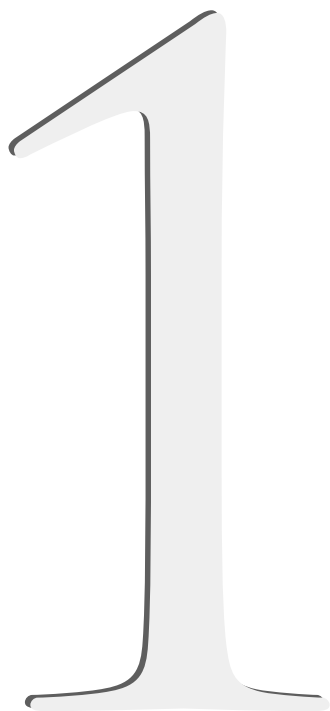


Introduction

The Wars of Independence



ON NOVEMBER 11, 1811, an angry mob of black and mulatto patriots stormed into the Cartagena town council hall. Armed with lances, daggers, and guns, they gave their petition for independence to the undecided members of the local revolutionary junta. After insulting and beating its members, they forced the helpless junta to sign the declaration of independence against its will.¹ The scene described above faithfully follows most contemporary eyewitness accounts of Cartagena's Independence Day and conforms to historical research that demonstrates the political influence of blacks and mulattoes in the independence movements. Yet to many it still seems incredible to narrate an independence scene in which blacks and mulattoes called the day.² To do so challenges two popular assumptions about the Wars of Independence: that the lower classes were mere cannon fodder and

had little, if any, political influence; and that the Wars of Independence were led by elites fueled by foreign “enlightened illusions” with no relevance to Spanish American reality.³

The latter idea can be traced back to the first histories of the Wars of Independence, in which the lower classes were counted among the numerous obstacles that creole patriots had to overcome to create an independent, free, and modern nation.⁴ José Manuel Restrepo—protagonist in the struggles for independence, minister of the interior under Simón Bolívar, and historian and author of the first history of the Colombian Wars of Independence—assessed the lower classes as primitive, in need of education, and prone to follow demagogues; if uncontrolled, they would push the nation down the road to anarchy.⁵ Restrepo acknowledged the presence and decisive influence of *pardos* (free blacks and mulattoes) in Cartagena’s revolution, but he immediately depoliticized their actions. Booze and cash rather than patriotism explained their participation in the independence movement.⁶ *Pardo* involvement was not a positive proof of popular patriotism; instead it demonstrated the “insolence and preponderance of people of color, which became fatal for public peace.”⁷ Restrepo’s foundational history inscribed the acts of *pardo* patriots within a discourse of danger and irrationality that set their behavior in sharp contrast to the noble and politicized conduct of the creole elite.⁸

In such nineteenth-century creole writings, modernity is the commendable aspiration of creole patriots and one of the principles justifying independence from Spain.⁹ Yet early narratives of the independence wars also contain some of the first denunciations of modern democratic politics as unsuitable for Spanish American societies. These texts did not condemn democracy per se, but rather its excesses. Simón Bolívar is perhaps the most influential representative of this tradition. His attacks on lawyers, demagogues, and incendiary theoreticians for their failure to grasp that modern politics could not be transferred to Spanish America without sufficient attention to local geography and culture are well known.¹⁰ What often goes unacknowledged is his influence

on the development of an intellectual tradition that erased the contribution of the Spanish American popular classes in the history of modern democracy, making modernity seem a mere illusion of the elite. Bolívar sought to prove that fully representative politics did not suit South Americans. He created a dichotomy that distinguished between politically virtuous North Americans and South Americans, whose “character, habits and present enlightenment does not suit perfect representative institutions.” An “entirely popular system,” he insisted, was not appropriate for this region.¹¹ He also cast local demands for popular and regional representation as the political pipedreams of a handful of enlightened lawyers.¹² In his address to the Constitutional Congress of Angostura, he criticized the current constitution by reminding legislators that “not all eyes are capable of looking at the light of celestial perfection.”¹³ Representative democracy might belong in paradise, but not in South America. By making representative politics look like the exclusive aspiration of self-deluded lawyers, he detached the new constitutional governments from the societies that birthed them. This narrative’s legacy erased from historical memory local struggles over the nature of the new political system. Yet if Bolívar lashed out against lawyers’ inability to realize that liberal and perfect institutions did not fit the geography of Colombia, this was because he feared not that the popular classes would remain aloof from modern politics but that they would participate too much. As Germán Carrera-Damas has shown, he feared that democracy in Spanish America could lead to the end of elite rule.¹⁴ He blamed lawyers for not understanding that representative institutions among “the Caribes from the Orinoco, the sailors of Maracibo, the *bogas* [river boatmen] of Magdalena, the bandits of Patia . . . and all the savage hordes of Africa and America” would lead to Colombia’s ruin, perhaps to a second Haiti.¹⁵ In his famous “Jamaica Letter,” he noted that in Lima “the rich would not tolerate democracy, and the slaves and *pardos* would not tolerate aristocracy.”¹⁶ Years later, he would warn José Antonio Páez against changing Colombia’s republican system, arguing that “the height and brilliance

of a throne would be frightful. Equality would be broken and *los colores* [the colored classes] would see all their rights lost to a new aristocracy.”¹⁷ Future interpretations of Bolívar would tend to forget the strong linkage between *pardos* and democracy in his writings. Mostly remembered instead is his attack on lawyers’ inability to comprehend local society.¹⁸

Paradoxically, this binary discourse of elite illusion and lower-class primitiveness reached new levels in the 1960s and 1970s, when a new generation of historians sought to denounce the elitism of traditional narratives that glorified independence and the historical role of the founding fathers. They wanted instead to understand the social effects of independence and to incorporate the popular classes into national histories. As historians compared the nature and degree of social and economic change from colonial times through the nineteenth century, they concluded that the lower classes had gained nothing by independence; if anything, they had lost.¹⁹ The lower classes had been betrayed by an elite illusion of modernity that proclaimed the equality of all citizens but was characterized by *caciquismo* (patron-client relations) and electoral fraud—that proclaimed racial equality but continued colonial practices of racial discrimination.²⁰ Therefore, changes in political culture were quickly dismissed as mirages that hid cruel social inequalities.²¹ The wars had secured independence from Spain, but nothing else. The work of Colombian historian Indalecio Lievano-Aguirre is typical of this perspective. Although he highlighted the participation of the popular classes in the wars, he disconnected them from the political ideology of their times. According to him, “the showing of false erudition of creole lawyers was unintelligible to slaves, Indians, the dispossessed, and the colored races.” In spite of his critique of traditional narratives, Lievano-Aguirre remained trapped by the elitist characterization of the lower classes as prepolitical primitives.²² Ironically, it is this focus on the lower classes that makes the Revolution a political chimera; it is their assumed disconnection from modern politics that makes revolutionary politics a mere illusion of the Spanish Ameri-

can elite. Thus, local intellectual and political debates became false erudition, implicitly contrasted with some true—perhaps European?—erudition. Spanish America's crucial, pioneering role in the history of democracy and republicanism became further erased.²³

But in Venezuela and Caribbean Colombia, which were central war theaters and important exporters of revolutionary armies, people of African descent were a demographic majority. They not only constituted the corps of the patriot army but also participated actively in the construction of the new political systems. Even so, some historians still insisted on their irrelevance. Significantly, this blind spot was not due to historians' ignorance of lower-class participation in the wars and receptiveness to certain revolutionary ideas. One of the most complex and brilliant political analysts of the period, François-Xavier Guerra, acknowledged the involvement of people of African descent, as well as the influence of French, particularly Haitian, revolutionary ideas in slave revolts.²⁴ Yet he quickly dismissed such events as exceptional and inconsequential occurrences that at most tended to make the elite more conservative. Thus Guerra's grand generalization was that the lower classes' lack of participation in modern politics set the Spanish American revolutions apart from other contemporary revolutions.²⁵

This persistence in denying *pardos'* contribution to republican politics speaks to the weight given to nineteenth-century political narratives, which continue to be read as documentary evidence of lower-class attitudes.²⁶ Anthony Pagden's analysis of Dominique De Pradt's 1829 writings about the blacks and mulattoes at the Constitutional Congress of Angostura provides a clear example of the limits of such narratives. De Pradt described the congress in the following terms:

Sybarites of the civilization of Europe, preachers of liberty, I would wish to see your tribunals set by the banks of the Orinoco, your benches of senators mingled with a horrible mixture of Blacks, mulattos, plainmen, Creoles, of men suddenly dragged out of the depths of slavery and barbarity to be transformed into legislators and heads of state! The same blood, the same language, the same customs, a common heritage of grandeur and of tal-

ent, an advanced civilization, all these hold together all the several parts of the societies of Europe. In America all is diversity, the principles of division, and absence of civilization. In Europe one plays, in America one must create.²⁷

One of the most striking features of De Pradt's observation is its endurance. Pagden uses De Pradt to point out Bolívar's failure to understand that his lofty republican ideals would do poorly within such a social environment. Oddly, he accuses Bolívar of not following his own precept—the need to adapt laws to regional specificities—and of not being able to see the chimerical nature of his own program. According to Pagden, local people needed a nationalist ideology based on emotional historical or religious nationalism instead of abstract republican precepts with which they had no connection.²⁸

In Pagden's analysis, one of the salient characteristics of De Pradt's description—the presence of black and mulatto legislators in Angostura—goes unnoticed. One wonders who these senators were; what they thought about their legislative duties; how they experienced, participated in, or followed the congressional debates. Did they influence the debates' outcome? Did Bolívar or any of the other legislators have them in mind as an important public in preparing their addresses? Addressing these questions may cause a different picture of the origins of modernity in Spanish America to emerge. However, this would require going beyond the conservative narrative of the Wars of Independence, which reiterates the unsuitability of republican ideals for Spanish American societies, the proclivity of the lower classes to follow demagogues, and the need for strong governments in societies riven by racial and social differences. This historical interpretation, as Antonio Annino has pointed out, is the result of the “Black legend” of Spanish American political history, which in its national version denounces nineteenth-century suffrage as a practice dominated by caudillos, corruption, and ignorance. This legend tends to have a checklist model of revolution, which inevitably compares Spanish American revolutions to the French and U.S. models in an effort to determine where they failed.²⁹

The problem with this perspective is that it does not help us understand the revolutions and their legacy. It does not do justice to the political and intellectual richness of this period. As Pagden, Guerra, Annino, Jaime Rodríguez, Margarita Garrido, and Jeremy Adelman, among others, have shown, this period witnessed serious and vigorous debates about the nature and future of representative politics.³⁰ The conservative narrative should be seen not as a description of lower-class political characteristics but as only one of several political programs and commentaries that emerged during the wars. Such readings need to be confronted with others that emerged during the Revolution.³¹ They should be understood as part of a larger debate over the nature of political change and the role of the lower classes in the new states, as part of a general nineteenth-century debate over how to reconcile social order and hierarchy with the politics of citizenship and representation. Further, seeing republican politics as an imported concept does not explain how the nineteenth-century Spanish American republics lasted longer than their European counterparts and why they survived in the midst of European monarchical backlash. It does not explain why these early republics enjoyed some of the most ample suffrage laws of their time or why they were replaced with more restrictive codes in the late nineteenth century.³² Moreover, it does not help us understand the mentality of the people who lived through the wars: the protagonists surely wondered at their changing times, at witnessing unprecedented transformations. Perhaps more important, the binary discourse of elite illusion and lower-class primitiveness deprives the Latin American popular classes of their historical role in the construction and development of modern politics. At stake are the very origins of Spanish American modernity.

Building on the methodological developments in peasant studies literature, works on the Wars of Independence have begun to provide a more nuanced conception of the appropriation of elite political discourse by the lower classes and their participation in the processes of state formation in the new republics. These narratives have challenged

the assumption of a strong ideological divide between the elite and the lower classes.³³ Peter Guardino, Alfonso Múnera, and Peter Blanchard have taught us that blacks and mulattoes were not mere cannon fodder in the Spanish American Wars of Independence; they participated in and influenced the political debates about citizenship in the revolutionary period, sometimes pushing the elites to acquiesce to radical measures that they had not initially contemplated.³⁴ The historical literature on slavery during the Age of Revolution—in particular the historiography on the French Caribbean—is further changing our understanding of blacks’ politics during this crucial period. This literature has examined the multiple ways in which enslaved and free people of African descent appropriated French revolutionary discourse. It has also highlighted the importance of lower-class, geographically mobile men and women in disseminating news about the Haitian Revolution and abolitionist politics among the Caribbean slave population. In addition, it has shown the importance of colonial revolutionary events in the development of European notions of race and citizenship.³⁵ My work follows this literature. I am particularly indebted to the work of Alfonso Múnera, the first historian to acknowledge the crucial importance of Afro-Colombians in Cartagena’s independence movement.

In spite of this new research, the revolutionary nature of the wars continues to be hotly contested. Even Eric Van Young’s recent insightful and sophisticated analysis of the Mexican Wars of Independence continues to question the relevance of modern politics for the Mexican lower classes.³⁶ In Colombia, as in the rest of Latin America, lower-class protagonism continues to be challenged. Aline Helg builds on Múnera’s account of blacks’ and mulattoes’ participation in Cartagena’s independence but reaches the traditional conclusion that the drive for independence “was a fragmented and conflictive elite-led movement.” According to her, “Afro-Colombian culture remained local and mostly festive. It seldom made claims against or directly challenged the power of the wealthy.”³⁷ It is not yet clear how historical

summaries of the independence period will incorporate the debate about popular politics and reconcile various interpretations. Still, many *pardos* embraced the rhetoric of the Age of Revolution and actively pressured for the realization of their vision of social and political equality.³⁸ Their political activities would have enormous consequences for Colombian politics and racial ideology. They would lead to the declaration of racial equality among all free people and the construction of a nationalist mythology of racial harmony and equality.

The Myth of Racial Democracy

During the Wars of Independence, Colombian patriots declared the end of colonial caste laws and decreed legal racial equality among all free citizens. They also constructed a powerful nationalist ideology that proclaimed the harmony and fraternity of Colombians of all colors and denounced racial hierarchies and conflicts as unpatriotic. Twentieth-century scholars called this link between nationalism and racial harmony “the myth of racial democracy.” Although this was a momentous political, legal, and ideological change, studies of race relations have tended to approach the declaration of equality only to denounce its failures. They correctly point out that legal equality did not eliminate racial discrimination. Moreover, they condemn the elites’ use of the republican rhetoric of equality to attract the black population to their side during the Wars of Independence and the nineteenth-century civil wars.³⁹ The fact that slavery remained legal in most of Spanish America until the 1850s seems to confirm the emptiness of this rhetoric. In addition, the nationalist discourse of racial harmony allowed the elite to maintain informal patterns of discrimination by impeding the formation of racially based political associations.⁴⁰

However, the powerful association among republicanism, nationalism, and racial equality that characterized the Spanish American independence period cannot be taken for granted. To do so not only

fails to address the complex processes of myth construction but also trivializes a major and fascinating historical moment. In the Western world, republican notions of citizenship have not always led to nationalist rhetorics of racial equality; on the contrary, the height of nineteenth-century liberalism coincided with increasing scientific racism.⁴¹ Moreover, when the notion of racial equality became firmly established in patriot rhetoric during the 1810s and 1820s, contemporary American republics did not provide compelling examples of racial equality to local elites. In the United States, nonwhite inferiority was part of the mainstream political landscape; only a few radical abolitionists favored full legal equality for blacks and whites.⁴² In Haiti, revolutionary France's declaration of racial equality was associated with civil war, slave rebellion, the defeat of the French planter class, and the formation of a black independent state—hardly an appealing image for Spanish American white creoles. Further, as race-war rumors show, early republican race relations were charged with deep tensions. With the emergence of a powerful black political and military class—including generals and congressmen—and the enfranchisement of a sector of the free black population, *pardos* had developed new expectations of freedom and equality. They now exerted a political pressure that the creole elite could not ignore. Clearly, the future of race relations was one of the most controversial and significant problems of the independence period and the myth of racial harmony one of the most important political legacies of the Age of Revolution.⁴³

Since Gilberto Freyre, José Vasconcelos, and Fernando Ortiz popularized the notion of Latin American racial democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, historians have searched the colonial past for the origins of the relative flexibility that characterizes Latin American as opposed to U.S. race relations. Scholars have explained this flexibility as a result of the demographic and economic weight of people of mixed descent and of a history of transculturation, patent in colonial culture, law, and religion.⁴⁴ A new generation of scholars has successfully challenged

this perspective, denouncing racial democracy as a myth, a hegemonic construction of Latin American elites. More than four decades of comparative analysis of slavery in the Americas have dismissed the notion of a benign and paternalist Iberian planter class, showing that these historical constructions are an intrinsic part of the myth itself. Research over the past decades has turned to an analysis of continuing patterns of racial discrimination in Latin America.⁴⁵ An unintended consequence of this intellectual shift has been the abandonment of the question of origins. Even recent works that look explicitly at the connection between nationalism and race in Latin America are more concerned with understanding how modern racial identities work once they are in place, rather than with asking how they emerged.⁴⁶ When and how the myth itself was constructed has been largely neglected.⁴⁷

The first decades of independence are crucial for understanding the myth's origins. The historical role of Gran Colombia (contemporary Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela) in its development can hardly be overstated. In more than one way, the Colombian struggle for independence represents a foundational moment in the history of modern race relations in Latin America. Gran Colombia was not only one of the first Latin American regions where racial equality became government policy but one of the first to elaborate a nationalist rhetoric of racial harmony and equality. Further, the important role of Colombian blacks and mulattoes precedes the similar part played by people of African descent in the better-studied Cuban war.⁴⁸ Yet most works on the myth of racial democracy tend to ignore the Age of Revolution.⁴⁹ Even recent comparative works on postemancipation societies usually analyze the later part of the nineteenth century—Reconstruction (1866–77), the Cuban Wars of Independence (1865–98), and Brazilian manumission (1888).⁵⁰ Studies on the history of the myth of racial democracy usually begin with the Cuban liberator José Martí and his call for a republic “with all and for all” in the 1890s.⁵¹ This focus, which reflects the weight and richness of the

scholarship on Brazil, Cuba, and the United States, tends to leave out the anticolonial struggles of the early nineteenth century. Yet in Latin America, patriots linked nationalism with racial harmony and equality for the first time in the 1810s and 1820s, during the Wars of Independence.⁵² When Cuban liberators made racial equality a fundamental slogan of the patriot camp, they were not inventing a novel concept but building on an entrenched Spanish American tradition that linked nationalism with racial equality.⁵³

Focusing on the province of Cartagena in Caribbean Colombia, this work examines the construction of a nationalist rhetoric of racial harmony and equality by examining the relationship among race, war, and nation. It analyzes how belief in racial equality evolved during the Wars of Independence from a notion shared by only a few American and Spanish radicals to a fundamental patriot nationalist construct that neatly separated Americans from Spaniards.⁵⁴ The tactical need to attract black soldiers to the patriot side is the common explanation for how racial harmony became associated with nationalism, but this does not suffice to explain this notion's strength and longevity or its association with patriotic love of country. The myth of racial harmony, like all nationalist myths, needed something further to provoke love and alliance: it is difficult to profess love to Machiavellian military tactics. What first captured the imagination of creole patriots was the Cádiz constitutional debates of 1810–12, which linked racial harmony to insurgent nationalism, thus endowing it with emotional power.

This work also examines the emergence of the phantom of race war and its impact on racial constructs. While elite racial fears are well known to historians, in particular Bolívar's constant reference to "pardocracy," we know little about the social basis of these fears and even less about the historical and political repercussions of talk about race war. Neither is it clear when or how the concept of race war disappeared.⁵⁵ Sedition cases in which *pardos* were accused of enmity toward whites can enhance our understanding of the historical sig-

nificance of constant references to race war. Specifically, these cases illuminate how the explicit expression of racial grievances became a mark of unpatriotic divisiveness. The linkage between racial equality and nationalism per se did not exclude the expression of grievances. The ideal of racial harmony and equality had the potential to either empower the disenfranchised or keep them in their place. The question was who controlled the concept of equality. Blacks' and mulattoes' demands, their active participation in patriot politics, gave this issue special urgency and concrete implications. Only through analysis of specific conflicts and negotiations among Afro-Colombians, local elites, and the state can we obtain a full appreciation of the origins of modern racial constructs in Colombia.

A Note on Region, Sources, and Terms

The region including the city of Cartagena and the Magdalena River valley up to the city of Honda is a privileged site for examining Afro-Colombian politics during the Age of Revolution. This was a crucial war theater in which people of African descent—a demographic majority—played a key political and military role. Moreover, its close links with other Caribbean regions such as Haiti, Jamaica, Venezuela, and Panama make it an excellent sphere for examining the transmission of revolutionary ideas to the Spanish mainland.

During the Wars of Independence and their immediate aftermath, Cartagena formed part of a territory larger than contemporary Colombia. In late colonial times, it was part of the viceroyalty of New Granada, which included today's Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. From independence, in 1821, until 1830, Cartagena was part of the new Republic of Colombia, which then included the regions administered by the old viceroyalty of New Granada—what historians today call Gran Colombia. Thus, until 1830, mentions of Colombia or the

Colombian state refer to Gran Colombia. This distinction is important: the foundations of racial imaginaries in Colombia were linked to this wider political area. The racial policies developed by the central state in Bogotá were thought to apply to a larger political entity, the region of Cartagena but one of a series of Colombian regions where people of African descent were numerous and politically active. When state authorities confronted racial conflicts in Cartagena, they tended to also take into consideration Venezuela, Panama, and Guayaquil.⁵⁶ The connections among these regions were also apparent to Afro-Colombians, many of whom traveled throughout South America and the Caribbean following the Bolivarian army.

The term *pardo* describes free people of African descent regardless of color. Although originally this term was used to describe mulattoes, by the early nineteenth century, it was commonly used in Colombia as a generic term for free people of African descent.⁵⁷ The term *castas* refers to all free people of mixed racial descent. The word *creole* refers to members of the white elite who were born in Spanish America. Finally, *myth of racial harmony* is used to describe the nationalist racial ideology of this period: it better reflects early nineteenth-century language than does *racial democracy*, a term coined much later. As we will see, some of this myth's ideological characteristics changed from the early nineteenth century to the twentieth—highlighting the need to historicize its cultural evolution. However, the linkage between nationalism and racial harmony and equality did not change.

A variety of documentary sources can help us to understand how race was used in different public and private spaces. I use parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, judiciary sentences, military speeches, manumission ceremonies, and personal diaries to trace the cultural, intellectual, and political bases of the new nationalist myth of racial harmony. I also use a series of criminal accusations against Afro-Colombians for “enmity toward whites” to illuminate certain aspects of race relations that are not apparent in other documents. These

judicial records offer rich insights into the racial politics of the early republican period. They provide a glimpse into the lives of Afro-Colombians at this time, emerging from the political activities of *pardos* whose names, professions, and words have come down to us. They give us a sense of how these people understood their changing times. They also reveal the presence of *pardos* in local politics. The 1812 Constitution of Cartagena enfranchised all men with independent means of support, either from property or from a profession or trade, regardless of income.⁵⁸ The 1821 Constitution, however, set property requirements for office holders and members of the electoral college.⁵⁹ In the Caribbean cities of Colombia, these electoral laws gave suffrage rights to a large number of *pardo* artisans who dominated the trades. Yet the available records do not reveal the percentage of *pardo* artisans (or independent peasants) who exercised this right. This obscurity derives not only from the paucity of contemporary public documents but also from republican laws that forbade the use of racial markers in these documents. Because of their very nature, however, accusations of race war are explicit about the race of the actors involved. Even though these records do not tell us how many *pardos* occupied public office, they do permit us a glimpse of political conflicts involving *pardos* who had reached positions of authority. Moreover, judicial records provide access to a variety of political expressions: voting was not the only political act.⁶⁰ Judicial cases illustrate what changes *pardos* expected the Republic to bring and how they sought to pressure the government to bring these changes about through petitions, pamphlets, and the support of political figures in the streets.