

IDENTIDAD Y ACTORES SUBALTERNOS EN LAS GUERRAS DE INDEPENDENCIA

IDENTITY AND SUBALTERN ACTORS IN THE WARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Guest Editor/ Edición a cargo de
Natalia Sobrevilla Perea

Introduction

NATALIA SOBREVILLA PEREA
University of Kent

At this time of bicentenary celebrations, the historiography of the wars of independence has gone full circle from first-hand accounts produced by elites privileged in the nineteenth century to the current search for the experiences of the subaltern. The grand narratives of the birth of nations written by veteran officers and the ‘romantic’ generation that followed chose to remember great heroes creating nations. These were at the core of national histories throughout the nineteenth century; however, by the middle of the twentieth century, especially during the last third of the century, these glorious stories of great men were challenged. Initially this was done by Marxist historians and later on by those influenced by the ideas of subaltern studies that were developed by intellectuals grappling with the history of the Indian sub-continent and its legacy of colonialism. This dossier reflects on subaltern actors during the wars of independence by exploring ideas of identity.

Building on the ideas of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who see the word ‘subaltern’ as having “both political and intellectual connotations” opposed to ‘dominant’ or ‘elite,’¹ the collection focuses on soldiers, women, and African slaves. All the actors studied were in one way or another subordinated

n.sobrevilla@kent.ac.uk

either in terms of class, caste, gender, or office. Moreover, as Florencia Mallon has stressed in her reading of Guha, “because subordination is a two-way relationship involving both dominated and dominant, elite groups would also receive consideration in the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars.”²² The articles in this dossier are interested precisely in this reciprocal relationship that involves both the dominated and the dominant, examining identity formation in an attempt to illuminate the way in which these relationships were shaped.

Independence was the moment of the birth of nations, and as such the historiography produced to understand it has been steeped in the idea of nationhood and the process of creation of new states. In the last couple of decades there has been a move to understand this process more as a push for autonomy that ultimately led to independence. Although the five articles collected in this issue all explore examples of nation-building, they are not meant to explain issues of identity through the lens of the state, challenging, as subaltern studies do, the notion that “there was nothing to politics apart from what concerned the state.”²³ The aim of these studies has been to look at independence from a wider perspective, focusing on national, religious, ethnic, or gender identities. The time frame has also been expanded and most of the articles compare the situation of the colonial period with that of the new republics in order to assess change and continuity, recognizing that the periodization of independence is still open to discussion.

The article by Scott Eastman analyzes the changing role of soldiers and priests from the wars of religion of the eighteenth century to the wars of independence in the nineteenth. In it he tackles an issue that continues to puzzle students of nationalism: how Catholicism was at no point rejected by those who fought for independence. During the wars of independence in Spain and Spanish America, for example, both sides considered themselves to be backed by God. In the case of Mexico, those fighting for independence were even able to create their own ‘national’ virgin, Guadalupe, mirroring practices seen in the peninsula. Eastman explores how religion was an important tool for creating cohesion and a sense of common identity among the dominant and the subaltern.

Alejandro Rabinovich studies deserters in the wars between the Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata and Brazil, which in turn became the war of independence of Uruguay. His contention is that the study of these patterns of mobilization and desertion provide an indication of the agency of subaltern soldiers. His sources are novel, as he has used the campaign diaries written by elite members to read against the grain in order to understand how desertion was in fact a pre-eminently political act to express dissatisfaction with the authorities. Rabinovich then looks at the way in which the war with Brazil presented the regime in the Río de la Plata with an opportunity to create a centralized institution in the army that appealed to a notion of an ‘Argentine’ nation. This remained at most

an aspiration that was challenged by the plebeian soldiers who chose to desert instead of fighting for the 'nation'.

The article I have written on the armed forces in Peru traces how ethnically segregated militias changed during the wars of independence. I assert that not all colonial militias were organized by caste, but instead most had a geographic ascription. As caste in the colonial period cannot be equated with a twentieth-century idea of race, I note that the main goal of caste divisions in the armed forces was to uphold a difference between those not perceived to be 'social equals'. The article also shows the way in which some caste-organized militias were still used in the armies put together by the first independent governments. Even after caste-divided regiments and battalions were completely abolished, the desire to establish boundaries between people perceived as not socially equal remained, as was seen in the differentiation between the regular troops and the militia corps, especially those such as the Batallón Comercio created in the 1840s.

The work by María Eugenia Chávez looks at how slaves in the state of Antioquia in the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada challenged elites for using the language of slavery to describe their relationship with the metropolis. Chávez reflects on the polysemic nature of the word 'liberty' and how it was from its very conception linked to the idea of slavery. She then points out how the slaves of Antioquia petitioned the courts for the abolition of slavery based on the Constitution given in this province in 1812, noting how the language of the charter spoke of freedom and the end of slavery. The reaction of the elites was to call for a free womb law in 1814 in an attempt to limit the risks of a possible slave rebellion in a province heavily inhabited by slaves. Abolitionism was therefore a consequence of the actions of slaves and their petition based on the 1812 constitution of Antioquia.

Finally, the article by Pablo Ortemberg is interested in how women's participation in political ritual in Peru changed from that of 'actrices' in the colonial period to that of 'actoras' during the wars of independence. Ortemberg shows how women move from being a mere 'soporte de imágenes' to become actual players in the ritual display of power. To do so he centers his analysis on the place women were given in a male-dominated discourse, from public rituals to the context of war, in which some of the controls over women were loosened. He notes how from the crisis of the monarchy women began to recite their own poems, sing patriotic songs and were recognized publicly with awards such as the Orden del Sol. So even if women were not incorporated as active citizens in the new republics, they were able to participate in a significant way that had not been possible in the colonial era.

The bicentenary has provided an opportunity for scholars to think about the period and reevaluate some of the assumptions postulated by the historiography.

But to limit the celebrations to 1810 would be at best antiquated. This collection aims to challenge this by looking at independence in a much broader temporal sweep. It also aims to further subaltern studies by reflecting on identity from outside of the national. At the time of independence nations were being formed not only by elites who thought about national identity, but also by slaves who claimed their freedom using the language of their masters, by women who took to the public space and spoke for themselves in political rituals, as well as by soldiers who fought or deserted and understood their place in society ethnically and religiously. Although this is not an exhaustive study, and there is only one article devoted to each theme, the aim has been to open a dialogue and to continue the very rich debate that has gained increasing momentum in the last twenty years.

NOTES

- 1 Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. v, vi.
- 2 Florencia Mallon, "The promise and the dilemma of subaltern studies," *American Historical Review*, 99, 1994, p. 1494.
- 3 Ranajit Guha, "Subaltern studies: projects for our time and their convergence," *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, Ileana Rodríguez ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 42.