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Book Review

Political Theory
1–6
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The Ideology of Creole Revolution, by Joshua Simon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 284 pp, US$29.99, ISBN 9781316610961 (pbk).

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At a moment in which the relations between the United States and much of the rest of the hemisphere are, to put it mildly, strained, it might be difficult to imagine another very different moment, one when patriotic leaders from across the Americas were engaged in a shared political project of Creole revolution and postcolonial state-making. As Joshua Simon's incisive study, *The Ideology of Creole Revolution*, shows, now-hardened national borders and economic divides obscure the strikingly similar origins of what would become the United States, Mexico, and the countries of hispanophone South America. Creoles—European-descendent, American-born elites—forged these polities through a mix of anti-imperial struggle and imperial territorial expansion, a seemingly contradictory pairing that Simon dubs "anti-imperial imperialism." To explain this ideological orientation (and the constitutional designs and foreign policy approaches it inspired), Simon offers a novel interpretation of the expansive written oeuvre of three Creole revolutionaries: Alexander Hamilton, Simon Bolívar, and Lucas Alamán. Conjoining comparative political theory, institutional analysis, and transatlantic history, his elegant argument distills the core features of Creole ideology and grounds them in Creoles' unique class position.

Further, Simon demonstrates the advantage of a hemispheric perspective on the political thought that accompanied the wars of independence across the Americas. The study of these revolutionary upheavals is often siloed by an assumption of US exceptionalism or by the prevailing approaches to the history of the Atlantic world, which sharply contrast the British North American and Spanish American colonies. As Simon shows, such anachronistic accounts retrospectively project contemporary differences in political and economic development, to tell an always-already story of Anglo-American supremacy.

As Bolívar put it after his second unsuccessful attempt to establish an independent republic in Venezuela, Creoles were "neither Indians nor Europeans" but "Americans by birth, and Europeans by right" who "must both dispute the claims of natives and resist external invasion"—a predicament he rightly saw as a "complicated situation" (17). As a class, Creoles were at once frustrated by their relative under-representation in metropolitan decision making and colonial administration, and fiercely jealous of their perceived right to dispossess and enslave indigenous and African inhabitants. In this context, Creole leaders embraced anti-imperial imperialism to solve the two-sided dilemma they faced: achieving—and maintaining—independence from Europe while preserving their domination over the multiracial masses of the Americas.

Meanwhile, British and Spanish imperial reforms to the "three colonial constitutions"—the overlapping intra-metropolitan, metropole/colony, and intra-colonial institutional arrangements —transformed latent tensions into outright conflicts. The reforms threw the Creole dilemma in sharp relief: they increased taxes, limited economic activity, constrained territorial expansion and the expropriation of indigenous land, further reduced political representation in the metropole and access to the upper echelons of colonial administration, and hinted at the possibility of abolishing slavery. In this evolving institutional context, Creoles across the hemisphere justified rebellion by reference to their rights and privileges, designed constitutions to unite former colonies under powerful executives, and fiercely defended "territorial expansion and internal colonization" (43). In each of Simon's three cases, Creole leaders drew on the resources furnished by their specific intellectual contexts to persuade their colleagues of the necessity of independence, and the advantages of union and a strong presidency.

Hamilton was partial to the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment, above all that of David Hume, which underwrote a cynical, anti-rationalist, and anti-utopian view of human nature. His defense of revolution, political union, and presidentialism (including his controversial constitutional proposal for a life-term executive), as well as his anti-democratic tendencies, stemmed from "a strong belief in the existence of a true public interest, combined with a deep skepticism regarding the capacity of the people, in their masses, to either know or seek that interest" (71–72; 79). Enlightened institutional design, in other words, substituted for collective intelligence and virtue.

Bolívar also worried about the absence of civic virtue among the diverse inhabitants of the Americas, but interpreted this failing in terms of "a vicious cycle of corruption" rather than the manifestation of inherent features of human nature (92). Inspired by the republicanism of Charles Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Bolívar wrestled with the paradox of founding a free

republic in a society accustomed to colonial servitude, and the existential threats posed by a rotating cast of counter-revolutionary characters: the anti-Napoleon *juntas*, Fernando VII, royalist clergy, mixed-race free persons (*pardos*) who had fought on both sides of the independence wars, "fiercely independent" cattle-ranchers suspicious of the urban-led insurgency, and the masses of indigenous and African inhabitants he deemed currently unfit for self-rule (100–9). Bolívar's commitment to anti-imperial imperialism was strengthened by the "rapid construction and destruction of two republics" in Venezuela and then concretized in the ultimately short-lived Gran Colombia, a union of former colonies comprising four present-day South and Central American states under a single president with expansive powers (102; 108–9).

Finally, Alamán—a political thinker and historian who represented New Spain in the Spanish *cortes* and then, after independence, helped write Mexico's first two constitutions and served in congress—crafted a uniquely conservative justification for independence, political union, and a strong executive. Deeply influenced by Edmund Burke, and in sharp contrast to Bolívar, Alamán viewed independence and his preferred constitutional design as a *continuity* of the trajectory set into motion by Spanish conquest and rule. While he viewed "Mexican independence as a foregone conclusion," the terms under which it would unfold were not (138). Alamán's firsthand experience of Mexico's first attempt at revolution (in his words, "an eruption of barbarians") solidified his Burkean conservatism into rejection of both an insurrectionary path to independence and of any constitution that would democratically empower the masses in a "tyranny of many" (140; 154–55).

Thus, despite distinct intellectual influences, all three leaders embraced anti-imperial imperialism. They sought independence from their respective empires, and endeavored to consolidate power over vast lands and unequal societies—goals that all three saw as furthered by political union under strong executives, paired with aggressive territorial expansion. But beyond identifying this ideology's core features, and its associated constitutional designs and foreign policy orientation, Simon's goal is to understand *why* such political ideas emerge when and where they do. Simon proposes a generalizable causal framework of the origins of political ideas, a "social-scientific task" for which he asserts that the expanding field of comparative political theory is well-equipped (9). In moving beyond what he sees as the field's exclusive focus on interpreting the content of non-Western political thought, Simon turns to conceptual and methodological tools more associated with the subfield of comparative politics: historical institutionalism and John Stuart Mill's methods of induction.

He argues that political ideas emerge as responses to "background problems," the subsequent reconstruction of which allows the analyst to provide a

causal account of political thought (10). Situated actors' proposed solutions to the political problems they face are shaped by two distinct contexts: institutional and intellectual. The former generates collective actors with identities and interests, and structures the conflicts in which they intervene; the latter shapes how collective actors perceive their institutional context. In order to draw causal inference, Simon's model treats these two contexts as isolable explanatory factors. Employing Mill's method of difference, Simon selected three most similar cases of Creole revolution (all share the same ideological outcome of "anti-imperial imperialism"). The method dictates that some factor(s) common to all three cases must explain this shared outcome. Here, Simon induces that convergent institutional contexts and the class positions they generated, and not dissimilar intellectual contexts, do the explanatory work.

In linking Creole ideology to class position and class position to a complex institutional matrix, Simon draws and innovates upon the interpretive framework Karl Marx first elaborated in *The German Ideology*. Following Marx, ideologies are smelted in the crucible of class conflict. The ideologues of the dominant classes justify their class position via appeals to natural right or universal ideals (19–20). Being particular interests repackaged as necessity or the common good, ideologies are riven with contradictions. In the case of the ideology of Creole revolution, these contradictions were close to the surface, and Simon astutely makes an analytic "virtue out of ideology's defining vice" (19). But in contrast to the stadial history of class struggle narrated in *The German Ideology*, Simon rejects two Marxian binaries: the opposition between "legal and political superstructure" and "real economic foundations," and the Manichean portrayal of class conflict between dominator and dominated (19–22). As a collective actor, Creoles unsettle both of these assumptions: their interests cannot be adequately accounted for by property relations alone, and the terrain on which they acted was not bipolar but rather cross-cut by a multiplicity of hierarchies, affording multiple theaters of class conflict. As a result, their ideological orientation encompasses both emancipatory and dominating impulses. In a given conjuncture one or the other tendency prevailed, depending on the contingencies of events and the exigencies of alliances. Among the most compelling pieces of evidence for Simon's causal account is the fact that new institutional arrangements forming in the wake of independence transformed both class identities and political ideologies. Nowhere was this dynamic more salient than Spanish America, where the dismantling of Gran Colombia "initiated patterns of political instability and economic underdevelopment that persist even to the present day" (191).

Attendant to contradictions and wary of reductionism, *The Ideology of Creole Revolution* represents an unusually sophisticated use of class as an

analytic category. And, given the parameters of his comparative methodology, Simon is right to conclude that the sharply divergent intellectual contexts that Hamilton, Bolívar, and Alamán inhabited cannot causally account for their ideological convergence; only their shared institutional context and resulting class position can. But this conclusion is complicated by the fact that, in Simon's recursive understanding of ideological production, ideas are both inputs and outputs. As he writes, "Political ideas, in other words, do not simply reflect the interests of groups privileged or underprivileged by institutions, they also mediate the translations of interests, shaping groups' perceptions" of their associated interests and identities (11). This contention, and the hermeneutic sensibility that informs it, sits uneasily alongside the imperative for causal inference, and poses two inter-related problems. The first is how to distinguish, methodologically and analytically, between two such tightly entangled contexts (where do "interests" end and "perception of interests" begin?) and the second, how to distinguish between the pre-existing ideas that do the work of mediating, and the ideas that result from the interaction between those initial ideas and the institutional context.

These problems, in turn, raise a thornier issue: how do classes become conscious of their interests? The annals of Marxism, as both academic orientation and political practice, provide a range of answers to this question. Given their intellectual and strategic commitments, however, most interventions focus on the obstacles to collective solidarity on the part of the exploited or dispossessed. As Simon's book reveals, however, the formation of a shared consciousness amongst the elite is too complex an affair, and this is especially so in the case of a nascent or insurgent class: like the more familiar bourgeoisie, the emergence of Creoles disturbed a pre-existing hierarchy structured by empire, monarchy, and feudalism. Indeed, although not explicitly addressed in Simon's causal argument outlined above, in his historical account Creole elites are divided by all manner of disagreements, most frequently pitting advocates of centralized unions ruled by strong executives against those who sought more decentralized arrangements. It seems less that Hamilton, Bolívar, and Alamán reflected the objective interests of their class than that they persuasively intervened in a debate defined by a shared problematic that encompassed a multiplicity of ideological positions—each, in keeping with Simon's framework, constituting a possible solution to the two-sided dilemma of Creole rule. To mix Marxist metaphors, in each of his three cases, Simon traces the dynamic process of a class-in-itself transforming into a class-for-itself, led by a Creole vanguard who can see beyond the sectional, partisan, and myopically self-interested obstacles to a shared class consciousness. By taking the open-ended and contingent nature of political action seriously, Simon situates his account in a moment in which the future of insurgent

colonies–turned nascent republics was far from certain, and Creole elites grappled with internal and external threats to their power over vast multiracial societies. The result is a gripping account of class formation and ideological production in the thick of revolutionary insurgency, tracing a full narrative arc from struggle to victory and tragedy to farce, with political consequences that would shape the hemisphere for centuries to come.