

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The *Angostura Address* 200 Years Later: A Critical Reading

Gabriel Andrade* and Jairo Lugo-Ocando†

After the collapse of the second Venezuelan Republic project and various other military failures elsewhere, Simon Bolivar managed to seize the region of Guayana in 1817, and set in Angostura as his base for guerilla operations against the Spanish. Despite the fact that he did not control the whole of Venezuela, he assembled a Congress in Angostura and delivered there his inaugural speech on February 15th, 1819. This speech, now known as the *Angostura Address*, is a prime document in the Bolivarian canon. Unfortunately, the Bolivar-hero cult rampant in Venezuela and Colombia (and to a lesser extent in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia), has promoted an extremely uncritical reading of this very important document. In occasion of its 200th Anniversary, this article offers a critical -yet ultimately sympathetic- reading of the *Angostura Address*. In this speech, Bolivar laid out his Enlightenment vision of freedom, yet he also displayed an authoritarian tendency.

Keywords: Simon Bolivar; Venezuela; Angostura Address; Critical Reading; Independence; Spanish Empire; Democracy; Authoritarianism

Introduction

In 2010, in the backdrop of a wave of left-wing, populists and nationalists governments that have been swept into power in what some refer to as the Pink Tide (Chodor 2014), many Latin American countries (most notably Venezuela, Peru and Argentina) held massive celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the beginning of independence from Spain. In most cases, these celebrations served the political purpose of legitimating the parties in power that organized the festivities and appropriating nationalists sentiments that could help boost popular support. Predictably, many of these celebrations were carried out without sufficiently critical and objective approach towards historical data. The facts that the year 2019 will mark the 200th anniversary of Bolivar's *Angostura Address*, is perhaps a neat opportunity to correct this and perhaps fill some of the gaps of a story that in the light of the Venezuela's crisis of today has become ever so more relevant in our days. Our piece is an opportunity to challenge future attempts by the Venezuelan government –with its self-proclaimed 'Bolivarian Revolution'- to expand the uncritical hero-worship of Simon Bolivar's memory as an instrument of self-national aggrandizement.¹

Similar attempts to debunk myth from reality have not been able to play out in the ways that these efforts were originally intended such as the 2015's 200-year commemoration of Bolivar's *Jamaica Letter*. Hence, many expect

that the 2019 will again be a year of nationalist unexamined joy, celebrating the *Angostura Address*. However, as we will argue in this paper, it is precisely due to the nationalist distortions that are likely to occur around the nature and context of the Angostura delivery that calls for a more critical reading of the document. That is the goal of this article.

Let us start by saying that by 1819, Simon Bolivar was a very uncertain man who had lived till then a hectic life. Being just 21 years old in 1805 and after losing his wife just years earlier, he went to tour Europe. While in Rome and inspired by his early contacts with liberal movements in the old continent (Bushnell 2003) he made an oath to free the American countries from Spanish imperialism (Castro-Klaren 2003). The opportunity came in 1808 when Napoleon invaded Spain, and the Caracas *junta* –which became the facto government- rejected Spanish authority in Seville in 1810, and reaffirmed its allegiance to Ferdinand VII, who was imprisoned by Napoleon.

However, this juncture would be rapidly embraced by radicals as an opportunity to proclaim independence from Spain in 1811 under the argument that they would not bow to an illegitimate French King. Independence would, nevertheless, prove to be no easy task. Venezuelans were by no means unanimous in their desire to be independent and consequently a bloody civil war began. Bolivar was given some military assignments in defending the Venezuelan Republic against loyalists of the Spanish monarchy. He failed miserably, the Republic collapsed, and after guaranteeing his own freedom by turning against Francisco de Miranda he managed to flee into exile (Paredes 2015).

* Xavier University School of Medicine, AW

† Northwestern University, QA

Corresponding author: Gabriel Andrade
(gabrielernesto2000@gmail.com)

After some military action in New Grenada (modern-day Colombia), Bolivar returned to Venezuela in 1812 and after a remarkable series of military triumphs he managed to recapture the capital Caracas (Lopez and Lopez 1999). But, this second Venezuelan Republic would also prove to be short-lived. Almost immediately, Bolivar had to confront a revolt lead by Juan Domingo de Monteverde y Rivas (1773–1832) and José Tomás Boves (1782–1814), who lured black slaves, mulatos and indigenous people to swore allegiance to the ‘legitimate’ Spanish King who by then had been re-stated to the Crown. By then, Bolivar’s movement was seen as one that intended to establish a Republic for the white ‘criollos’, which explains partly why Boves savagely occupied Valencia and executed so many of the white elite (Stoan 1974).

Once again, Bolivar had to flee. This time, he wandered throughout the Caribbean. He first settled in Jamaica, and then in Haiti. From there, with the auspices of President Alexandre Petion (1770–1818) –that included 6.000 soldiers, money and even a print- (Helg 2003), Bolivar returned to Venezuela with a military expedition. This time he understood that he could not make a frontal assault on Caracas, so he decided to begin a campaign of guerrilla warfare in the Eastern and Southern region of Guayana, in Venezuela, via the Orinoco River. In 1817, Bolivar captured the city of Angostura (now Ciudad Bolivar) and the whole of Guayana, and established it as his center of military operations. Despite not controlling Venezuela, Bolivar called for a Second Congress of Venezuela (the first one had been called in 1811 in Caracas, to declare independence), to assemble in Angostura. The Congress would lay down the political foundation for the Third Republic.

However, given that the rest of Venezuela was still controlled by Spanish authorities, only a few provinces could send delegates. Despite this, it was still an important event as Bolivar would communicate the basis of his political doctrine. He prepared weeks in advance the speech delivered on February 15th, 2019, to delegates of the Congress. That same year, Bolivar would head towards the Venezuelan plains, assemble an army of *llaneros* –who now supported the Republican Cause- and European mercenaries. He would lead them cross the Andes chain of mountains in modern-day Colombia towards a surprise attack on the capital, Bogota. From there he would go to occupy modern-day Ecuador and unite the current territories of Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela into a single political entity; it was known as the Gran Colombia, with Bogota as its capital. Thanks to these achievements he would then be invited by the Peruvian authorities to organize the military campaign against the remaining Spanish and loyalist forces in Peru and Upper Peru (modern-day Bolivia), thus completing the final defeat of the Spanish Empire in South America. His success, however, would again be short-lived, as in 1830 Gran Colombia ruptured into its three original constituent countries, and Bolivar would have to march into exile and died on his way in in the city of Santa Marta, before he could make it to Europe.

In the South American revolutions, there were men of action (Paez, Sucre, etc.) and men of philosophical thought (Roscio, Viscardo, etc.), but few embodied both military and

intellectual talents. Bolivar was certainly the foremost figure that synthesized formal political thought, constitutional doctrine, and revolutionary action. In the context of early 19th Century Venezuela, this was a major accomplishment. In this regard, despite his flaws, he is to be considered one of the great men of South American history.

The *Angostura Address*: Cultural identity, ethnic relations

Although never formally educated in universities, Bolivar was a self-taught man and had at least two illustrious tutors who were the arguably the leading intellectuals of the region at the time; Simon Rodriguez and Andres Bello. As it was the educational custom of his times, Bolivar was deeply embedded in the Classics, emulating the spirited rhetoric of Cicero and other great orators of Greece and Rome. Thus, the *Angostura Address* is plentiful with passages such as these:

“Sir! Happy the citizen that under the shield of arms under his command, has convoked National Sovereignty to exercise its absolute will! (...) Legislators! Please look indulgently on this declaration of my political vision, on my heartfelt desires and my earnest pleas, which I have dared to address to you in the name of the people” (Bolivar 1819).

This style seemed to serve a very specific purpose as by 1819, Bolivar was keen to present himself as a humble citizen that, only reluctantly, takes hold of power, not out of personal ambition, but because of ‘some historical metaphysical necessity’. He attempts to excuse himself thus:

“Only an imperative necessity, united to a strongly expressed desire on the part of the people, could have induced me to assume the dreadful and dangerous office of dictator, supreme chief of the republic” (Bolivar 1819).

The whole purpose of the Angostura Congress was precisely for Bolivar to renounce power as dictator and give it back to the constituency. But, as it turned out, this was just to pay lip service as Bolivar assumed dictatorial powers again and again throughout his ensuing political career. This would become a perennial feature amongst many Latin American caudillos ever since and something that would dominate most of the region’s politics and society for the next century (Castro 2007). These leaders assumed the role of dictators while rhetorically expressing their reluctance to do so. They justified themselves by arguing that they were just agents of ‘a greater historical force’. Bolivar himself made such a proclaim when arguing:

“Amidst that sea of woes and afflictions, I was nothing more than the miserable sport of the revolutionary hurricane, driven to and fro like the wild bird of the ocean” (Bolivar 1819).

Yet, despite his obvious ambitions, in 1819 Bolivar still wanted to appear as to be reluctant to become a perpet-

ual dictator. In an oft-quoted passage of the *Angostura Address*, he argues:

“The continuation of authority in the same individual has frequently proved the ruin of democratic governments. Repeated elections are essential in popular systems, for nothing is so dangerous as to allow power to remain a long time vested in one citizen; the people become accustomed to obey, and he to command, and this gives rise to usurpation and tyranny” (Bolivar 1819).

As with any leader who faces the dichotomy between utopias and realities, Bolivar had some profound ideological transformations throughout his political and military career. One of the most significant transformations was his approach to the position of a President for Life. In the *Angostura Address*, he was clearly against it. However, later on, in the Constitution that he wrote for Upper Peru (named Bolivia in his honor) in 1826 and that he attempted to impose on Colombia afterwards, he stipulated the figure of President for Life. Needless to say, Bolivar hoped to become precisely a perpetual figurehead in the politics of the region and went to describe the role as follows:

“The President of the Republic comes to be in our Constitution, as the Sun that, firm in the center, gives life to the Universe. This supreme authority must be perpetual...” (Bolivar 1819)

This brings us to one of our key questions: Had Bolivar already planned to be a perpetual dictator by 1819 and was the *Angostura Address* paying mere lip service to the principle of alterability in power? This question becomes even more important as it was central to the separatist movement against the Great Colombia that finally overthrew him and led to his exile and ultimate death in solitude. Although some historians still debate this (Damas 1983; Draper 1968) it does not seem to be the case. There are some accounts that suggest instead that Bolivar may have been genuinely concerned with perpetual dictators at first (Harwich 2001). It was only the chaos of post-colonial South American politics, which drove him towards an increasingly authoritarian approach. Be as it may, however, the Constitution of Bolivia of 1826 proved to be his undoing. Although there were many reasons for Bolivar's disputes with Francisco de Paula Santander (1792–1840) and other conspirators in Bogota, it was by far the ambition of becoming President for Life that turned out to be the most crucial amongst his opponents.

By the end of his life, Bolivar was a deeply disappointed and bitter man who wrote to a friend: “All who served the Revolution have plowed the sea” (Bolivar 1830). However, it would be a mistake to think that it was only after the independence that he became aware of this. Again the *Angostura Address* of 1819 clearly shows a Bolivar who was already very concerned with the chaotic potential of an independent South America. Indeed, despite his strong criticisms of Spanish imperialism he seemed to acknowledge that Spanish rule offered an important

degree of stability and unity while independence could bring instead disunity and possible chaos amongst the emerging nations:

“The separation of America from the Spanish Monarchy resembles the state of the Roman Empire, when that enormous structure fell to pieces in the midst of the ancient world” (Bolivar 1819).

Bolivar was fully aware that whoever takes on the responsibility of demolishing an ancient order, must also immediately come up with ideas for a new one. It is no speculation to argue that he was legitimately worried by the prospect that the emerging nations would not have a sufficiently defined national identity for viable political institutions. In the *Angostura Address*, Bolivar tries to define Venezuelan national identity, more negatively than positively as he seemed clearer about what Venezuelans were *not* than what Venezuelans were:

“We are not Europeans, we are not Indians, but a middle race between the indigenous peoples and the Spaniards” (Bolivar 1819).

Bolivar and the Bourbon reforms

Bolivar was very eloquent in denouncing the vices of Spanish imperialism in his vociferous anti-colonial stand. Nevertheless, his main concern was not so much with absolutism itself, but rather, with the exclusion of *criollos* in the administration of the Spanish Empire. As he explains it in the *Angostura Address*:

“In absolute governments there are no limits to the authority of public functionaries. The will of the Grand Sultan, the Khan, the Bey, and other despotic sovereigns, is the supreme law, and it is arbitrarily executed by the pashas and inferior governors in Turkey and Persia, where the system of oppression is completely organized, and is submitted to by the people because of the authority from which it emanates. These subordinate officers are entrusted with the civil, military, and political administration, the collection of duties and the protection of religion. But the key difference is this: the governors of Isfahan are Persians, the viziers of the Great Lord in Turkey are Turks, and the sultans of Tartary are Tartars. In China they do not send for their mandarins, military, and literati to the country of Genghis Khan, who conquered them, even though the present race of Chinese are direct descendants of the tribes subjugated by the ancestors of the present Tartars. With us it is quite different. We are controlled by a system which deprives us of the rights to which we are entitled, and leaves us in a sort of permanent infancy with respect to public affairs” (Bolivar 1819).

Bolivar's choice of despotic governments, once again, reveals that he was a man of his time. One common colonialist trope in the 19th Century was the concept of “Ori-

ental despotism" (Wittfogel, 1953), popularized by Hegel and Hegelians especially Karl Marx himself. Throughout his post-colonial critique of Orientalists, Edward Said (2006) has documented how 19th Century Western scholars portrayed the East as some sort of mysterious place ruled by despots, mainly as a way to contrast the virtues of Western Enlightenment. Bolivar, a man of the Enlightenment himself, continued this trope, by presenting the Turks, Persians and Chinese, as despotic peoples.

Yet, Bolivar's point is that Spanish imperialism is even worse than Oriental despotism, inasmuch as the control exercised by the Spanish Crown is even tighter than in Eastern societies. Indeed, in the 18th Century, a series of reforms began to be undertaken by the new Spanish ruling dynasty, the Bourbons. After Spain's humiliating defeat in the Seven Years War, Charles III understood the necessity to cleanse the corrupt and inefficient administration of the Spanish Empire. Formerly, *criollos* had major participation in the administration of the Empire. But, admittedly, it had turned out to be very corrupt. The infamous slogan, "*se acata pero no se cunple*" (laws are obeyed, but not enforced), became a common standard of *criollo* administration. Government posts were bought and sold, thus being filled by grossly incompetent administrators.

The Bourbon reforms sought to change that, and they succeeded in doing so. Under Jose de Galvez's (1720–1787) recommendation (after an administrative visit to the Indies), posts high in the military and civil hierarchy (including ecclesiastical appointments) ruling American affairs, would no longer be occupied by people born in Spanish America, but rather, by administrators born in Spain, i.e., the *peninsulares*. The Spanish Crown would no longer trust local administrators. *Criollos* would know be second-class citizens.

By 1812, liberals in Spain understood that, if the Empire were to survive, some further reforms were required. The Cortes, assembled in Cadiz during Napoleon's invasion of Spain, redacted a very liberal Constitution by the standards of the time. In that Constitution, it was made clear that Spain would have equal citizens on both sides of the Atlantic. At least theoretically, this would ensure that *criollos* would no longer be second class citizens.

However, a very strong point of contention in the Cadiz Cortes, was the demographic balance in the representation of deputies. The population in the Americas was far greater than the population in the Iberian Peninsula, yet, only a minority of deputies' posts were assigned to representatives of the American territories. The rationale was that people with any degree of African descent would not be eligible for full representation.

Furthermore, by 1814, Napoleon's troops retreated from Spain, and Ferdinand VII returned to power. Yet, astonishingly, Ferdinand abolished the 1812 Constitution, and imposed a new absolutist regime that, once again, contemplated the American territories as colonies.

Bolivar was not really greatly concerned with these events in Spain. As early as 1805 (when he made his famous oath of American independence in Rome's Monte Sacro), he was already determined to fight for American independence. It is unlikely that any liberal concessions from Spain would have changed his mind, but the fact

that these concessions were very incomplete, and that they were ultimately abolished by Ferdinand VII, sealed in his mind the question regarding the break with Spain.

Some nostalgic defenders of the Spanish Empire in Latin American countries claim that the Indies were not colonies at all. This thesis was put forth by Argentine historian Ricardo Levene (1951), in an influential treatise, *Las Indias no eran colonias*. Levene's thesis proposes that the Indies were actually kingdoms with the same legal standing as kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula; the implication is that Bolivar's struggle for independence was unjustified. Levene's thesis is only half true. It is certainly the case that, during Habsburg times (the dynasty before the arrival of the Bourbons), the Indies were not colonies in the modern sense. But, the Bourbons, and especially Charles III, embraced a program of enlightened despotism and absolutism that by 1810, had fully converted the Indies into colonies. The Bourbons had a clear mercantilist economic program: the Indies were to be ruled only for the benefit of the mother country, Spain (Annino 2015).

Charles III introduced a system of "*comercio libre*", free trade, but the name is very deceptive. *Comercio libre* meant that various Spanish ports could trade with the Indies; however, the Indies could not trade with any other country. During Habsburg times, a great deal of contraband went on, but with the arrival of the Bourbons, economic regulations were severely tightened and enforced. Furthermore, in order to avoid competition with the mother country, the Bourbon reforms prohibited the production of certain goods in the Indies. This was by far the most important motive in the struggle for independence amongst the *criollo* elite, and throughout his writings, Bolivar makes very clear how important this issue is for him.

Federalism and cultural particularities

The *Jamaica Letter* is mostly about Bolivar's attempt to justify his struggle for American independence. The *Angostura Address*, by contrast, is far more about Bolivar's actual political proposals in thinking about what lies ahead for Spanish America after independence. Throughout the document, he is concerned about whether or not the emerging nations are truly ready for liberal forms of government.

And, at times, he seems to believe that, the new nations are not sufficiently mature to be wholly free: "Liberty, says Rousseau, is a succulent food, but difficult to digest. Our weak and feeble fellow citizens will have to increase in strength of mind in a very great degree, before they can be permitted to digest freedom's wholesome food" (Bolivar 1819).

Bolivar was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers. Yet, it is very revealing that, in this and other passages, he has a predilection for Rousseau. For, of all Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau is typically considered to be somewhat of an outsider, even a pioneer of the Counter-Enlightenment. When it came to liberty, Rousseau himself had some qualms about how truly liberal a State should be, to the point that he claimed in an oft-quoted phrase from *The Social Contract*, that subjects should be "forced to be free" (Roberts 2012: 117). Not surprisingly, this quote (and Rousseau's political philosophy as a whole)

has historically risen some eyebrows, as it seems to sympathize with authoritarian regimes, ironically all in the name of liberty itself. Bolivar's political philosophy, as laid out in the *Angostura Address* and other political writings, also took on these authoritarian leanings.

Starting in 1999, Bolivar's image was politically used by Hugo Chavez's leftist revolution, and ever since, leftist governments and guerrillas (especially FARC in Colombia) throughout the region have claimed to be followers of Bolivarian thinking. But in truth, for most of the 20th Century, Bolivar was more frequently an icon of authoritarian right-wing military Latin American governments, who quite openly opposed democratic institutions.

Even Benito Mussolini was an admirer of Bolivar (Caballero 2006: 72). Of course, it would be fallacious to accuse Bolivar of being authoritarian, just because he had authoritarian sympathizers. But, in the *Angostura Address*, he clearly mistrusts democracy, as it seems to cripple the strength of a nation: "But what democratic government was ever able to unite power, prosperity and permanency at the same time? On the contrary, aristocracy and monarchy have long established great and powerful empires. What government is more ancient than that of China? What republic has exceeded in duration those of Sparta and Venice? Did not the Roman Empire conquer the world? Did not monarchy exist in France for fourteen centuries? What state is more powerful than Great Britain? The governments, however, of those nations, were either aristocratic or monarchical" (Bolivar 1819).

Bolivar acknowledged that federal forms of government were theoretically virtuous, and that democratic systems of checks and balances were to be emulated. But, he believed that federalism was not suited for the political culture of Spanish America. Indeed, this is the main thesis of his *Cartagena Manifesto*, in which he places most of the blame for the collapse of Venezuela's First Republic, on federalism. In the *Angostura Address*, he returns to this theme: "The more I admire the excellency of the Federal Constitution of Venezuela, the more am I convinced of the impossibility of applying it to our situation" (Bolivar 1819).

A big point of contention between Enlightenment thinkers and their Counter-Enlightenment foes, was about universalism. The Enlightenment proclaimed the equality of all human beings, on account that we all share a common nature that makes human rights universal. By contrast, Counter-Enlightenment authors such as Joseph de Maistre argued thus: "In the course of my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; I am even aware, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian. But, as for Man, I declare that I have never met him in my life. If he exists, I certainly have no knowledge of him" (Maistre 1965: 80).

Bolivar, once again, was a man of the Enlightenment, but on this dispute, he seemed to be more on the side of Counter-Enlightenment figures who believed that the same political recipe could not be applied universally to all nations. In a sense, Bolivar's approach is anti-colonial (let us remember that many aspects of colonialism itself were modeled on the universalism of the Enlightenment), inasmuch as he advises colonized peoples not to necessarily copy Eurocentric models. In his view, federalism may work in some countries, but not in all.

Yet, at the same time, Bolivar seems to reproduce some old colonialist tropes, according to which Anglo-Saxon peoples are more virtuous. And it is for this very reason that Bolivar believes that federalism works in North America, but it would never work in South America. This is his explanation in the *Angostura Address*: "Nevertheless, the North American people are a singular example of political virtue and moral rectitude. Liberty has been its cradle, it has grown up in liberty, and it is maintained by pure liberty. I will add that that people is unique in the history of the human race, and repeat that it is a miracle that a system as weak and complicated as the federal should have existed under so difficult and delicate circumstances as those which have occurred" (Bolivar 1819).

In the *Angostura Address*, Bolivar, typical in his style, praises North American society over and over again: "Our legislators were influenced by the provincials, and were carried away by the dazzling appearance of North America's happiness, thinking that the blessings she enjoyed were owed exclusively to the form of government, and not to the character of the people" (Bolivar 1819). In this regard, Bolivar very much anticipates Tocqueville's analysis in *Democracy in America*. One of the main thesis of that classic work of political philosophy, is that American democracy is not only built on a particular form of government and its institutions, but also on the cultural foundations of Americans (Tocqueville 2004).

But, even when it came to the American government, Bolivar had high praises for it in the *Angostura Address*: "And in fact, the example of the United States, with its progressive prosperity, was too flattering not to have been followed. Who could resist the glorious attraction of the full and absolute enjoyment of sovereignty, independence, and liberty? Who could resist the admiration and esteem inspired by an intelligent government, which unites at the same moment public and private rights, which forms by general consent the supreme law of individuals? Who can resist the lure of a beneficent government which employs an able, active and powerful hand to direct all its efforts at all times towards social perfection, which ought to be the end of all human institutions?" (Bolivar 1819).

Yet, despite his admiration for the United States, Bolivar insists that South American nations are not ready for federalism or even North American institutions as a whole, on account of a cultural mismatch: "Would it not be extremely difficult to apply to Spain the political, civil, and religious code of Great Britain? It would be even more difficult for the laws of North America to be adopted in Venezuela. Do we not read in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* that laws should be suited to the people making them, and that it is extremely unlikely that the laws of our nation will suit another?" (Bolivar 1819).

Again, contemporary anti-colonialists may find much of value in Bolivar's words. Former colonial powers may be admired in many regards, but that does not imply that there is exclusively one single path to progress that must be followed by all nations on Earth. Contemporary anti-colonialists place much emphasis on the acknowledgement of cultural diversity, and Bolivar certainly took it into account when deciding what the best political path for a nation is.

To get his point across, Bolivar returns to the question of cultural identity in the *Angostura Address*, but adds an interesting remark about Spain: "Let us bear in mind that our population is neither European nor North American, but are closer to a blend of Africa and America than they are to Europe, for even Spain herself is not strictly European due to its African blood, institutions and character" (Bolivar 1819).

The Enlightenment did not reach Spain with the same force as it did in France or Great Britain. Yet, there were still notable Spanish Enlightenment figures (Jovellanos, Mayans, Olavide, amongst others). Most of the figures of the Spanish Enlightenment became *afrancesados*, thinkers who believe Spain should embrace French customs. To a certain extent, this implied moving away from its African roots, and some authors made it explicit that, in order to be more civilized, Spain should be less African (Shubert 1999: 2).

Europeans still perceived Spain more as an African country, as in Alexandre Dumas' (himself of African descent) apocryphal observation: "Africa begins at the Pyrenees" (Altaschul 2012: 11), and Enlightened Spaniards tried hard to overcome that. Yet, Bolivar (very much as Unamuno would do almost a century later), embraced Spain's African identity. He had some clear political motivations in doing this, (i.e., as an argument to reject federalism and favor stronger governments leaning towards authoritarianism). But, it still reflects Bolivar's anti-colonial convictions, inasmuch as unlike most figures of the Spanish Enlightenment, he was not embarrassed of having African roots.

Bolivar's political program

Bolivar's political program, as laid out in the *Angostura Address*, is straightforward. He believes that "The most perfect system of government is that which produces the greatest degree of happiness, of social security, and political stability" (Bolivar 1819). The wording is unmistakably reminiscent of Bentham's philosophy, and indeed, the English philosopher was a major influence on Bolivar's political thinking.

In order to achieve this political goal, Bolivar proposes conventional republican institutions: "Venezuela's government has always been republican, it is republican, and it should always remain so. It must be based on the sovereignty of the people, the division of powers, civil liberty, the prohibition of slavery and the abolition of monarchy and privileges" (Bolivar 1819).

This may not seem groundbreaking today, but in 1819, it was. The morality of slavery was by no means a settled debate during the time of the *Angostura Address*. Bolivar was decidedly on the abolitionist side, and this speaks very well of his moral character. Admittedly, Bolivar came late to abolitionist ideals. He was moved towards abolitionism by Haitian President Alexandre Petion, who offered him military support in exchange of the attempt to abolish slavery from liberated territories.

Venezuela's First and Second Republic collapsed, in part because they failed to meet the support of *pardos* and slaves (Blanchard 2008). By 1819, Bolivar fully understood

that he would not succeed without their support. But, it was not a mere cynical ploy to enlarge his armies. Unlike other far more questionable Venezuelan caudillos of the latter 19th Century (such as Ezequiel Zamora), who freed their slaves only after having been financially compensated, Bolivar genuinely freed his own slaves without any compensation. He also publicly proclaimed the emancipation of slaves in Carupano, in 1816.

This is not to say that Bolivar's relationship to people of African descent was totally harmonious. Throughout many of his private writings, Bolivar expressed enormous concerns about *pardocracia*, the takeover by *pardos*. But, his concern was, if not legitimate, then at least understandable. Despite Bolivar's gratitude for Petion's support, Bolivar was extremely concerned by the way the Haitian revolutionaries exterminated whites. He was a high-spirited revolutionary, but he understood the dangers of uncontrolled rage and racial vengeance.

Bolivar's stand on the abolition of monarchy, however, is more problematic. Unlike Jose de San Martin (who explicitly desired a Constitutional Monarchy for emerging South American nations), he constantly paid lip service to the toppling of monarchs. In 1829, in the mist of continuous crises of legitimacy, some of Bolivar's loyalists in Bogota proposed to establish a monarchy, with Bolivar as king, although his title would be *Liberator*; he would then have a European prince as successor (Lynch 2010: 263).

Bolivar remained loyal to his republican convictions, and scolded at the possibility of being crowned as king of Colombia. Yet, as previously mentioned, his 1826 Bolivian Constitution stipulated a ruler who was basically a king without a crown. His praise for division of powers was also only half-hearted. Bolivar's authoritarian turn came later in his political career, well after independence was sealed. But, even in the *Angostura Address* itself, Bolivar seemed to be very enthusiastic about strong governments with little distribution of power, as this passage makes clear: "The Roman Constitution brought about the greatest power and fortune that any people on earth have enjoyed. There was no exact distribution of power there. Consuls, senate and people all served also as legislators, magistrates and judges. The executive power, consisting of two consuls, had the same flaw as Sparta. Yet notwithstanding this deformity, the Roman Republic did not suffer from the disastrous discord which might be expected from a leadership consisting of two individuals, both endowed with a monarch's powers" (Bolivar 1819).

Again, Bolivar was certainly a big critic of Spanish imperialism, but he did not seem to mind other empires. In modern times, he sought the protection of the British empire; in referring to ancient times, he consistently showed admiration for Roman imperialism, and had no words of criticism for it, as once again expressed in the *Angostura Address*: "A monstrous and purely warlike government raised Rome to the highest pitch of virtue and glory, and made the whole world a Roman Empire, showing men just how much can be achieved by political virtue, and how trivial the influence of institutions can be" (Bolivar 1819).

Although Bolívar admired British imperialism more for its liberal *ethos* than for its military might (as opposed to the despotism of Spain), he was still a man of arms, and imbued his political ideas with militarism. This emphasis on militarism cohered well with his autocratic inclination. His choice of admiration for an ancient Greek city, reveals his militaristic tendency in the *Angostura Address*: “The Republic of Sparta produced more real effects than Solon’s ingenious creation, even though it seemed a chimerical invention at first. The Lycurgus legislature produced glory, virtue, morality and therefore national happiness” (Bolívar 1819). Sparta, of course, is the emblem of militarism in Western imagination.

In the *Angostura Address*, Bolívar engages in some confusing argumentation trying to justify the concentration of power in the executive branch of government: “In a republic, the executive ought to be the strongest, because everything conspires against it; and on the other hand in a monarchy the legislative ought to be the most powerful, as everything unites in favor of the sovereign” (Bolívar 1819). This argument is hard to follow. How is everything conspiring against the executive power in a republic? Bolívar never really says. He had a great ability to arouse emotions with grand claims in order to get the support of his audiences, but he was still lacking in detailed political reasoning.

Bolívar insists that, in monarchies, the executive power becomes too powerful, as it enjoys too many advantages. This is an understandable and legitimate point. But then, mysteriously, Bolívar argues that “...those very advantages are a good reason why a republican president should be endowed with greater power than a constitutional prince” (Bolívar 1819). This logic is very hard to follow. How, exactly, does the potential for abuse in a monarchy justify the expansion of executive power in a republic? Again, Bolívar never answers. Bolívar makes a sophistic gap that leaves careful readers perplexed.

As complement to the strong executive power, in the *Angostura Address* Bolívar proposed a legislative power divided in two chambers: Representatives and the Senate. In imitation of the British House of Lords, Bolívar proposed a hereditary Senate. Again, his justification for this very aristocratic proposal was not altogether clear, although he tried to offer some rather confusing arguments: “A hereditary senate, coming from the people, would share its interests, its opinions and its spirit, and for that reason it is not to be presumed that a hereditary senate would not follow the people’s interests or forget its legislative duties” (Bolívar 1819). It is extremely hard to follow Bolívar’s logic here. How does an aristocratic principle, such as hereditary privilege, motivate sharing the people’s interests, opinions and spirit? Again, Bolívar does not make it sufficiently clear.

Despite the confusing nature of some of these arguments, we must not lose sight of the fact that Bolívar was, above all, a man of revolutionary action, and he responded to particular historical circumstances that may have required some necessary measure in the mist of the chaos originated in the civil war that had been going on for almost ten years.

Bolívar must have been aware that his liberal and enlightened audience would object to his proposal, inasmuch as it reminded them too much of the old Spanish imperial regime and its inegalitarian institutions. He thus anticipated these objections, by trying to assure the audience that a hereditary Senate would not be aristocratic: “In no manner whatever would the creation of a hereditary senate be a violation of political equality; it is not a nobility I wish to establish, because that, as has been said by a celebrated republican, would be to destroy at once equality and liberty. It is an office for which candidates ought to be prepared, as a senator needs much wisdom and the right faculties to acquire knowledge” (Bolívar 1819). Unfortunately, again, Bolívar’s reasoning is very confusing; as every critic of the House of Lords or any other hereditary office reminds us, such an institution is precisely the foundation for a nobility. The case could be made, however, that, in the context of revolutionary struggle, perhaps Bolívar was not aspiring to create an old-fashioned nobility, but rather, a neutral organ intermediate between executive and popular instances.

Bolívar had much admiration for Montesquieu, but in presenting his proposals for political organization, in the *Angostura Address* he added a fourth power to the three traditional ones (executive, legislative and judicial); the so-called “moral power”. Once again, he was inspired by his upbringing of admiration for Classical Antiquity: “I have dared to suggest a moral power, drawn from the remote ages of antiquity and those obsolete laws, which for some time maintained public virtue amongst the Greeks and Romans” (Bolívar 1819).

Bolívar did not elaborate much on what this moral power would do exactly, but he seemed to have in mind a governing body akin to Roman censors, whose basic function was to regulate public morality (Leiva 1985). Throughout his lifetime, Bolívar was concerned with public morality, and perhaps his most quoted words by Colombian and Venezuelan schoolchildren, come from the *Angostura Address*: “Morals and knowledge are what we most need now” (Bolívar 1819).

The enforcement of public morality has repeatedly been associated with authoritarian regimes. Indeed, Bolívar’s stance on the moral power coheres well with his authoritarian leanings. After he assumed full dictatorial powers in 1828, Bolívar severely limited various basic liberties, appealing to reasons of public morality. In order to gain Catholic support, he even outlawed the teaching of Bentham’s philosophy (which he himself had admired for so long), as the English philosopher’s views were considered too immoral by conservative clergy.

Conclusion

Bolívar, typical of his rhetorical style, concluded the *Angostura Address* with these words: “Gentlemen! You may begin your work. Mine is done. The congress of the Republic of Venezuela is installed. In it, from this moment, national sovereignty is centred. We all owe it our obedience and loyalty. My sword, and the swords of my illustrious comrades-in-arms, will protect its solemn authority. God save Congress!” (Bolívar 1819).

The Congress ultimately decided not to pursue two of Bolívar's most controversial proposals in the *Angostura Address*: a moral power, and a hereditary senate. Despite their genuine admiration for Bolívar, constituents understood that Bolívar's argumentation in favor of hereditary principles of political power was very weak (not to say confusing), and that an institution imitating the British House of Lords would be nothing but a setback to old aristocratic times.

They also seemed to understand that a moral power could very easily be turned into a censoring body that hastily suppresses individual freedoms. Yet, in 1999, Venezuela's constituents did uphold Bolívar's original proposal, in a new Constitution. That Constitution, labeled the *Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, written under the auspices of Hugo Chavez and the self-proclaimed Bolivarian Revolution, went to great lengths in attempting to imitate Bolivarian thinking in every aspect of political organization. The 1999 Constitution articulated a so-called "Citizen Power" designated by a "Republican Moral Council", based on Bolívar's original purpose of regulating public morality. Predictably, very much as Bolívar did in 1828, watching over public morality in the Bolivarian Revolution became despotic in itself, and many of Venezuela's basic freedoms (but most especially freedom of speech; Venezuela currently occupies number 143, as indexed by Reporters Without Borders (2018)) have deteriorated over the last 18 years.

2019 should definitely be a year of celebration, for the *Angostura Address* is a landmark political document. But, such celebrations should be devoid of nationalist distortions, and they should be cleansed of the typical hero-worship that has taken place in Latin America for the last 150 years, and has accelerated in Venezuela during the last 20 years. Bolívar was a great man of action and an important thinker, but he was still flawed in many regards.

He liked to describe himself as the "man of difficulties". Indeed, he was, but even more so from an intellectual point of view. For, his intellectual and political legacy is a mixed bag. He was a staunch anti-colonialist when it came to Spanish America; but he had high praises for the Roman imperial ethos, he seemed content with the British imperialism of his day, and he repeated many of the tropes typical of 19th Century colonialist thinking. He was a spirited combatant of monarchies, yet he insisted on being president for life (i.e., a king without a crown). He ardently defended freedoms, yet he believed that South American nations were not fully prepared for liberal systems. He genuinely emancipated slaves, yet was extremely afraid of a takeover by *pardos* and "all the savage hordes from Africa and America who roam like wild deer in the wilderness of Colombia" (Bolívar 1821).

Surely, the best homage we may render to Bolívar on occasion of the 200th anniversary of his *Angostura Address*, is to critically engage with his work, objectively describe his views, and present him as he truly was: a great man, but not a demigod. After all, despite his authoritarian inclinations, Bolívar was a man of the Enlightenment, and it is safe to say that he would have been happy with open, frank and critical discussion of ideas, not mindless nationalistic worship.

Note

- ¹ Despite the prominent hero-worship of Bolívar, there have been scholarly works critical of his deeds. See, for example, Madariaga (1951) and Carrera Damas (2003).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

- 2018 Freedom of Speech Index.** Reporters Without Borders. Retrieved from: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.
- Altaschul, N.** 2012. *Geographies of Philological Knowledge: Postcoloniality and the Transatlantic National Epic*. University of Chicago Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226016191.001.0001>
- Annino, A.** 2015. *Silencios y disputas en la historia de Hispanoamerica*. Bogota: Random House.
- Blanchard, P.** 2008. *Under the flags of freedom: slave soldiers and the wars of independence in Spanish South America*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wrcf5>
- Bolívar, S.** 1819. *Discurso del general Bolívar al Congreso de Angostura*. Retrieved from: <http://www.archivodellibertador.gob.ve/escritos/buscador/spip.php?article9987>. Download date: August 25th, 2018.
- Bolívar, S.** 1821. *Carta a Francisco de Paula Santander*. June 13, 1821. Retrieved from: <http://www.archivodellibertador.gob.ve/escritos/buscador/spip.php?article10971>. Download date: August 25th, 2018.
- Bolívar, S.** 1826. *Proyecto de Constitucion para la Republica de Bolivia y discurso del Libertador al Congreso Constituyente de Bolivia*. 1826. Retrieved from: <https://www.ensayistas.org/antologia/XIXA/bolivar/bolivia.htm>. Download date: August 25th, 2018.
- Bolívar, S.** 1830. *Carta de Bolívar al General Juan Jose Flores*. Retrieved from: [https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Carta_de_Bol%C3%ADvar_al_general_Juan_Jos%C3%A9_Flores_\(1830\)](https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Carta_de_Bol%C3%ADvar_al_general_Juan_Jos%C3%A9_Flores_(1830)). Download date: August 25th, 2018.
- Bushnell, D.** 2003. *Simón Bolívar: Liberation and Disappointment*. London: Longman Publishing Group.
- Caballero, M.** 2006. *Por que no soy bolivariano*. Caracas: Alfa.
- Carrera Damas, G.** 2003. *El culto a Bolívar: Esbozo para un estudio de la historia de las ideas en Venezuela*. Caracas: Alfa.
- Castro, P.** 2007. El caudillismo en América Latina, ayer y hoy. *Política y cultura*, 27: 9–29. <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/267/26702702.pdf>.
- Castro-Klarén, S.** 2003. "Framing Pan-Americanism: Simón Bolívar's Findings." *CR: The New Centennial Review*. 3(1): 25–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0004>
- Chodor, T.** 2014. *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America. Breaking up with TINA?* New York: Springer.

- Damas, G.** 1983. "Simón Bolívar, el culto heroico y la nación." *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 107–145. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2515360>
- Draper, H.** 1968. "Carlos Marx y Simón Bolívar: Apunte sobre el liderazgo autoritario en un movimiento de liberación nacional." *Desarrollo Económico*, 8(30/31): 293–311. América Latina 4.
- Helg, A.** 2003. "Simon Bolivar and the spectre of pardocracia: Jose Padilla in post-independence Cartagena." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 35(3): 447–471. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X03006849>
- Leiva, L.** 1985. *La Gran Colombia: una ilusión ilustrada*. Caracas: Monte Avila Editores.
- Levene, R.** 1951. *Las Indias no eran colonias*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- López, J** and **Lopez, J.** 1999. *El proceso ideológico de la emancipación en Colombia*. Madrid: Planeta.
- Lynch, J.** 2010. *Simon Bolivar: A Life*. Yale University Press.
- Maistre, J.** 1965. Considerations on France. In: Lively, J (ed.), *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*. New York: McMillan.
- Paredes Muñante, J.** 2015. "The conspiracy against Miranda July 31, 1812." *Diálogos Revista Electrónica de Historia*, 16(2): 219–267.
- Roberts, P.** 2012. *Introduction to Political Thought*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Said, E.** 2006. *Orientalism*. Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Shubert, A.** 1999. *Death and Money in the Afternoon: A History of the Spanish Bullfight*. Oxford University Press.
- Stoan, SK.** 1974. *Pablo Morillo and Venezuela, 1815–1820*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Tocqueville, A.** 2004. *Democracy in America*. Washington. Library of America.
- Wittfogel, K.** 1953. "The ruling bureaucracy of Oriental despotism: A phenomenon that paralyzed Marx." *The Review of Politics*, 15(3): 350–359. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500001534>

How to cite this article: Andrade, G and Lugo-Ocando, J. 2018. The *Angostura Address* 200 Years Later: A Critical Reading. *Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 47(1), 74–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/iberoamericana.427>

Published: 11 October 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, History is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.

OPEN ACCESS