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**The Independence  
Processes of Greece and  
Colombia: Topics and  
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by

**LUIS ALFREDO DE LA PEÑA JIMÉNEZ**



The historiographical production on the Age of Revolutions, a period of crisis and transformation in a global scale broadly framed between 1760 and 1850, has revitalized, contextualized and integrated the processes of modernization of political culture into non-European spaces. The latest literature on the field is trying to challenge the Eurocentric approaches of the main historical narratives that defined and delimited the period in historiographical terms. These works are concerned with questioning the narratives of seminal works such as those authored by Eric Hobsbawm and R.R. Palmer about the Age of Revolutions.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the growing literature on regional historiography and efforts that aim to contextualize this revolutionary period globally, most of the current scholarship focuses on case studies, relegating the topic's relevance within a broader international framework. Further, methodological and perspectival issues complicate the comparison of processes in different locations and historical circumstances, especially for fundamentally opposite contexts like the post-Napoleonic revolutions in the Balkans and Latin America.

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1 Eric Hobsbawm, *La era de la revolución 1789-1848* (Buenos Aires: Crítica, 2009), 107; R. R. Palmer, *The World of the French Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). For the criticism to the Eurocentric approach of Hobsbaw and Palmer see David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xvi-xxiii.

This essay will test the use of a comparative approach to examine the possibilities of analysis on the similarities and differences between the Colombian and Greek revolutions. Despite the spatial distance between the two, their contemporaneity establishes a platform that showcases their concordances. Perhaps the main similarities that both conflicts share are their nature as post-Napoleonic wars, both were largely waged with irregular warfare using both human and economic resources to the limit, with a new indoctrination of combatants and the permanent presence of geographical obstacles.<sup>2</sup> Performing this comparison is important because it helps uncover correlations between the cases that can inform our understanding of an important period of global history, and construct a more cohesive narrative of events hitherto neglected by global scholarship. In short, despite the spatial distances and the differences, there is a possibility to compare two different cases of state-building who share political features and a periodical context, finding similarities and correlations in between, framing them in a global discourse.

It is relevant to contextualize these comparisons into the main historical context of the Age of Revolutions. The struggles for

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2 Jorge Conde and Luis Alarcón, "La conversión de milicianos y guerrilleros en ciudadanos armados de la República de Colombia," *Historia Caribe* IX, no. 25 (2014): 17-37. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15648/hc.25.2014.1>

independence of the New World colonies from the European empires in the early nineteenth century are particularly interesting for numerous reasons: firstly, in 1804, Haiti gained its independence from the French Metropolis. Secondly, prompted by the Napoleonic invasion in Spain, pro-independence insurrections across Spanish America began to take off simultaneously in 1810. Noteworthy, New Granada's independence, being the epicenter of the independent movement in the north of South America, played a fundamental role in the liberation and future political configuration of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time but in a different hemisphere, the Ottoman Empire experienced serious territorial decline after the defeat in the Russo-Turkish war of 1774 and the Napoleonic invasion of 1798. Also, in 1798 France, the Ottoman Empire's greatest ally in Western Europe for centuries, invaded first Egypt and then Syria, both of which had been under Ottoman rule. From the late eighteenth century onwards, important parts of the empire were governed by autonomous administrations that often despised the authority of the Sublime Gate. As such, in 1806 the Ottoman sultan was faced with the rebellion of the Wahabbite religious fanatics in Arabia. In response, the Ottoman governors of Egypt and

the Balkans, tried to reassemble the troops that Napoleon had defeated to support the Sultan in suppressing that rebellion. This attempt was futile, and the rebellion later triggered the Greek War of Independence in 1821.<sup>4</sup> Thus these two processes deserve a comparative analysis.

### SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR: COMPARATIVE AND ASYMMETRIC HISTORY OF THE INDEPENDENCES

According to Marc Bloch and William Sewell, the comparative method has two equally important applications in history: discovering the uniqueness of different societies and formulating problems for historical research.<sup>5</sup> By applying this approach to the two case studies, not only the parallels between the divisions of territory and loss of control in the Ottoman and Spanish empires become clearer, but also the unique character of each one of these experiences is confirmed. Each of the two empires were in turn protagonists and antagonists of the history of the world for centuries. Indeed, both empires went through a phase of expansion, both experienced a "Golden Age" during which they were considered as a representative or the messiah

3 Alan Forrest e.a., *War, Demobilization and Memory. The Legacy of War in the Era of Atlantic Revolutions* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2016), 416.

4 Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the sand: the struggle for mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 12.

5 William Sewell, "Marc Bloch and the logic of comparative history," *History and Theory*, 6 (1967): 208.

of the faith they represented, and both were directly embroiled in conflict with each other on more than one occasion. Yet, these similarities are generally overshadowed by the structural differences of both imperial experiences and their unique development. The ignorance of the similarities between the Spanish and Ottoman empires is reflected in both Spanish and Turkish language historiographical production on the history of the Ottoman Empire and its relationship with the Spanish Empire, and vice versa. Despite the existence of these and more obvious similarities (their Mediterranean character for example) there is a lack of historiographical work aiming to compare methodically these empires, and this paper will try to fill that vacuum.

The similarities between the events in both empires' occupied territories and colonies, and their respective struggles for independence are clear, particularly regarding two aspects: the figure of the leaders of these new proto-states and their difficulties to consolidate. The former is the case of Simón Bolívar and Yiannis Kapodistrias, both of whom faced difficulties in conducting military operations on the challenging terrain that comprise the Colombian and Greek territories, and struggled with quasi-simultaneous processes of formation of new independent states. Further, both leader's states were born out of empires that had controlled the territories for almost four centuries, which—in the nineteenth century—

started to play a preponderant role in the international concert, and whose Metropolis were in decline.

Yet, these similarities are not completely symmetrical, and there are some substantial differences between the events that suggest different developments in the construction of the future Colombian and Greek states respectively. The main differences are the geopolitical location of the former two, as well as the historical burden that both regions carried, which shaped the development and intensity of their respective war experiences. The position of the primitive Greek state and the rebels who constituted it was clearly much more jeopardized than that of its revolutionary counterparts in New Granada.<sup>6</sup> The imperial authority of Sultan Mahmud II, against whom they had to rise, was neither thousands of kilometers and an ocean away, nor absent, as was the case of Ferdinand VII with the American territories. In the same way, given its strategic position within the European continent and the support or direct intervention it received from the European powers during the Greek revolution, future Greece can hardly be compared with the new Colombia.

Another fundamental difference is the cultural factor, which can be divided into several aspects, the main two being religious and linguistic differences. By the

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6 Petros Pisanias e.a., *The Greek Revolution of 1821: a European Event* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2011), 257-258.

beginning of the nineteenth century, the Spanish colonial system had achieved considerable homogeneity in the implementation of language, beliefs and customs on the American continent. Despite the ethnic and linguistic diversity, further increased through the forced migration of African enslaved people, added to the European and indigenous population, the American colonial society was tried to be homogenized around Catholicism and Spanish language. However, both faith and speech were enriched by many centuries of syncretism and resistance from the subjects of the empire that disagreed with the uniform social parameters imposed by the metropolis. The indigenous and black populations of America gave their contribution to the Spanish traditions and impositions in religious or secular ceremonies, and those combinations still live throughout the material and immaterial culture of the continent. Nevertheless, attempts for linguistic and religious homogeneity were an inherent part of life to the leaders of the revolution, and therefore they did not seek or attempt to replace it.

This development is very distinct from that of the Ottoman Empire, which from its genesis and by the very nature of the peoples who inhabited the conquered territories for centuries before the arrival of the Turks, led to the configuration by the first Ottoman sultans' *millet* system<sup>7</sup>,

7 The term *millet* refers to "nation" in the Turkish language.

in which the people subjected to the Sultan were protected in their authority, and could also upkeep their traditional language and religion. This course of action allowed the Sublime Gate to govern a vast multiethnic and multi-religious territory for centuries. The Greek revolution, conceived by its leaders and elites through the new concept of nationalism derived from the French revolution, sought to break this system at all costs. Their goal was to group the entire Grecophone and Orthodox-Christian population of the Ottoman Empire in a new, independent Greek state.

### THE REVOLUTIONS, THE TRANSFER OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS AND THE *HISTOIRE CROISÉE*

The Greek and Colombian cases show numerous similarities that can either be discarded as coincidences or recognized as being derived from the same process, but in different contexts. As such, *histoire croisée* offers an alternative to theoretically grasp the different dimensions and interrelations which the two case studies represent.<sup>8</sup> These two examples are relevant for their position within the age of revolutions on a regional scale, and despite the geographical distance, their historical development is strikingly similar.

8 M. Werner and B. Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire croisée* and the Challenge of reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 30-50.

This historiographical approach could be useful to understand the similarities, differences and contact points between these two cases. The correspondences were present at various levels. At the end of the 18th century, the colonial subjects of the Spanish and Ottoman empires in other geographical spaces began to visit regions beyond the imperial borders. The ideas of freedom and rebellion started to arrive either through wealthy Creoles like Bolívar or Miranda; through agents of a foreign empire like Kapodistrias or Ipsilantis; or through societies such as the Neogranadian masonic lodges or *Filiki Eteria*.<sup>9</sup> Transmitting those ideas to the fighters, including veterans and volunteers from Europe, *klepthes* in Greece<sup>10</sup> or *lanceros* in Colombia,<sup>11</sup> the respective colonial and occupied peoples transformed the liberal, rebellious ideas into actual independence.

The process of transmission, assimilation, and implementation of revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment in regions thousands of kilometers away from the point at which these ideas emerged was a long and complex process that can be classified following the direction of the communication exchanges

made between the center (the Metropolis) and the periphery (the occupied/colonial territories).<sup>12</sup> Evidently, and for reasons of pure domination, the clearest examples of transference are given from the center to the periphery and were carried out both by colonial authorities and institutions, as well as by individuals or collective groups, which had a broad political or scientific character that was often trans-imperial. An example of that in this specific case is Lord Byron, one of these trans-imperial agents that personally shared his sympathies with both revolutions and was in contact with prominent protagonists of the Colombian and Greek independence.<sup>13</sup>

During the beginning of the eighteenth century, the transfer of ideas in the modern Greek experience followed a pattern from center to periphery. In the quest for an integral education and the revitalization of the ideals of classical antiquity, the custom of making a trip to the Mediterranean to see the vestiges of the Greek civilizations was consolidated into traditional practice for the educated upper classes around the continent. In Rome, this sort of undertaking received the name *Grand tour*.<sup>14</sup> These journeys of

9 David Brewer, *The Flame of Freedom. The Greek War of Independence 1821-1833* (London: John Murray, 2001), 238.

10 Michael Broers, *Napoleon's Other War: Bandits, Rebels and Their Pursuers in the Age of Revolutions* (Witney: Peter Lang, 2010).

11 Eduardo Pérez, *La guerra irregular en la independencia de la Nueva Granada y Venezuela 1810-1830* (Tunja: Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia - Academia Boyacense de Historia, 2005).

12 Paschalis Kitromilides, *Enlightenment and Revolution. The making of Modern Greece* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 15

13 Ernest J., Lovell, ed., *His Very Self and Voice, Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York: MacMillan, 1954), 369

14 Lisa Colletta, ed., *The Legacy of the Grand Tour: New Essays on Travel, Literature, and*

young intellectuals who marveled at ruins and romanticized those who at that time inhabited the Italic and Balkan peninsulas played a double role. First, they laid the foundations for an ideological and intellectual apparatus based on the erudite interpretation of classical antiquity from Western Europe especially during the eighteenth century, called Neohellenic Enlightenment or «Διαφωτισμός».<sup>15</sup> In second place, they helped to shape public opinion of the European powers in favor of the national and independence movements. This was especially the case during the Greek war of independence, forging a whole social movement of volunteers from Europe and America, seeking the freedom of the “cradle of civilization” from the Ottoman yoke. The embodiment of this philhellenism movement was Lord Byron, who personally met personalities like Francisco de Miranda or Kapodistrias and would be the mutual acquaintance between the protagonists of the Greek and Colombian revolution.<sup>16</sup> Making him an important part of the bridge that connects both independence processes.

It is easy to elucidate the intellectual transfers from Europe to its periphery through the exchanges of ideas and journeys of intellectuals. However, it is important to keep in mind that, particularly in this period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the experiences and historical developments which emerged in that Western periphery would be tremendously influential. For example, according to Benedict Anderson, the very concept of nationalism<sup>17</sup> emerged in the New World and not in Europe.<sup>18</sup> In any case, it was not the same to be a local “enlightened” and to undertake a trip from Spanish America or from Ottoman Greece to Paris, London or Rome, then to do it in the opposite direction. It was also not the same to embark on official expeditions, commissioned and sponsored by the central state towards the imperial territories than to do it from the periphery with the resources and defects that the same colonial system regarding social mobility imposed.

Simón Bolívar is one example of how ideas were transferred from the periphery to the center. Bolívar traveled in his youth to Rome and in an enlightened ecstasy proclaimed an oath to fight for the freedom of Hispanic America on Monte

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*Culture* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), X.

15 Anna Tabaki, *Neo-hellenic Enlightenment. An introduction*, Academia.edu. Accessed April 5, 2019. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/2025102/Neo-hellenic\\_Enlightenment.\\_An\\_introduction](https://www.academia.edu/2025102/Neo-hellenic_Enlightenment._An_introduction)

16 Jeremy Black, *War in Europe: 1450 to the present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 161; David Howarth, *The Greek Adventure: Lord Byron and Other Eccentrics in the War of Independence* (London: Collins, 1976).

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17 Charles Esdaile, *Las guerras de Napoleón: una historia internacional, 1803-1815* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2009), 11-13.

18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991) xiii; Anthony McFarlane, “Identity, Enlightenment and Political Dissent in Late Colonial Spanish America,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 8 (1998): 309-335.

Sacro on August 15, 1803.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the undoubtedly most important example is that of Francisco de Miranda, one of the most interesting men of his time, without being of the highest social class, his skills and charisma led him to fight for Spain, alongside George Washington, and then to become a general of the French Revolution who ended up writing his name on the *Arc de Triomphe*. In addition to a large journey through London and St. Petersburg, he was perhaps the first South American to visit the Ottoman Empire.<sup>20</sup> His visit to Attica marked him deeply, even to the point of buying a house in Athens, motivated by the feeling that the search for the freedom of the Greeks was his own.

### FUTURE STEPS OF ANALYSIS, COMPARISON AND DIFFERENTIATION

So far it has been evident that despite the distance and the different peculiarities of the independence of Colombia and Greece, the initial question about the possibility of a comparative analysis between both revolutions, and about the prospects of building that bridge between different spaces from the analysis of the Napoleonic post-war period, could be answered affirmatively. That

possibility exists, essentially because of the contemporaneity, nature and development of both processes. In any case and bearing in mind that this is an introductory work to an almost unexplored historiographical branch, the comparative possibilities do not end here. For example, both countries, despite acknowledging that the most important historical event in their configuration as a nation is the war of independence, also have sometimes monolithic conception of these bellicose events in their historiography and national historical consciousness. On the other hand, it is crucial to turn the tide of the current historiographical analysis of Empires towards the study of the Spanish and Ottoman entities, their encounters, clashes and resemblances through the Modern Age.<sup>21</sup>

Another possibility of comparison could be the racial and ethnic composition of the troops. In that sense, the Colombian case generated certain particularities when it came to the creation of royalist or patriotic armies. This aspect is also present during the Greek revolution, where the ethnic melting pot of the Balkans, began to stir with the nationalisms that emerged during this period. Secondly, the use of a common past, specifically that of classical antiquity under the filter of the ideas of neoclassicism, should be considered

19 John Lynch, *Simon Bolivar, A life* (London: Yale University Press), 26.

20 Miguel Castillo Didier, *Grecia y Francisco de Miranda* (Santiago de Chile: Centro de Estudios Bizantinos y Neohelénicos "Fotios Malleros" Universidad de Chile, 2002), 317.

21 Hilda Sabato, *Republics of the New World: The Revolutionary Political Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

as a topic of future research. Without going deeply into this aspect, it would be very interesting to investigate and analyze how close the Greeks of the first half of the nineteenth century were to their millenary ancestors, or whether, on the contrary, they gave priority to Byzantium and to Christian orthodoxy. Despite the geographical distance that would imply a closer ideological affinity between Nariño and Caldas<sup>22</sup> and Aristotle and Demosthenes, than that of the latter with Makriyiannis or Ipsilandis.<sup>23</sup> The formulation of these possibilities, the imagination of new ways to break the schemes and established periods must be an action and reflection of the historical discipline, which has always fulfilled a function with the present and the needs that are generated from it. A key part of the historical analysis, and especially in what concerns to global history is to look for other perspectives to analyze an event that may be distant in space but close in time. This kind of approach can act as a looking glass for understanding the social conglomerate in a certain way, whether it be inserted in the Colombian, Greek, Latin American or Balkan context.

In summary, this comparison could be possible for the striking similarities of this independence processes. That were contemporary, driven by the same kind of ideas and fought in a relatively similar way. Even so, the aims and outcomes of both independences were not the same, and their impact in the regional geopolitics were different. Nevertheless, this comparative exercise contributes to global history while opening the possibility of studying less-known revolutions of this historical period in their own terms, trying to clear up the omnipresent mist of Eurocentrism and shifting the focus to other valuable spaces of analysis. The methodological approach chosen in this essay seeks to shed light on how global processes as the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolutions spread and manifest in seemingly disparate environments like Colombia and Greece. With the current trend of the discipline to enhance and challenge the spatial boundaries of analysis, the history and comparison of these two spaces that sound alien to the main narratives of the early nineteenth century could take more relevance.<sup>24</sup> The Greek and Colombian experiences of independence would draw important examples for later global developments of nation-state building in Europe and America. Comparing them and build an

22 Del Molino García, Ricardo "La Antigüedad Clásica en la Nueva Granada teatro revolucionario e iconografía republicana," in *International Conference "Imagines": The reception of Antiquity in performing and visual Arts* (Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja, 2007): 69-82; Margriet Haagsma, Pim den Boer, and Eric Moormann. *The Impact of Classical Greece on European and National Identities: Proceedings of an International Colloquium, Held at the Netherlands Institute at Atenas, 2-4 October 2000* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 2003).

23 Yiannis Makriyiannis, *Memorias de la Revolución griega de 1821* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2012), 28.

24 Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 115.

historiographical bridge between the regions will contribute to a broader perspective, one that would push the limits of global history, while shifting, overlapping and entangling the scales, themes, and spaces of historical analysis.<sup>25</sup>

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25 Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 137.