



If US-Americans expressed doubts about Spanish America, it was grounded in anti-Catholicism rather than Anglo-Saxon supremacy, until the 1820s, when the latter comes to the fore.

As to the relationship with imperial rivalries in Europe, that was an important contributor. There had been, for generations, in Britain a major critique of Spain and Spanish imperialism, sometimes called the “Black Legend.” But again, this was primarily anti-Catholicism rather than Anglo-Saxon supremacy. As in the Americas, the latter only emerges in the 19th century, with the advent of so-called “scientific” racism – a reconceptualization of racial difference.

■ ■ In recent years, the notion of US exceptionalism has been under attack from many fronts, and your work elegantly makes a surprise contribution to that onslaught, if you will. After all, in your opinion, was the US really exceptional in any proper sense of the word?



Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) was a Venezuelan military and political leader who led many modern-day countries in Americas to independence from the Spanish Empire.

I’ve been interested in the concept of US Exceptionalism for a long time, and it remains central to my work. The original formulation of that concept, within social science, was an effort to explain the weakness or outright absence of a significant socialist political party within the USA, which made it an outlier when compared with western Europe. So efforts were made to find the causes of that difference, and various factors: the lack of a history of “feudalism,” racial divisions in the working class, an “open frontier” for settlement, and so on. While those explanations work well enough when you’re comparing the USA to western Europe, they all fail when you compare the USA to Latin America. In Latin America there was no history of European-style feudalism, there are racial divisions in the working class, there were “open frontiers,” and almost every Latin American country has a significant socialist



Lucas Alamán (1792-1853) was a Mexican conservative politician and revolutionary who played a major political and intellectual role in the independence of Mexico.

political party. So to my mind, changing the frame of comparison from Europe to the USA really undermines commonplace accounts of US exceptionalism.

I would say that vis-à-vis Latin America, the United States was exceptionally lucky, in the following sense: the union of former colonies formed after independence in the United States survived despite major challenges and a Civil War, while in Latin America political instability led to state breakdown and ultimately the emergence of 18 separate states. Political unity facilitated the United States economic development, which in turn made the US a major military power, first within the Western Hemisphere and then in the world as a whole. It’s in those international relationships that I think we have to look for a cause of the weakness of socialism as a political ideology in the United States.

■ ■ You observe that the absence of political unity in Central and South America “prevented their inhabitants from mounting an effective resistance to the United States’ repeated incursions.” In more recent years, some of those countries have again tried to make alliances to fight the US hegemony. To what extent can we trace the new developments back to those early efforts of resistance?

The connections are very clear and very direct, visible, for example, in the way that Simón Bolívar has been made an icon of integrationist projects in Latin America since the late 19th century. The former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was perhaps the most prominent voice for Latin American unity as a counter-weight to US interference in recent decades, and he consistently presented his project as a continuation or revitalization of Bolívar’s. He renamed the country “The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” He named the regional institution he founded, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of



Hugo Chávez (1954-2013) was a Venezuelan politician who was president of Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013. He was the leader of the Fifth Republic Movement political party which was later transformed into the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Our America (ALBA for its acronym in Spanish: Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América).

■ ■ You observe that the historical outcomes of the efforts of unifying colonies in the Americas were not inevitable. Forgive me, but I’m a fan of alternative history. (I especially like ‘The Man in the High Castle’ TV series.) Let’s imagine that the project of the union in Philadelphia had failed, and its counterparts to its south had succeeded. What, if any, would be characteristically different about the United States of South America and its dominance over North America?

Yes, I am also interested in counter-factual history, and I’ve written on precisely this issue. I think the counter-factual you outline is not a particularly likely one. As I noted above, what is notable is how the USA escaped the fate that befell the unions created after independence in Spanish America, despite very serious challenges culminating in the Civil War. So a likelier counterfactual trajectory is what if the USA, like its counterparts in Spanish America, broke apart? I think in that case the parts of the USA would have followed a developmental path, if not identical to the ones traced by the Spanish American states – which after all are not identical to each other – but more similar than the path they actually followed. Slower economic development, later industrialization, inter-state warfare, a smaller footprint in hemispheric and international politics. Within particular regions, like the US south, slavery might have persisted longer, which itself might have delayed industrialization and economic development further, and set up a set of possible alliances during the 19th century or even into the 20th – ie, what if a sovereign state in the US South had joined the Holy Alliance, or allied itself with Louis Napoleon, or taken the side of Austria-Hungary in the first World War? Or the side of Germany in the Second World War? Meanwhile, other regions of the USA, in particular the west, might never have become parts of the USA at all – a set of divided sovereign states likely would not have had the financial means to purchase Louisiana from France, or the military means to defeat Mexico in 1848, or the diplomatic influence to convince Britain to cede the Oregon Territory in 1846. Then you have to start thinking about how things would be different elsewhere in the world if the USA were not a superpower. Where would Iran be today if there had been no CIA? Suffice it to say that things would have looked very different than they do in fact look today.