

Chávez was the symbol of Latin American unity against US interference in recent decades

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■ ■ In explaining the paradoxical presence of both imperial and anti-imperial ideologies in the core of the Creole Revolutions in the Americas, you use the phrase “anti-imperial imperialism.” First, I understand that it may be used interchangeably with “imperial anti-imperialism,” but I suspect that choosing one instead of the other might be significant to you. Is it so?

That’s such an interesting question. I think either phrase works to pick out what I am trying to say. I chose to use the first phrase, “anti-imperial imperialism,” because here the adjective “anti-imperial” modifies the noun “imperialism.” That is to say, the ideology of the American independence movements is a kind of imperialism, comparable to other, prior, forms of imperialism in its drive to territorial expansion and commitments to unifying a political regime over space while maintaining a hierarchical social order within that unified political regime. But the imperialism of the American independence movements can be distinguished from other forms of imperialism by the fact that it is justified explicitly by reference to the strategic necessities of a struggle against imperial rule, and a critique of the inequalities and oppressions inher-

ent in that imperial rule. Thus, anti-imperial imperialism.

To turn it around though (in a way that I hadn’t really thought to do until I read your question) I suppose one might equally say that the ideology of the American independence movements is a kind of anti-imperialism, comparable to other, mainly later, forms of anti-imperialism, but distinguished from them by the imperial features and methods I just noted. That would make it an imperial anti-imperialism.

I think I chose the former because when I started this project there was a small but growing literature in political theory on the ideologies of imperialism, which had looked closely at the British and French, and to a lesser extent, the Spanish, thinkers who sought to justify their countries’ imperial projects, but hadn’t considered the Americas. I was looking to contribute to that literature, so I described the kind of imperial ideology that emerged from the Americas.

If I were doing it over again, though, I might go the other way. That’s actually the direction my current research is heading.



Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804) was an American revolutionary and statesman, a Founding Father of the United States, and a founder of the Federalist Party.

■ ■ Second, were the revolutionaries aware at the time of this paradox?

Another good question. I think the answer is yes, they fully understood the imperial and anti-imperial dimensions of their proj-

ects, but they weren’t necessarily aware that the position they were taking is paradoxical. There are points at which the figures I examine explicitly seem to describe the paradox. Hamilton, for example, refers to the United States as an empire in the 1st Federalist Paper. And that terminology was not unusual amongst his contemporaries, though they were certainly conscious of the fact that they had just overthrown an empire. Bolívar described the constitution he wrote for Bolivia as combining the advantages of a republic and an empire. That is pretty explicit, but he didn’t regard that as a chimerical combination. The classic self-contradiction involved in denouncing imperial political institutions that made “slaves” of American colonists while preserving the institution of slavery within the American colonies (which I am far from the first to notice or describe) was ubiquitous in the American independence movements. But again, it wasn’t necessarily regarded as self-contradictory.

The paradoxical quality of the institutional arrangements made during the American independence movements became clear over time, however, as they generated internal instabilities that resulted in civil wars and, in the case of the Spanish American republics, led to regime breakdown, territorial reordering, long periods of unrest and delayed economic development. Of course, the US also experienced its share of instability, but managed to survive intact, mostly for what I regard as contingent historical reasons. Still, I think one could read the history of the United States since the independence movement as a continuous and still-ongoing effort to address and correct the internal contradictions built into the country’s institutions at its origins. That definitely has not only been a story of progress. There have been periods of regression as well.

■ ■ You point out that North American settlers developed and harbored a notion of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, presumably over their Spanish counterparts to the south, right? To what extent was this a reflection of imperial rivalries in Europe? Did the circumstantial patterns of settlement in the Americas significantly reinforce those sentiments?

Yes. Well it’s a tricky issue to date exactly when Anglo-Saxon supremacism becomes a major driver of political thought and both domestic and foreign policy in the USA, but I would argue that it really emerges in the 1820s, that is, a few decades after the US independence movement, during the period in which the Spanish American independence movements were underway. As I describe in the book, in 1824 Simón Bolívar organized a diplomatic congress of the American republics. Though Bolívar himself was initially against it, his administration did send an invitation to the USA. It is during the debates in Congress initiated by that invitation that I see, for the first time, a strong strain of Anglo-Saxon supremacism generating division between the USA and the Spanish American republics. Prior to that moment, there was, amongst both elites and the public, a real sense of solidarity with Spanish America in the USA, pride in the accomplishments of the western hemisphere, and a commitment to a common mission to establish and maintain republican forms of government in the face of threats posed by the European monarchies.