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Review/Reseña

Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic*.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Empire, Sovereignty, and the Law in Latin American Independence

Karen Racine

University of Guelph

With this book, Jeremy Adelman continues to build his reputation as a careful scholar who takes on large and complicated topics with energy and extensive archival research. Just as he did in his previous book, *Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the New World*, Adelman approaches his subject from a birds-eye perspective, viewing the breakdown of Iberian empires and the subsequent process of national state formation from an international perspective that derives its

central assumptions from the role of law in civil society. By explicitly situating his work in an Atlantic context, Adelman joins other recent scholars in an attempt to elevate the study of the Iberian Atlantic to the same level of prominence as the Anglo-American Atlantic and the Black Atlantic.¹ For example, J.H. Elliott, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, and Antonio Barrera-Osorio have published important books in the past two years, and a major international collaborative center for the study of the Iberian Atlantic has been sited at the University of Liverpool under the direction of Harald Braun and Kirsty Hooper.² Adelman's book is a welcome addition, particularly since it incorporates significant archival and secondary research on Luso-Brazilian events, which are often shunted aside in discussions of Latin American independence, for obvious reasons. By focusing on the overarching concept of sovereignty, Adelman is able to integrate the histories of two regions often treated as separate and distinct, an undertaking which represents a major historiographical advance.

In this book, the author sets out several clear goals. First, he argues that residents of Spanish and Portuguese overseas empires were not inevitably disaffected with their conditions, but rather that the Iberian imperial domains crumbled "less out of internal conflicts and more from the compound pressures of several centuries of rivalry between Atlantic powers" (5). He has drawn upon Theda Skocpol's theory of social revolution to inform his observations that "international pressures of competing sovereignties broke down state systems" and that this cleavage and instability allowed for divergent visions to permit a larger scale transformation to take place. Adelman's second goal is to repair what he sees as a large gap in the historiography of the independence movements,

¹ J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain 1492-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic 1550-1700* (Stanford University Press, 2006) and *Nature, Empire and Nation: Explorations of Science in the Iberian World* (Stanford University Press, 2006); Daniela Bleichmar et al, eds, *Science in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires 1500-1800* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Antonio Barrera-Osorio, *Experiencing Nature: The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

² "Re-thinking the Iberian Atlantic," Housed in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies, University of Liverpool, UK. The research group has sponsored conferences on a particular theme.

namely that surprisingly little is known about how these state systems actually decomposed. Here the author's choice of verb is central to understanding his interpretation of the process. Independence was less a preordained, ideological hero-driven event than a slow, convoluted series of individual choices and systemic shocks that eroded pan-Atlantic empires over time. In other words, the Iberian Atlantic empires decomposed (and, to extend the author's imagery, in so doing they created fertile soil for the flowering of new national entities). Ironically enough, the evocation of the New World as a garden was common enough during the centuries preceding the events under discussion and carried with it some sort of divine, edenic implication not usually associated with contractual relationships.

As a third goal, Adelman also explicitly intends his book to "restore the centrality of the imperial dimension to the way we think about revolutions and their national progeny" because his area of a concern, sovereignty, was "reflexively associated with imperium" (5). Sovereignty as a historical concept encompasses several distinct but related meanings, including the legal personality of subjects within a governed entity, their rights, responsibilities, and method of redress, and also the establishment of meaningful borders around the political community. To this end, Adelman set out to blur the imperial-colonial distinction by referring to an Atlantic world whose history can be looked at bifocally to bring both sides of the ocean into the same visual frame of empire. Although he does not state it explicitly, he is also setting out paradoxically to blur the distinction between Portuguese and Spanish America, and to sharpen an awareness of how much they had in common as their respective imperial systems decomposed.

The fourth and final goal of this ambitious book is to rehabilitate the notion of the center to discussions of the imperial power relations. By focusing on merchant networks based in urbanized ports and their supplier towns, and by putting the concept of sovereignty at the center, Adelman wants to remind his readers that our collective desire to restore agency to the colonies and to explore the effects of long-repressed peasant and

indigenous resentments, we have diminished the other side of the equation and thus created an intellectual imbalance that is equally ill-advised. In this sense, Adelman is speaking to a much larger professional audience than students of the Iberian world alone. His discussion of the rule of law, national sovereignty and revolution in the context of an imperial breakdown have clear implications for many other fields of historical study, as well as our own contemporary political horizon. As any good scholar should, Adelman is engaged with the issues of his own age, although he remains professional enough to let the reader draw his or her own parallels.

By arguing that both imperialists (royalists) and nationalists (patriots) conceived of “the state as an instrument for creating moral communities of civic-minded men (and sometimes women), defined as subjects or citizens who lived and transacted together under the same legal norms and statutes” (394), Adelman nods toward the recent historiographical emphasis on the centrality of the liberal Cádiz constitutional order which has been extensively developed by Jaime Rodríguez, Manuel Chust, Roberto Breña, and François-Xavier Guerra. Indeed, his discussion of sovereignty also takes care to document the important distinction between independence and autonomy, which is so crucial in the Iberian context. Iberia has had a long history of autonomist movements on its continental territory as well (Galicia, Catalonia, Andalusia, Basque region). In that context, the emergence of a similar ethos among its overseas residents was entirely reasonable and did not necessarily make the drive to full independence an inevitability. By focusing on the relative weakness of the Iberian centers, and their dependence on their outlying colonies (the capillaries) to reinvigorate the metropolis (heart), Adelman’s careful research clearly proves how the energetic Bourbon and Pombaline reforms signaled a new “national” vision of sovereignty that resided in an updated and invigorated arrangement between merchants and the state. The suggestion is intriguing, not because it confirms that the Enlightenment reformers fundamentally disrupted the status quo in a way that was destructive in the long-run (we already knew that), but because it raises new questions about the role of entrepreneurship and capital in the formation of a new patriotic ethos.

The book is strongest when dealing directly with the Enlightenment political philosophy and the legal underpinnings of sovereignty. Other sections of the text are less-clearly relevant and have a cursory feel. For example, there are references to the Andean Rebellion of the 1780s and the Tiradentes/ Confidência Mineiro in Brazil in the 1790s, but these complex and highly localized events are not convincingly integrated into the larger themes. Similarly, the second chapter deals with the major issue of slavery in the Iberian world, a discussion that only begins to take on a heightened level of interest and sophistication when Adelman turns his attention to the contractual and legalistic implications of the nefarious trade. The narrative sections dealing with the great military campaigns of Bolívar and San Martín are eclipsed by discussions of their philosophies, constitutions, and international entanglements. One of the great strengths and contributions of this book, ironically, is the same thing that makes it difficult to absorb; the ability to synthesize broad movements over a great swath of time means that the actual human dimension often gets lost in abstraction. When using sovereignty and empire as the categories of analysis, the temptation to place disparate movements alongside each other as examples occasionally means that the particularities can be lost. As a consequence, some key conflicts of sovereignty, such as that of the Carrera vs. O'Higgins factions appear only as brief examples. Nevertheless, the magisterial sweep of Adelman's vision outweighs the imperatives of details.

There are some challenging qualities to the book's format. Although it is comprehensively footnoted as one would expect from a professional scholar, the book does not include a full and final bibliography. This omission reflects a worrying trend in academic publishing that may make sense from the press's production-cost standpoint, but which has a negative impact on the book's readership by rendering it more difficult for them to note the totality of its research base, survey state of the field, and locate future research sources for their own use. The book is erudite, long, densely layered, and reflects the author's deep familiarity with legalistic arguments. In many places, the prose is challenging to decipher, but in others, an extended analytical metaphor of the Latin American labyrinth is invoked to lovely literary effect. Adelman references Borges, Paz, and Tocqueville with

equal aplomb. *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* is most likely to appeal to advanced graduate students and sophisticated readers who can appreciate the complex notions of political philosophy that underpin his discussion of sovereignty, particularly since the nature of the Iberian social contract is quite different from that of Anglo-America. Adelman's book is a major contribution to the fields of Atlantic history, Latin American independence, and post-colonial studies and well-timed to contribute to the rapidly-approaching bicentennial commemorations.