

**Beyond the “History of Ideas”  
The Issue of the “Ideological Origins of the Revolutions of Independence”  
Revisited**

The issue of the “ideological origins of the revolution of independence” has recently returned as a central topic in Latin American historiography.<sup>1</sup> The standard view, whose origin can be traced back to the very period of the wars of independence, affirms the presence of an intimate relation between the revolutionary outburst and the arrival of the ideas of the Enlightenment, coming mainly from France. According to this view, Rousseau’s concept of the social contract would have provided the basis on which the entire revolutionary discourse stood.

This standard view contains implicit, in turn, an assumption: that local societies, educated in the Catholic milieu of the Spanish tradition, were not ready for independence. In this context, only the intervention of an external factor could explain the break of the colonial system and the formation of the new nations founded on modern, republican system of governments. However, this assumption was never unanimously accepted by local historians. Some of them thus dedicated to the task of searching for the local roots of independence, the precursor ideas and movements that prepared and led to it. Seen in this light, revolutions of independence were the final outcome and the realization of an old dating and deeply rooted desire for self-determination of preexisting nations. On the ideological level, historians like the Argentinean Ricardo Levene believed to find the local roots of the Independence movements in Spanish juridical tradition. It allegedly contained the germs of self-

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed state of the art on the different views of the revolutions of Independence in Latin America from the perspective of conceptual history, see Elías Palti, “¿De la *tradición* a la *modernidad*? Revisionismo e historia político-conceptual de las revoluciones de Independencia”, in Gustavo Leyva, Francis Brian Connaughton, Rodrigo Díaz Cruz, Néstor García Canclini and Carlos Illades, coords., *Independencia y revolución: pasado, presente y futuro* (Mexico: F. C. E. / Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2010), 174-190,

government and local autonomy. As a matter of fact, in strictly legal terms, the ultramarine possessions of Spain were not considered colonies but autonomous kingdoms under one common crown.<sup>2</sup> That principle would be associated, in turn, to a political concept which plunged its roots in the Neo-Scholastic thinking of the seventeenth century.

In effect, the so-called second generation of Neo-Scholastics, whose main representative was the Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548-1617), elaborated on the idea that sovereignty did not come the king directly from God but through the intercession of the people, which conferred it on the monarch. Although this latter line of interpretation was marginal among Latin American historians, it was dominant in Spain's historical milieu. It challenged the main premise on which the standard view was founded: the assumption that the social contract idea that the revolutionaries invoked for justifying the break of the colonial ties with Spain were not taken from Rousseau or the Enlightenment, but referred back to a much older Spanish tradition.

In recent years, this debate has taken a particular twist. The (re-)discovery of the so-called "classical republicanism" or "civic humanism" led to the re-formulation of the terms of the debate. Now, there seems to be a general consensus regarding that the intellectual premises of the revolutions of independence plunged their roots not on the Enlightenment tradition, but on the classical-republican one.

The shift in the dispute from one in terms of an opposition between Enlightenment vs. Neo-Scholasticism to another in terms of an opposition between liberalism and republicanism was triggered by the works of authors like John Pocock and Gordon Wood. It is, in a great measure, merely a transposition of the terms which preserves the same base scheme: the antinomy between the traditionalist nature of the

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<sup>2</sup>Levene, Ricardo. *Las Indias no eran colonias* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1973).

Hispanic societies and the modernity of the conceptual frameworks of the American society and its political culture. Thus, underlying this dispute, there is hidden premise shared by all the different interpretations. The paradox, in the latter case, lays that the recent reformulation of the antinomy takes on the findings of those very authors who intended to show exactly the same thing that would have happened in Latin America in ideological terms would apply to the American revolution, which demolishes the basic assumption, on which the entire debate on the ideological origins of the Latin American independence hitherto rests. Lastly, what this inconsistency reveals is that the whole discussion about the presumed ideological origins of Independence is completely misleading and inevitably leads to absurd conclusions. Seeking the differences in the different ideological models that the respective revolutionary processes followed, whatever they were, is simplistic and fruitless. Actually, there is no way of establishing whether the idea of social contract that the revolutionaries endorsed was taken from the Enlightenment or the Neo-Scholastic, whether it had liberal or republican premises. And, more importantly, that, in the case of that to be possible it would be absolutely irrelevant for the comprehension of the nature of the revolutionary discourse.

This is what the reading of the work by the Argentinean historian Tulio Halperin Donghi reveals. In *Tradición política española e ideología revolucionaria de Mayo* (*Spanish Political Tradition and Revolutionary Ideology of May*) (1962), he would reformulate the whole question. According to him, the point is not to establish where these motifs and ideas came from, what were their origins, but what the revolutionaries of the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century did with them; to understand how those motifs or ideas then became re-arranged and re-signified giving rise to the peculiar conceptual universe within which revolutions took place. Lastly, whatever their origins were, it is clear that they then served to new purposes and

were addressed to new, specific, problems and questions, which were absolutely different to those to which they were addressed in their origins, whatever they were. At that point, even though ideas did not change, the logic of their articulation did, thus giving rise to a new ideological constellation:

If, as we have seen, the originality of a thinking resides only exceptionally in each one of the ideas that are coordinated in it, seeking the source of each one of them seems to be the less fruitful (as well as less secure) to trace the history of thinking.<sup>3</sup>

The history of ideas is thus radically incapable of understanding what changed at that moment, on the level of discourses, since the kind of conceptual rupture produced by the emergence of a revolutionary discourse cannot be perceived on the level of the ideas that it gathered but in the ways in which it articulated them. And this explains, in turn, why, beyond the differences among the participants in this debate, it has remained locked within the frameworks of the antinomies of the tradition of “history of ideas,” that, under different forms, all the different interpretations inevitably relapse into the antinomies that are proper to that tradition, such as individualism and organicism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, rationalism and irrationalism, modernity and tradition, etc. The idea of an opposition between models of thinking assumes them to be consistent and homogenous entities whose definition can be *a priori* established in a definite mode, which inevitably leads to incur in the kind of anachronistic transpositions (the series of “mythologies”) that, as Quentin Skinner and others denounced, were intrinsic to the history of ideas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Halperín Donghi, Tulio. *Tradicón política española e ideología revolucionaria de mayo* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1985), 17. From now on, pagination on the text corresponds to this work.

<sup>4</sup>Skinner, Quentin, “Meaning and Understanding in the History and Theory,” *History and Theory* VIII.1 (1969): 3-53.

In the following pages I intend to analyze how, in his classical book quoted above, Halperin Donghi approached the issue of the “ideological origins” of the revolution of Independence in Latin America and reframed it within a perspective far removed from the traditional frameworks of the “history of ideas”, thus providing the basis for what we can call a “new conceptual history” of Latin American Independence.

In effect, as we have seen, for Halperin Donghi, tracing the origin of the ideas and motifs that the revolutionary discourse gathered is irrelevant. The point is to understand how they became re-signified once they became inscribed into new discursive fields, which were articulated around new kind of problems and issues, very different from those in which those ideas and motifs were initially conceived. This view led him, in turn, to the definition of the basic paradox that the revolutionary discourse raised and he intended to unravel: that the very revolutionary vocation for a radical rupture with the past had its roots in that very past with which it wanted so violently to break. As he shows, “the ideas in whose name the pre-revolutionary reality was condemned were born out of that same reality” (p.9).

Yet, this corroboration may pave the way to the view of a lineal continuity between the pre- and the post-revolutionary ideas, thus missing the fundamental issue: the fact that those very traditional ideas eventually served as the basis for a revolutionary discourse. It thus obliterates the series of conceptual torsions that these ideas underwent since their origin in order to produce that paradoxical result.

[By looking for the origins of ideas, these interpretations] run the risk of underlining the affinity between the world of revolutionary ideas and that existing before revolution, overlooking a fact which is much more essential than that very affinity: that—as we already have remarked— those ideas now structured a revolutionary ideology, an ideological tool to deny and condemn all that past (p. 12).

According to Halperin Donghi, this is, precisely, the point here at stake, that which a conceptual history of the revolutions of independence should be aimed at recreating: the series of semantic displacements through which the very traditional ideas ended up giving rise to a revolutionary ideology that was alien to (and indeed contradictory with) the conceptual frameworks within which those ideas were initially conceived. That book thus serves as a model to approach the political-conceptual process that led to the revolution of Independence in Latin America as what we can call, taking an expression by Hans Blumenberg, a “history of effects” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).<sup>5</sup>

### **Ideological Change and the Reconfiguration of the Discursive Field**

For Halperin Donghi, the line of interpretation that emphasizes the traditional roots of the idea of social contract that the revolutionaries endorsed made a fundamental contribution insofar as it allowed to take critical distance of the self-interpretation of the very agents who perceived the moment of the revolution as a kind of virginal dawn of liberty. This self-perception, he thinks, cannot be taken at face value but it itself deserves to be explained. As he affirms, that very anxiety to radically break with the past actually plunged its roots in that same past with which they desired to break. The incapacity of the revolutionary discourse to come to terms with its own conditions of possibility is, to him, symptomatic.

Yet, this view, in turn, misses a critical point: how those traditional ideas become, in the process, reformulated, gaining a completely different meaning to the

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<sup>5</sup>See Blumenberg, Hans. *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987). In this book, Blumenberg describes the series of torsions that the Aristotelian physics, and its fundamental concepts underwent as a result of the very efforts to save it from the anomalies that it presented in the course of the centuries immediately preceding the astronomical revolution initiated by Copernicus.

established one. Although the ideas remained, the language in which they were then articulated had already mutated.

As a matter of fact, the conceptual ground on which the Neo-Scholastic idea of social contract had mutated in the course of the two centuries that preceded the revolutions of Independence. A fundamental aspect in the thinking of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries is that, for it, it was impossible to think of the idea of the self-constitution of the community, which made the revolutionary concept inconceivable. Imagining that a political community could exist at the margins of any center of power around which it could coalesce and from which it could take its consistency was simply absurd. As Francisco Suárez stated, “a body without a head is mutilated and monstrous.”<sup>6</sup> The constitution of a political community necessarily entailed relations of command and obedience. Before the institution of a political power, we just have a plurality of disperse individuals, not a community properly speaking. As Halperin Donghi remarks:

[For Suárez] the multitude can be considered from two different points of view: as a mere aggregation, with no order or physical and moral union, or as a political body. Now—and we find here again a postulate derived from an authoritarian concept of political relationships—the political body demands, as one of its essential conditions, the presence of the political power (p. 33).

Royal authority was thought as belonging to the realm of natural right, the need of it was inscribed in nature itself. Political power and the community were simultaneously constituted (“it is only thanks to the king that the political body exists”) (p. 53), and the latter cannot be detached of the former. Thus, even though it is certainly true that the revolutionaries took the idea of the social pact from the Neo-Scholastics, it

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<sup>6</sup>Suárez, *De Legibus*, Book I, Chapter VIII, # 9.

would be absurd to see that postulate as a precursor idea of revolution. We must keep always in mind that the Neo-Scholastic thinking, even though it made reference to the idea of the legitimacy of tyrannicide, “was a discourse of power,” (p.37) not of revolution.

There is, besides, a second fundamental difference between the Neo-Scholastic’s and the Enlightenment’s concept of social contract. Although the two imposed limitations to power, the kind of limitations that the former postulated were not associated to the idea that the monarch should follow or obey popular will. Popular will had no normative force in the politics of the Ancient Regime (the fact that people want something does not make it right or just, justice was thought as a set of objective norms, that were established by God himself and imprinted in the very nature of things). Limitations to royal power were given by the ends to which the royal investiture was attached. The social contract at that time worked as the reminder that power should be exercised on behalf of the welfare of the community and not on behalf of his own welfare. Yet, we find here the point where the first torsion in this traditional discourse that would eventually lead to the revolutionary discourse will be produced, the first conceptual displacement in this history of effect.

### **The First Conceptual Displacement: the Secularization of the Ends**

To Halperin Donghi, the figure of Juan de Solórzano (1575-1655) is expressive of first the series of torsions occurred at the interior of traditional political discourse. As he says:

Solórzano participates of another fundamental feature of the Spanish political thinking in the era of the Baroque: the exalted and never solved contradiction between the ideals and the historical-political reality (p. 55).



The Neo-Scholastic thinking of the “second generation” must be inscribed within the context of the disintegration of the universalist ideals of the old Empires (which Philip II had seemed to briefly incarnate), which resulted into a fundamental reconfiguration of the political discourse regarding the Medieval Christian tradition (let us take note of the fact that he does not say that Solórzano affirmed that, but he expresses an objective change in the political discourse of the time, which has to do with changes in the kind of problems at that moment at stake). At that point, the ends to which the social contract concept was hitherto associated were re-interpreted in increasingly secular terms. They were no longer transcendent (the realization of the kingdom of God on Earth) but profane: “the common wealth was now defined as the *felicitas civitatis* as well as that of the citizens as such” (p. 36).

The development of the Enlightenment ideas in the eighteenth century, far from contesting the absolutist concept of power, served to reinforce the authoritarian character of the Catholic monarchy and the idea of the arcane associated to it. With it, the kind of knowledge associated to the exercise of power lost the self-evident nature that the traditional idea of Justice possessed.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it produced a more radical departure of the seventeenth-century rationalism and imbued political discourse with a more marked empiricism: “the essential change resided in the revalorization of the data of experience” (p.45). And this would pave the way, in turn, to the second twist in the traditional political discourse.

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<sup>7</sup>Insofar as the principles of Justice were eternal, they were self-evident, since the opposite contradicted its very definition. In this fashion, they were immediately available to the subjects. The concept of *synderesis* expressed the idea of the natural capacity by the subjects for the intelligence of the principles of Justice. And this made possible for them to eventually judge the justice of the action of authority, with which the problem of the legitimacy of tyrannicide was always posed. This radically changed with the Enlightenment, from the moment that the values on which the community rested were now assumed as conventional, thus losing their self-evident nature. Thus they were no longer publicly available, but demanded a kind of specialized knowledge. On this topic, see Palti, Elías, “El absolutismo monárquico y la génesis de las ‘soberanía nacional’”, in Márcia Naxara and Virginia Camilotti, orgs, *Conceitos e linguagens: construções identitárias* (São Paulo: Intermeios, 2014), 33-50.

As we saw, the break of the universalist ideal of the old Empires did not change the concept that the kind of limitations that the social contract imposed over political authority was associated to the ends to which this authority was conferred by the people, but these ends became increasingly secularized. Now, this process accompanied, in turn, in Spain a profound feeling about the rapid decline of the Empire, which would lead to dig in the past in the search of the roots of the present crisis. And this very fact already entailed a much more radical redefinition in the ways of conceiving of society and power; as we will see, it produced a fundamental torsion in the interior of the categorical universe of the time.

### **The Second Conceptual Displacement: The Detachment of the Nation and Power**

In the eighteenth century Spaniards started to think of (ministerial) despotism as the fundamental cause of the decline of the Empire, whose expression was the abandonment of the “traditional constitution” of the kingdom. This view accompanied the development of the school of “historical constitutionalism.” The origin of it is normally referred to the inaugural discourse by Melchor Gaspar de Jovellanos at the Spanish Academy of History in 1778. The main goal of it was to explore the national past in the search of the Spanish traditional constitution that allegedly despotism had dislocated and these school intended to recover. At that point, a new type of treatises emerged, which was organized around a new object of inquire: the nation and its past, which made thereby its appearance on the level of political discourse. And this rearticulated the entire terms of the debate. As Halperin Donghi remarks, from then on, “the figure of the King is no longer identified with the entire nation; this latter becomes now placed on a higher and broader sphere” (p. 97).

We get here the second displacement in the traditional political discourse. At that moment, the nation gained a substantive presence of its own. It would find the means for its articulation at the margins of political power, which broke the logic of the absolutist state.

Fatherland and nation are notions that represent a radical innovation in the traditional political thinking, insofar as they are seen, in an increasingly emphasized fashion, as entities that are able to subsist at the margins of the state's organizations (p. 100).

Thus, the first displacement in the traditional political discourse that Halperin Donghi traces had to do with the redefinition of the ends of political power, which became increasingly interpreted in secular terms. The second torsion was even more radical, since it involved the emergence on the political arena of a new subject: the nation, which possessed a will of its own and, presumably, the power to impose it even against the will and the action of the political authority. In any case, it was now assumed to pre-exist the monarchy and, as a consequence, to eventually subsist after its fall.

This new concept of the nation, which introduced an element that was heterogeneous within the frameworks of the absolutist political discourse, was the result, in turn, of the efforts of the local oligarchies to control the advance of the state intervention, especially on the local finances and administration of justice (the two faculties traditionally reserved to the local authorities). In the context of this struggle, the city oligarchies invoked the people and the will of the people, on behalf of which they started to speak. This was a process similar to which Edmund Morgan described, for the case seventeenth-century England, in his classical work, *The Invention of the People*, We can call it "the invention of the people," or "the invention of the nation" in

the Spanish world, which then became detached of political power and found its own organs of expression separated of the state apparatus.

The paradox here is that the very absolutist state also invoked “the people,” or even “the nation,” and its will, in order to justify its action against local oligarchies. Public officials argued that their actions were addressed to liberate the communities of the oppression by the local oligarchies. In any case, this nation, which had now detached of the state apparatus and politicized by the very action of the monarchy, will eventually come to confront that same state, which will then become declared as artificial. Against it, it will be opposed that other entity which would bow be the supposedly only “natural” one that existed: the nation. And this paved the way, in turn, to a third torsion in political discourse.

### **The Third Conceptual Displacement: The Emergence of the Constituent Power**

The second half of the eighteenth century thus witnessed a general trend to explore the national past in the search of that “traditional constitution” from which allegedly despotism had departed. Certainly, historical constitutionalism did not simply recover past institutions; at that moment, the (republican) national tradition was actually (re-)invented. And, more importantly, this fact became evident indeed for its very agents and speakers as soon as the debate around that “traditional constitution” exploded. We cross here the third threshold in this *history of effects*.

According to Halperin Donghi, a further displacement in the interior of the traditional thinking would be produced as the result of the royal vacancy after the abdications in Bayone (which was forced by Napoleon, who then designated his own brother as the governor of Spain, which triggered, as a reaction, the so-called *Guerra de Independencia*, a general uprising by local population). At that juncture, it was

convoked to Cortes at Cádiz (the Cortes have not been convoked since the sixteenth century), whose first measure was to assume the sovereignty that was left vacant after the abdications. This meant the institution of a completely new figure: a Constituent Power. It had no longer anything to do with the traditional Cortes, but only its name.

The Congressmen now assumed the representation of the nation, on behalf of which they spoke, and from which their prerogatives were supposed to emanate. The mission of the Congress was to restore the traditional constitution of the nation. Yet, it soon became clear that there was not agreement on what that traditional constitution was. Every party had a very different view of it. In any case, there was not doubt about one point: whether they had to create a new constitution or restore the traditional one, or, in this latter case, what was it, it was the very Cortes the ones which had to decide it. Only them were entitled to do that. And this represented a fundamental political-conceptual innovation.

The very formation of the Cortes at Cadiz actually meant the break of the premises on which the Ancient Regime was based. The institution of a constituent power was produced in the name of past traditions but was heterogeneous with the traditional order. As François-Xavier Guerra remarked, quoting Tocqueville (who, in turn, took on an expression by Loménie de Brienne, in reference to the General States), from the very moment that the constitution of the nation had become a matter of controversy, the Ancient Regime had crumbled down.<sup>8</sup> We find here a fundamental paradox: Spaniards then looked back to the national past *only to find in it the power to cancel that past* (that is, the Cortes, which were entitled to create a wholly new

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<sup>8</sup>See Guerra, François-Xavier, “La política moderna en el mundo hispánico: apuntes para unos años cruciales (1808-1809)”, in Ricardo Ávila Palafox, Carlos Martínez Assad and Jean Meyer, coords., *Las formas y las políticas del dominio agrario. Homenaje a François Chevalier* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1992), 178.

constitution, provided it wanted to do it). Yet, at that point, we also meet the limit-point of the so-called Spanish First Liberalism.

### **The Fourth Conceptual Displacement: The Constitution of the Nation Itself as a Problem**

The constituent power that emerged at Cadiz actually had a limited goal. The mission of the Congress (the Cortes) was to provide a Constitution in order to institute a new political regime. In fact, it did not eliminate the monarchical system, but transformed it into a constitutional monarchy. However, the last limit of the first liberalism did not lay there but in another point. The constitution of the state entailed the existence of the subject which could institute it. In effect, even though there was no agreement regarding the nature of the traditional constitution of the nation, the revolutionary process initiated in Spain after the royal abdications already presupposed the presence of that nation. Actually, the spontaneous uprising against the foreign occupant seemed to prove the actual existence of it. Only at the Colonies there will emerge a new problem, which was not perceived as such in the Spanish Peninsula: how to constitute the nation itself.

The invocation to a constituent power got in the Colonies a sense of radical foundation that was absent in the Peninsula. Beyond the character of the ideas, actual situation imposed on the revolutionary process in the Colonies a Jacobin logic: as Halperin Donghi remarks, the revolutionary ideal would become there much more than an ideology, it would turn into the founding myth of the new nation, the one which would be now located in the place of that past with which the revolution intended so brutally to break.

The revolutionaries in the Colonies thus faced a much radical challenge than their Spanish counterparts. Initially, the former, like the latter, claimed that, after the fall of the monarchy, sovereignty relapsed into the nation. But they would not take long to discover that, in the American possessions of Spain, there were not such nations that preexisted the monarchy and could assume sovereignty. According to the *porteño* revolutionary leader Mariano Moreno, at the origin of the colonial societies there was not any social contract but an act of sheer violence. As a consequence, there were no preexisting nations here which could be invoked.<sup>9</sup> And the process of territorial disintegration that followed Independence threw that problem to the forefront of political debate. At that juncture, there was no means of discerning how the nation was constituted, what were its boundaries and composition; more specifically, what collective subjects were entitled to claim for them the possession of sovereign rights, an autonomous, sovereign will: the inhabitants of the viceroyalties? of the Intendencias?, indeed those of each city?, or, as the *peninsulares* affirmed, only the population of the entire kingdom as a whole?

This gave rise to a process of territorial disintegration that soon seemed to become unstoppable. Every province, and indeed every city, claimed to possess sovereign rights to constitute itself and an autonomous, national entity. This meant the plain dissolution of the subject of the sovereign imputation; it had become indiscernible turning into the center of a properly *political* dispute (in Carl Schmitt's sense of the term). Actually, the social contract discourse had no answer to it. It presupposed a demarcation criterion (how to delimitate who could freely contract with each other and legitimately constitute a nation of their own; what social groups were entitled to claim

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<sup>9</sup>See Moreno, Mariano. "Sobre la misión del Congreso convocado en virtud de la resolución plebiscitaria del 25 de Mayo", in *Escritos políticos y económicos* (Buenos Aires: La Cultura Argentina, 1915), 269-300.

the possession of a sovereign right) but was radically incapable to establish it. This issue thus marked the last limit of the very revolutionary discourse itself, the point in which it started dissolving paving the way to a new, and radical reconfiguration of political language.

In effect, the entire discourse of emancipation rested on the premise of the opposition between a *natural nation* and an *artificial state*. The Spanish First Liberalism (that dominated in the Cortes summoned at Cádiz) hinged on the basis of that assumption. As we saw, for it, the constitution of the political power already presupposed the existence of the entity that should constitute it. Lastly, this was a paradox implicit in every Constituent Congress: it must already invoke the actual existence of the very entity to which it supposedly came to constitute; that is, that nation which had invested it, and from which its privileges had emanated. But only in the Colonies this contradiction came to appear at such. In the ultramarine possessions of Spain, the revolutionary discourse would thus be confronted to the paradox that the revolution should constitute, along with a new political power, the very subject that should constitute that power.

Lastly, the issue that then emerged was how the very constituent power was, it itself, constituted. Here we get the fourth and last torsion in the traditional conceptual universe, the point at which the revolutionary discourse took its final form, and, paradoxically, also that in which it started dissolving, paving eventually the way to a new reconfiguration of political language. Finding an answer to that paradox was the mission of the nineteenth century, of what Foucault called, in *The Order of Things*, “The Age of History.”<sup>10</sup> It will then transfer the burden of the constitution of the nation from the subjective realm, to the objective realm. It would be now the task of History (with

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<sup>10</sup>Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences*. Nueva York: Vintage, 1970.



capital letter), the new entity that then emerged as such (a conceptual transformation that Reinhart Koselleck analyzed under the label of *Sattelzeit*).<sup>11</sup> At that point, the entire set of antinomies that the absolutist state had established (and eventually led to its own dislocation) would finally collapse to make room to a new conceptual constellation.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the History of Ideas**

Halperin Donghi's recreation of the process that led to the revolution of Independence in Latin America is illustrative of why the issue of the ideological origins must be overcome. And this entails the break of the frameworks of the history of ideas. His approach transcends ideas or models of thinking and seeks to trace *ideological processes*, that is, how the very discursive field becomes successively reconfigured. In effect, the kind of displacements he traces are not changes in the "ideas" of the subjects. For example, the detachment of the nation of the body of the king was not something that someone thought, something that a given thinker proposed or devised. These torsions involved the reconfiguration of the horizons within which ideas displayed, indicated the alteration in the conditions for the public articulation of them; even though the ideas of the subjects remained the same, they then got a new sense.

At this point, we can go back to Tocquville's expression quoted by Guerra in connection to the Cortes at Cádiz, when he stated that from the very moment that the constitution of the nation became a matter of controversy the Ancient Regime had ended. Guerra, in turn, interprets it affirming that the best expression of that change was the victory of the liberal party led by Manuel Quintana in the election for the deputies to the Cortes.<sup>12</sup> However, this was not what Tocqueville suggested, but rather the opposite:

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<sup>11</sup>Koselleck, Reinhart. *Future Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup>See note 7.

that no matter who would have won the election, that even the victory of the absolutist party would not have altered the fact that, *from the very moment that the constitution of the nation had become a matter of controversy, the Ancient Regime had ended*. We get here the fundamental point that Guerra inevitably misses because his approach remains on the level of ideas. Changes in political languages do not refer to the *ideas* of the subjects, but to the kind of *problems* subjects find themselves confronting at every given moment. It is the changes in the soil of problems, rather than the ideas, what eventually reconfigure the discursive field. In effect, in 1810 probably the ideas of the subjects did not were very different to those they had in 1800 or indeed in 1700; however, the issues at stake had mutated, and this altered the entire political discourse, the underlying political language. Actually, the constitution of the nation was a problem that had no conceivable room within the frameworks of the political languages of the Ancient Regime. As Halperin Donghi shows, the very emergence of a constituent power implied the collapse of the logic that articulated that discourse, setting a new terrain for the deployment of ideas.

We observe here a fundamental aspect regarding the difference between the kind of conceptual history of Independence that Halperin Donghi practiced and the approaches in the tradition of the history of ideas: the conceptual processes he analyzes are objective phenomena, independent of the will and even the consciousness of the agents. They refer to a symbolic dimension that is inscribed in the very social and political practices. As a matter of fact, every social, economical or political practice works on the basis of a set of assumptions, has implicit a symbolic dimension that constitutive of it. And we set it in motion in the very performance of that practice, whether we are conscious or not of how this practice actually works (to with, we all are nowadays agents in a globalized economy but we do not really know how it works). His

approach thus transcends the realm of ideas, of the representations of reality. Its objects are of a symbolic nature, yet they do not belong to the realm of the subjective representations of reality, but of that which those ideas intend to represent. This symbolic dimension forms an integral part of actual practices and exists with precedence of the interpretations we make of them, are constitutive factors of these practices. The mutation of this symbolic dimension determines the alteration of the regimes of exercise of power, indicates the recomposition of the set of assumptions and idealizations on which they premise.

This is the critical aspect in his methodology. It means that his view, rather than questioning a given interpretation in the history of ideas, penetrates and dislocates the epistemological ground on which all of these interpretations rest: what we can call a *philosophy of consciousness*. It crosses through the opposition between “ideas” and “realities” that is at the basis of the tradition of the history of ideas, rendering that opposition untenable.

Lastly, the type of conceptual history Halperin Donghi practices in that book makes evident why the whole discussion about the affiliation of the ideas of the Revolution (whether they were Neoscholastic or Enlightened, republican or liberal) is misleading. Not only is it something that cannot be established in a definite fashion, but also, and more importantly, in the case it could be done, it would be totally irrelevant to understand the kind of conceptual processes we intend to analyze. That very question entails a simplification of the problems here at stake, smoothing over the complexity of the series of symbolic transformations historically produced in the modes of exercising power throughout the period at stake. All the approaches within the frameworks of the history of ideas are thus condemned to perpetually oscillate between antinomial terms, between two models or “ideal types”: a “traditional” and a “modern” ones, as if the

traditional and the modern universes were homogenous wholes that remained unchanged throughout the centuries. And, as a consequence, between, on the one hand, a Neptunian view, normally held by the critics of the Revolution (both, from the catholic Right and the Marxist Left), that postulates a linear continuity between the old regime and the newly emerged national states, and, on the other hand, a Vulcanian view that simply takes on the perspective of the very actors at face value, and sees the Revolution as marking a radical break with the past, as an event which keeps no relation at all with that very past with which it intended to break.

Actually, insofar as the two approaches remain on the level of “ideas,” as they do not transcend that level and intend to recreate the underlying alterations on the discursive field within which ideas display, the series of displacements of the coordinates that organized debates accompanying the alterations in the regimes of exercise of power (and the symbolical dimension that is intrinsic to them), these interpretations are unable to grasp the paradox that Halperin Donghi intends to approach: that the impulse to destroy the past had its roots in that very past; in the end, it cannot conceive of how the very traditional ideological frameworks could have eventually led to a result that not only was the opposite to that which they were intended to produce but also something inconceivable within them and totally unpredictable in its origin (that is, what Blumenberg called a “history of effects” or *Wirkungsgeschichte*).

Elías J. Palti  
UBA / UNQ / CONICET