamilton in 1803 purporting to show, from circumstantial evidence, that James Madison must have approved Hamilton’s proposal of life tenure for the president at the convention, though if so it would have represented a pretty sharp departure from Madison’s views theretofore and subsequently (72, 218n85). Though Simon suggests that Hamilton’s ideas at the convention enjoyed considerable

approval from the assembled hosts, the more persuasive judgment is that Hamilton's speech was "admired by everybody" but "supported by none."<sup>[17]</sup> Hamilton's ideas at the convention for framing a government may not have been "totally out of step" with American sentiment at the time, as Simon maintains, but they were mostly out of step with it (72).

Simon adopts Eric Nelson's view, in *The Royalist Revolution*, that the federal and state conventions vested the U.S. president with the prerogative powers inhering in the king.<sup>[18]</sup> This interpretation suffers from several limitations. For one, the thesis is plainly at variance with the federal convention's placement of the war power—the quintessential attribute of prerogative—in the Congress. Prerogative, if inescapably present in the new government launched in 1789, was at a minimum divided between president and congress by the Constitution, not vested alone in the president. Nelson, in the opening of his book, notes that James Wilson offered, on June 1, 1787, the motion that would create the American presidency. The new federal executive, in Nelson's summary of Wilson's position, "should 'consist of a single person,' and this chief magistrate should be vested with sweeping prerogative powers."<sup>[19]</sup> But Wilson's proposal was simply that the Executive should consist of a single person, and Wilson went on to explain: "He did not consider the Prerogatives of the British Monarch as a proper guide in defining the Executive powers. Some of these prerogatives were of a Legislative nature. Among others that of war & peace &c. The only powers he conceived strictly Executive were those of executing the laws, and appointing officers."<sup>[20]</sup> Given Wilson's explicit denials, how can Nelson possibly derive "sweeping prerogative powers" in the Executive from Wilson's motion?

Second, the argument of "patriot royalism" neglects the profound institutional weakness of the British monarchy in the colonies, making the royal governors, where they existed, utterly reliant on the support of the colonial assemblies.<sup>[21]</sup> To see a species of Stuart royalism in the colonists' tactical arguments in favor of king over parliament in the final years of the imperial crisis is inconsistent with the institutional setting in which they found themselves. They were not pining to restore some version of Charles I—on the contrary, they wanted a perfect equality in their relations with the mother country. The readiness with which the colonists rejected the monarchy, once their appeals for George III to veto oppressive parliamentary legislation failed, shows how thin that supposed support was, as do the multitude of satirical treatments of hereditary monarchy that followed. In 1775, the continental congress professed a veneration of the king because, in their conception of the imperial constitution, he could not do squat without their consent, and after independence the colonists made the executives of their new state constitutions even weaker than the colonial governors. Nor was there a close link between these theories of the empire and subsequent conceptions of executive power. Others in the colonies, like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, developed the same argument regarding the true constitution of the British Empire, but did not follow Hamilton in their conception of executive power or the wisdom of far-reaching centralization in the federal union.

It was the disasters and setbacks of the war of independence, demonstrating the need for effective governance that depended on law and coercion rather than volunteerism and virtue, which instigated a searching examination of whether a government constituted on strictly republican principles could be an effective government. Hamilton was oppressed furthest by these doubts, and in that way is very much like Bolívar, but he is not especially representative of broader North American thinking in this particular. In the unlikely event his proposal for a president with life tenure had survived the Philadelphia convention, it would probably have sunk the Constitution in the state ratifying conventions. It was equally impossible to reconstitute the union by obliterating the power of the states. The Constitution that Hamilton so ably defended in *The Federalist*, of course, had neither of these features, and Hamilton conceded the imperative need for a fair trial of the Constitution as it was.

If Hamilton was anomalous in pushing so far at the convention the theory of the British Constitution, he was also anomalous in his 1798 support for Francisco de Miranda's scheme to revolutionize South America, with U.S. land forces, led by Hamilton, to act in conjunction with the Royal Navy (86-87). John Adams, then president, thought Hamilton's ideas in 1798 hallucinatory and likened Miranda's "visionary" scheme to "that of his countryman Gonzalez, of an excursion to the moon, in a car drawn by geese trained and disciplined to the purpose." Had it been implemented, Adams thought, it would have produced "an instantaneous insurrection of the whole nation from Georgia to New Hampshire."<sup>[22]</sup> Hamilton's support (secret at the time) for Miranda's ambitious project was well outside the mainstream,

even among Federalists, but also indicative of the frenzied overreaching that led to the Federalist defeat in 1800. If any exculpation is to be allowed Hamilton for this momentary enchantment with military adventurism, it is due to his overarching fear of France, and of the universal empire at which he conceived the revolutionary republic to be insidiously aiming. The whole scheme was floated under the assumption that France would soon be on the attack in the Americas. Here, the European rather than hemispheric context is vital, as Hamilton and his friends believed France on the cusp of attaining a tyranny on sea and land “that would press as heavily on the necks of the subject nations, as that of Rome.”<sup>[23]</sup> The Spanish treasure fleets facilitated that dire outcome; only the British Navy prevented it. In 1798, in short, they believed themselves to be in what might be called a ‘1940 moment’ rather than, say, an ‘1846 moment.’

Simon cites Alexander Hamilton’s “Conjectures on the Constitution,” from late September 1787, after the federal convention had adjourned, to argue that Hamilton believed the federal government would “triumph altogether over the state governments and reduce them to an intire subordination, dividing the larger states into smaller districts” (73). That was but one of the alternatives in Hamilton’s conjecture, however, and not in his estimation the most likely. His more characteristic reflection on the “frail and worthless fabric,” both in 1787 and later, was that it would be rent apart by the state and sectional interests it needed to control. Rather than a victorious national government, he ventured in his “Conjectures,” the “most likely result” was contests over state and national authority ending in a dissolution of the union.<sup>[24]</sup> While Simon rightly elevates the importance of ‘union’ in his consideration of Spanish America, he slights here (though not later, see 177-178) the importance of disunion in his consideration of North America.

I was made a bit uneasy by the paucity of concrete description regarding the characteristics of the imperialism the North American Creoles practiced. There is no discussion of the Federalists’ Indian policy, which stood in opposition to the southern states’ land hunger and expansionist ambition. Noting the Indian treaties made by the Federalists, John Taylor of Virginia argued that “instead of encroaching upon the barbarians,” the Federalists were encouraging “the barbarians to encroach upon us.”<sup>[25]</sup> With respect to slavery, Hamilton and other northerners palliated and endured over the question, for the sake of the union, but did have an attitude worlds apart from the southern slaveholding interest. It is the southern planters rather than northern Federalists like Hamilton who most embodied the contradictions of “anti-imperial imperialism.” This is a point that sits uneasily within Simon’s larger thesis, as the southerners tended toward political decentralization and were scolding opponents of executive discretion in the 1790s. These “anti-imperial imperialists,” at least, do not conform to the general portrait he gives of that position. Simon writes that the Creoles in North and South America feared both tyranny and anarchy—“more complete domination from across the Atlantic” and “chaotic conflict with the African Americans, Native Americans, and mixed-race Americans that they lived amongst” (18)—but when Hamilton considered the questions of slavery and aboriginals, he refracted it all through the problem of union: the question, for him, was not how to keep slaves and Indians down, but how to keep southern slaveholders or discontented western settlers within the federal empire.

Simon provides a fine portrait of Simon Bolívar, more Hamiltonian than Hamilton in seeking centralization, presidential power, and military aggression as means to avoid the descent into anarchy. Simon’s thick description of Bolívar’s constitutional thought also illustrates a more heterogeneous political landscape than existed in North America. Complaining of federalist approaches to Gran Columbia’s constitution of 1821, Bolívar wrote of an astonishing diversity comprehended by “the Caribs of the Orinoco, the plainsmen of the Apure, the fishermen of Maracaibo, the boatmen of the Magdalena, the bandits of Patia, the ungovernable Pastusos, the Guajibos of Casanare and all the other savage hordes of Africans and Americans that roam like deer through the wilderness of Colombia” (108). Later, he acknowledged that, in Colombia, “the South hates the north, the coast hates the highlands, Venezuela hates Cundinamarca; and Cundinamarca suffers from the disorders in Venezuela, and in the midst of all this disturbance *pardocracia* flourishes” (120-121). While Simon does not enlist himself among the thinkers (like Benjamin Constant, Henry Clay, or, later, Salvador de Madariaga) who regarded Bolívar as submitting to the lure of Napoleonic ambition, the overall tenor of his treatment of Bolívar’s thought is certainly not inconsistent with that accusation.<sup>[26]</sup> Simon casts a very skeptical eye, for example, on the argument of scholar Diego von Vacano, who sees Bolívar as an exemplar of a “consistently anti-imperialist republicanism” (116).<sup>[27]</sup> Of the three men surveyed in the book, Bolívar most illustrates Simon’s larger thesis regarding the Creoles: that they employed “imperial means for putatively anti-imperial ends” (119). But given the heterogeneity and pertinacity of its

component units, Bolivarian visions of union—whether on a big scale, like Gran Columbia, or the yet larger scale projected by the Panama Congress of 1826—had an immense mountain to climb and were virtually destined to fail. Bolívar himself likened the quest for continental union, the first step of which was to be taken at Panama, to “that mad Greek who from his rock tried to direct the course of ships sailing by.”<sup>[28]</sup>

One of the distinctive features of Spanish American thought is the somewhat cynical but usually discerning view taken of the Yankees, lost invariably to the intrinsic greatness and rightness of their enterprises. Bolívar, an admirer of the U.S. federal constitution in theory, but emphatic that it could not be applied in South America, had little use for the North Americans in practice, and wanted a closer connection with Great Britain instead. Only a sleight of hand, as Simon notes, got the U.S. an invitation to the Panama Congress (125). Alamán, whose career was long enough to witness the loss of Texas and the disastrous war of 1846-1848, had ample opportunity to digest and marvel at the Yankee talent for hypocrisy. By the time of José Martí, whose thought is surveyed in Simon’s conclusion, the wariness of Bolívar and Alamán toward the United States had “blossomed into outright opposition” (195). It remains a remarkable feature of contemporary politics that U.S. opinion is normally oblivious to Latin American views, whereas South American opinion is by institutional setting and power realities obsessed with what the *norteamericanos* are up to. From an impartial perspective, it stands to reason that those outside, at least on certain great points, might actually see things more clearly than the insiders, proving a useful corrective to the well-known North American tendency toward solipsism.

Simon’s sixth chapter surveys political developments in the United States and Spanish America after the initial Creole consensus fell apart, acutely describing the challenges to the patriot consensus that accompanied independence. While one might question the solidity of the initial Creole consensus, Simon describes ably the ensuing party battles. In understanding this different trajectory, which left North Americans rich and powerful, and Spanish Americans weak and divided, Simon downplays explanations that emphasize the legacies of British and Spanish imperialism, and focuses instead on the contingent and contrasting fortunes of union and disunion in North and South America. I agree that union is the crucial factor, though it should be re-emphasized that the problem confronting South Americans was just overwhelming and intractable, whereas for the North Americans it was merely incredibly difficult.<sup>[29]</sup> In principle, Bolívar and Alamán saw the attractions of a Spanish American union, but took as a matter of course that their own nations would be the leaders of the thing (165), one among many particularist assumptions that set Latin voyages in union onto the rocks.

Simon concludes on a somewhat ambivalent note. Are we to be more impressed by the partiality of interest the Creoles displayed, their insistence on “preserving and justifying hierarchy,” or by the emancipatory possibilities their thought also disclosed? Is the glass half empty or half full? The answer, as ever, remains uncertain. While it is true that many North American Creoles did seek to preserve and justify hierarchy over slaves and indigenous peoples, that is not all they did. There were liberal or anti-imperial elements in their program for their own societies that were far more inclusive and egalitarian than anything found in Europe. One must thus heartily concur with Simon’s closing thought: such elements might indeed still inspire those who would seek to emancipate the New World once again.

[Review by Erika Pani, El Colegio de México](#)

**T**he similarities and connections between the American Independence movements are not uncharted territory. Many Latin American schoolchildren are –albeit fleetingly– taught about the rebellion of Britain’s thirteen North American colonies as a precedent to their own revolutions. But efforts to tell this story from a broader, continental, comparative perspective have been rare, and have often led to predictable chronicles of unbridgeable distance, of principles perverted and things gone wrong, as the former subjects of the King of Spain proved to be too Hispanic, too Catholic, too backward, too diverse and too tropical for the modern, liberal, revolutionary politics launched by their neighbor to the North.<sup>[30]</sup> This makes Joshua Simon’s elegant reframing of the Americas’ Independence movements as a “Creole Revolution” particularly bold, provocative, and productive.