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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘Morals and Enlightenment’: Bolívar’s Virtuous Democracy in the Angostura Address

Guillermo Aveledo

Love of country, love of the law, love of leaders, are the noble passions that must exclusively occupy the soul of a republican. . . . If country, law, and the authorities are not held as sacred, society is a morass, an abyss, hand-to-hand combat between individuals and groups.

To extricate our nascent republic from this chaos, not even the full weight of our moral faculties will suffice unless we can unify our country: its governmental structure, its legislative body, and its national spirit. Unity, unity, unity – that must be our motto. If the blood of our citizens is diverse, let us make it one. If our constitution has divided the powers, let us unify them. If our laws are moribund relics of every ancient and modern despotism, let us tear down this monstrous edifice and, obliterating even its ruins, build a temple of justice in whose sacred precincts we can dictate a Venezuelan code of law. If we need to consult monuments and models of legislation, Great Britain, France, and North America will offer us theirs.

*Popular education should be the highest concern of paternal love for our congress. Morals and enlightenment are the poles of a republic. Morals and enlightenment are our first necessities.*¹

How best to establish a popular government with a corrupted and stillborn citizenry? Which institutions would serve better the purpose of creating a state both democratic and stable? Such are pressing questions for any revolutionary statesman, but more so for general Simón Bolívar, as he addressed the inauguration of the Constitutional Congress in Angostura, on a hot and humid day of February, 1819, during the South American wars of independence.

Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) remains a towering figure among the many leaders that witnessed the breakdown of society during that era. To this day, he is a vivid icon within Latin America, to the extent that his extensive written works, long-winded and prolific as befit his peculiar political career, are used by politicians and commentators from all sides of the ideological spectrum. Bolívar sits at the crux of the region's optimism about its future and pessimism regarding its own character, inciting strong emotions from different misreadings.

The myriad of unsuccessful attempts to install a durable and legitimate form of government in Venezuela triggered the most violent civil conflict of the Spanish American wars of independence during the 1810s,² and brought Bolívar to the forefront of revolutionary politics, where he displayed both his revolutionary zeal and military outlook in political affairs.³ Bolívar's political thought crystallized under the strength of this experience: while the installation of a democratic republic was the sole legitimate pursuit in a revolutionary war, liberal institutions were too weak, and the people of Spanish America were unprepared to live under a democratic constitution, prone as they were to fanaticism and servitude.⁴ Bolívar also learned specific lessons from his wide but unsystematic reading of the political theory of his day. From Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, Bolívar took to heart the warnings against creating political institutions out of tune with the specific spirit – culture, morals religion, climate – of a particular nation, as well as the warning that the guiding principles of any republican government, be it aristocratic or democratic, were the prevailing virtues of its leaders and citizens, especially moderation and love of country. And he further agreed with Rousseau's assertion in *The Social Contract* that the only source of legitimacy and stability for a just government was the elimination of particular interests in favour of the General Will.

To create a lasting and virtuous government from warring factions and races after the cataclysmic upheaval of the wars of independence, Bolívar proposed a redefinition of popular government among Colombia's citizens. In 1819, the Angostura provisional Colombian government was not the product of a creole-only elite, but the result of a completely new army,

which had among its officer class and active troops members of all the racial castes. It is to this audience that Bolívar presented his dire views on the possibilities and needs of democratic self-rule in his famous Angostura Address. Since political corruption had been the cause of both the failure to institutionalize a democratic republic and of the civil war that ensued, Bolívar proposed an institutional framework that would shape the nation's virtues and take advantage of those citizens who, emerging among the warring factions and races, had proved sufficiently enlightened and virtuous so as to have survived not merely 'some new political tempest, or bloody war, or even an outburst of popular anarchy, but the spectacle of every disruptive force'.⁵

In Bolívar's view, legislators had previously tried to conjure patriotism out of thin air, but the influence of Spanish conquest had bequeathed a population unfit for self-rule, morally weak, easily duped into acquiescing to despotism, and inept at understanding its natural freedoms:

our lot has always been purely passive and politically insignificant [. . .] we have always occupied a station lower than that of servants [. . .] Enslaved by the triple yoke of ignorance, tyranny, and vice, we Americans have never experienced knowledge, power, or virtue [. . .] We've been ruled more by treachery than force and corrupted more by vice than by superstition.⁶

Bolívar was repeating the common trope of the Spanish black legend: the Iberian nation was described as the most backward, ferocious and fanatical of all the European powers, with faulty institutions and declining influence in the new, civilized world. This insistence served the purpose of belittling his main political antagonist, but Bolívar dispensed with the delusion of copying a 'foreign' polity more akin to a virtuous commonwealth such as that of the United States. An 'absolute democracy', still longed for by many of the Angostura congressmen, was out of the question.

Nevertheless, Bolívar was unyielding on the need to abolish aristocratic rule: 'A republican government has always been, still is, and must ever be that of Venezuela. It must be founded upon the sovereignty of the people, the division of powers, civil liberty, the proscription against slavery, the abolition of monarchy and privileged classes.'⁷ To reverse course would be to render the sacrifices endured by thousands of patriotic citizens fruitless, and it was imperative that the conflict's hardships should bring about freedom's fruits, even if they were 'succulent . . . but hard to digest'.⁸ Bolívar aspired to popular rule but he feared the people were not immediately ready for 'untrammelled freedom, absolute democracy'. How could a democratic republic be thus established? The answer was twofold: find the model for future citizens among those individuals who had sacrificed the most, and build the new institutions around them, checking relative present freedoms in order to secure their future liberty.

For Bolívar, the revolutions in Colombia had been a trial, before which no single caste would have been prepared to establish a legitimate form of rule. The war itself became the evidence of such impossibility, but it also created a new kind of citizen: the military man. Alas, if the new Republic should only rest upon its armed citizens, how could an oligarchical entrenchment be prevented? The answer lay in Bolívar's redefinition of the people itself, by upending the prescription of a representative government of laws made by the people. Countering Enlightenment tropes, he argued that the patriots and citizens needed in order to uphold popular self-rule did not require property or education, but merely virtue, defined as the capacity of individuals to look beyond particular factional interests. Virtue could – and should – be instilled, but in the meantime, a popular government had to be construed from 'the people' at hand, all the while promoting the necessary measures so as to ensure that both property and education spread among the potential future citizens now freed by the might of the actual citizens. The normative ideal was a democratic republic; the practical reality was that the different divisive forces in play during the civil wars – ideology, race, geographical distance, economic inequality – needed to be harmonized.

For Bolívar, thus, 'the people' was not an extensive concept, deriving from the whole of the free population, and not even from its richest or most enlightened persons, as the creole republic of 1811 had advocated, and the war had cruelly decimated. The war had brought forward a new kind of citizen, from which society's betters had effectively emerged: the soldiers of the republican forces, '[m]en who have sacrificed all the pleasures and wealth they formerly possessed as a result of their virtues and talents; men who have experienced the pits of cruelty in a horrid war [. . .], men who deserve so much from their country demand the attention of the government.'⁹ Bolívar could be accused of being disingenuous, as he was addressing an audience of military officers, among whom many caudillos were present, and of whose personal ambition he knew. But beyond offering compensation for their sacrifices, Bolívar was upholding them as 'Liberators of the Republic', as the core element of the nation's active citizenry.¹⁰

Ultimately, this was an egalitarian argument: only the army upheld the reality of racial equality and the dissolution of the old caste system, just as his proposed absolute abolition of the slave trade would, given that both the troops and officers of the republican armies were not only from the minority white creole former elite, but also from the popular castes of African descendants, native peoples and *mestizos*.¹¹ Natural and physical inequality were openly acknowledged by Bolívar, yet that inequality should not hinder 'the right of every citizen to contribute to the framing of laws, as member of the sovereign', though only within representative institutions among the virtuous, and not in 'popular gatherings, always tumultuous'. And in any case extreme equality would run counter to the 'order, tranquillity, circumspection, prudence and wisdom' demanded by strong institutions.¹²

Consequently, the basis of the new citizenry was to be moral, rather than racial or economic. The people would participate insofar as their capacities would allow them to do so without endangering the common good. A moderate republic, more attuned to the wisdom of Britain than that of the overtly democratic United States, was in order. Not only would it have a restricted electorate, 'the first dam against popular license', it would also discriminate between the powers of its representative bodies: a Chamber of Representatives, which would provide space for the discussion of current affairs among its factions, and a hereditary Senate, which would protect the lasting interests of the Republic, being 'above the fray of partisan politics'.¹³ The lower house would elect the first generation of Senators among its more deserving citizens ('this race of virtuous, prudent, bold men who [. . .] have laid the foundation of the republic at the cost of the most heroic sacrifices'), but its continuity would rest upon the establishment of a school for legislators, where the future representatives 'would learn [. . .] the knowledge needed to adorn the mind of a public servant, [. . .] the career to which they are destined by Providence, and [. . .] would prepare their spirits for the dignity that awaits them'.¹⁴ The natural virtues of the current leadership, which had shown enough evidence of patriotism and reason, would be polished by political education.

Bolívar also defended the institution of a unitary executive, while disparaging federalism as the amorphous chaos of fractious and semi-sovereign little provinces. While the judiciary appears underdeveloped in the address, the role of preserver of legal and moral rectitude is found in the proposal of an 'audacious invention': a 'Moral Power' that, similar to Athens' Areopagus or Roman censors, was to serve as moral check against executive impropriety, and to oversee all matters regarding the education of children, patriotism, honesty and any fault against public morals, imposing severe 'moral chastisements' instead of corporal punishments.¹⁵ In this regard, the concern over public education and the moral shortfalls of the general population prevails in Bolívar over any qualms about the abuse of power. To foster 'love of country' and 'love of the law', Bolívar's political virtues, it would be necessary to have 'love of leaders', and that would only happen if the people could restrain their own base impulses, which would only be possible in due time. In effect, the establishment of a democratic republic was postponed until an active citizenry was in place, when power could again be fully redistributed. But the checks on the representatives' power, as well as the measures to instil virtue and reason among the people, had to be put into effect immediately.

Ultimately, Bolívar's model for an ideal polity to 'regenerate the character and customs imposed on us by tyranny and war'¹⁶ stems from an unrelenting pessimism concerning the current virtues of the people, while harbouring an unbridled optimism regarding the formative effects of political institutions in transforming their character, and a deep-seated personal trust about the patriotism and wisdom of the citizens born out of war. Neither the

legislators of Angostura, nor most of the new statesmen of the nascent Republic of Colombia, fully shared his inclinations, dismissing the most controlling elements of the *Libertador's* proposal¹⁷ and eventually opposing his authority and political influence as illiberal, all the while dismantling his more progressive measures regarding slavery and the rights of non-propertied officers. During the last decade of Bolívar's life and political career, his project for a unified Colombian republic unravelled and he was more frequently accused of being a petty tyrant. But this dissension would not change his ambiguous evaluation of democracy, to which his Angostura Address remains the most lasting testament.

It would be unfair to chastise Bolívar regarding his views about the perils of democracy, conceived as the direct rule of the people, a common fear at that time. But Bolívar's expectations of political virtue came from his conviction that the attributes of popular military heroes would help them fulfil their duties as mentors of the new citizenry, a belief derived from his vexing formative years and his own martial ethos. Alienated and impatient about the deliberations of parliaments, and desperate for the end of a dire social catastrophe, sacrifices in the battlefield seemed to verify the mettle of the emerging elite to which he belonged. While this view may have proved itself politically inadequate for the aftermath of the independence wars, since neither order, liberty nor equality prevailed, perhaps his pessimism was not completely unwarranted.

Notes

- 1 'Discurso pronunciado por el Libertador ante el Congreso de Angostura el 15 de febrero de 1819, día de su instalación', in Simón Bolívar, *Obras Completas* (México: Editorial Cumbre, 1976), vol. VI (book VIII), document 83, 255–6. Translations from the Spanish are my own. A standard English translation can be found in Simón Bolívar, Frederick H. Fornoff, trans., and David BusŸell, ed., *El Libertador: writings of Simón Bolívar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 2 JoŸ Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808–1826* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), 189–217.
- 3 Fernando Falcón, *El Cadete de los valles de Aragua: el pensamiento político y militar de la Ilustración y los conceptos de guerra y política en Simón Bolívar, 1797–1814* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2006), 29–94.
- 4 For Bolívar the war had 'confirmed that perfectly representative institutions are not appropriate to our character, our customs, and our current level of knowledge and experience . . . Unfortunately, the acquisition of these qualities to the necessary level would seem to be very remote from us; on the contrary, we are dominated by the vices contracted under the rule of a nation like Spain, which has shown itself to excel only in pride, ambition, vengeance, and greed.' Simón

Bolívar, Carta de Jamaica (Caracas: Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 1972), 166.

- 5 'Discurso . . .' Bolívar, *Obras Completas*, vol. VI, document 83, 237.
- 6 Ibid., 239.
- 7 Ibid., 247.
- 8 Ibid., 240.
- 9 Ibid., 259.
- 10 In a revealing letter to general Santander, regarding continuing legislative opposition to his constitutional ideas, Bolívar quipped:

These gentlemen think that the will of the people is their will, forgetting that in Colombia the people is in the army, because it really is there, and because it has conquered its rights as a people from the very hands of its former tyrants; because it also is the people who wants, the people who does and the people who can; all the rest are folks that merely loaf around with more or less malignancy, more or less patriotism, but all of them with no more right to be anything but passive citizens . . .

Letter from Simón Bolívar to Francisco de Paula Santander, San Carlos, 16 June 1821, in Bolívar, *Obras Completas*, vol II, document 493, 75.

- 11 There is a problem with the word 'slavery' as used in the Angostura address. According to the tropes of Enlightenment political thought, slavery was often used to mean political servitude under absolute or despotic rule. But chattel slavery was rarely confronted head-on by thinkers who might have even profited from the trade (Bolívar himself sought the support of British slave-owners in 1815). 'Slavery' is used in that political and not economic sense in all but one mention in the address, but Bolívar had set free his own slaves in 1814, and decreed the freedom of former slaves who joined the republican forces in 1816, as well as in multiple decrees abolishing the slave trade and ordering the emancipation of slaves issued during his Southern campaign. The Angostura Congress postponed any emancipatory measures, and the matter was only settled in Colombia and Venezuela in the 1850s.
- 12 Proyecto de Constitución de 1819 (Title I, 1st Section, Article 15), in Pedro Grases (comp.), *El Libertador y la constitución de Angostura de 1819* (Caracas: Banco Hipotecario de Crédito Urbano, 1970), 115.
- 13 'Discurso . . .' Bolívar, *Obras Completas*, vol. VI, document 83, 250.
- 14 Ibid., 250–1.
- 15 Ibid., 256. Bolívar's Project for a Constitution of Bolivia clarified the jurisdiction of the Moral Power, as censoring and vigilant authority over 'the sciences, the arts, education, and the press' ('Discurso del Libertador al Congreso Constituyente de Bolivia', Ibid., 402).
- 16 Ibid., 257.
- 17 Caracciolo Parra Pérez, *Bolívar: contribución al estudio de sus ideas políticas* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, Fundación Bancaribe para la Ciencia y la Cultura, 2015), 105–6.