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Enlightenment, Latin America, Age of Revolutions, Spanish America, Brazil

Katherine A. Lentz
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

An essay analyzing the effect of Enlightenment thinking on the political and societal elite of the colonial Spanish and Portuguese Americas, and the subsequent colonial revolutions.

Keywords

Enlightenment, Latin America, Age of Revolutions, Spanish America, Brazil

Disciplines

International Relations | Latin American History | Political History

Comments

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Katherine Lentz
3/13/2017
Intro to IR Dr. Hartzell
IR Analysis Paper

Enlightenment Thinking in the Societal Elite of the Colonial Spanish and Portuguese
Americas During the Age of Revolution (ca. 1760–1850)

The Enlightenment was most pervasive in the international system during the 17th and 18th centuries but, due to the versatility of its ideals, still had a profound effect on shaping the views of the political and social elite of numerous countries during the Age of Revolution. The Enlightenment, born in Europe with the writings of Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau, encouraged not only progress by way of secular science and rational thought, but also ideas of equality, freedom and the fallibility of kings. As the Enlightenment was born from European thinkers, it is not surprising that these ideas had a tremendous impact on shaping the beliefs that influenced the leaders of the French Revolution. However, the Enlightenment was also present in the international system during this time, which raises the question of whether it also influenced the elite of the Spanish and Portuguese Americas to rebel or, if due to the demographic, social and cultural differences between Europe and the Americas, it had limited effects on the revolutions of those colonies.

Many scholars have agreed that Enlightenment thinking was present in the political and social elite of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas, especially after the French Revolution. However, there is discord among them with respect to whether the presence of more than one interpretation of the Enlightenment in a

particular colony damages the integrity and thus the validity of the Enlightenment's influence. Uribe-Uran, Burns, Wallace, Leiva, Conrad, Stolley, McFarlane and, to some degree, Schmitt and Weber, maintain that the presence of Enlightenment thinking in the political and social elite did have an impact on a colony's choice to revolt. Langley and Davis, however, engage with counterarguments that suggest that although the Enlightenment was present in some regards, it was ultimately inconsequential in whether a colony revolted due to both the elites' unwillingness to apply those beliefs to slaves and the indigenous people.

Determining whether the Enlightenment had an effect on influencing the elite of colonies and their subsequent revolutions is timelessly relevant due to the fact that new ideologies are birthed regularly and understanding their ability to grow and adapt could help predict the influence and effect they can have in countries aside from the one in which they were born. The scholars noted above examined not only case studies of particular countries, but also explored the third level of analysis by tracing the impact specific individuals and particular groups had on the spread and influence of the Enlightenment in the Spanish and Portuguese American colonies.

Evidence of Enlightenment Thinking in Spanish and Portuguese Colonies

The late colonial period in Spanish America and Brazil was particularly stressful for the royal officials in the colonies because the chaos of increasingly periodic rebellions was exacerbated by the tempestuous political climate following the conclusion of the French Revolution (Uribe-Uran 2000). The turbulent political atmosphere was further provoked by the Bourbon reforms, which included, "[The removal of] the colonial state from private interference, nepotism, and corruption...[The Bourbons] also became

advocates for liberal economics, and allowed some market activities, especially trade, to function without intense state interference” (Uribe-Uran 2000, 428).

Prior to the Bourbon reforms, colonial regimes in Spanish and Portuguese America banned any discussion of politics and policymaking amongst the public. However, due to these state-sponsored reforms, there were increasingly obvious loopholes and forbidden books containing information about the Enlightenment made their way into the Americas due to the Inquisitions’ inability to prevent the spread of new ideas. (Schmitt 1959) Also during this time, access to news of the French and American revolutions became more widely available to the educated members of the population due to the birth of a press in the colonies of Spanish America (McFarlane 1998). The introduction of the reforms, which unintentionally created channels through which books could be smuggled and brought in to the colonies, combined with both the French and American Revolutions and the birth of a press to write about them, led the educated members of Spanish and Portuguese American colonies to become vastly more informed and involved in their public spheres.

After the Bourbon reforms were enacted and the subsequent access to Enlightenment thinking by means of books materialized, the elite started to become significantly more involved with both small-scale and mass rebellions, which had previously involved primarily Native Americans and peasants (Uribe-Uran 2000). “Throughout the Americas, the elites themselves – priests, lawyers, students, landowners, military officers, merchants – seem to have unleashed and commanded several small scale regional and local ‘plots’ against the Iberian and other crowns” (Uribe-Uran 2000, 429).

The revolutionaries were critical, not just because of their ability to spread the new ideas, but also because they were able to take the ideas and shape them into a political movement (Wallace 2007). Simón Bolívar, for example, was a revolutionary in Spanish America who “had to mould concepts of reason, liberty and equality to form a basis for colonial emancipation” (Wallace 2007, 121). More generally, in Mexico, the Inquisition investigated a plot containing more than thirty students and professors who met secretly to discuss the French Revolution and the possibility of Mexican Independence (Uribe-Uran 2000). In Brazil, José Azeredo Coutinho played a massive role in spreading Enlightenment ideals throughout the colony. This was not due not to his status as, rather ironically, a royal official and General Inquisitor, but rather as an educator and essayist (Burns 1964).

In addition to educators, also crucial to the spread of Enlightenment in Spanish and Portuguese America were lawyers, landowners and the political elite. In New Granada several young lawyers and law students were accused of “holding meetings in a local *colegio* to conspire against the authorities, placing subversive posters in public places, and translating and circulating the French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man” (Uribe-Uran 2000, 431). In Venezuela in 1794, elites discussed the organization of a republican revolution, which was to be headed by Manuel Gual, a military captain, and José María España, an *hacendado*, or landowner. By 1796 the movement had gained several lawyers, merchants and a priest (Uribe-Uran 2000).

It was not uncommon for priests to engage with Enlightenment ideals, in spite of the fact that a major component of the movement was its criticisms of the Church. Some priests were opposed the Enlightenment, quite vehemently, but most were either

absorbing and exploring Enlightenment ideas or, at the very least, indifferent to or ignorant of the Enlightenment (Schmitt 1959). In fact, in both New Grenada and New Spain, priests were the primary leaders of research. José Celestino Mutis was not only a very successful priest, but also a botanist and physician who also engaged with astronomy and mathematics. He was so prominent, in fact, that in spite of having no connection to local universities, young men came to learn under him. In fact, one of his students, Francisco Caldas, was so enthralled by the ideas he learned from Mutis that he threw himself into the forefront of the fight for independence (Schmitt 1959). While Mutis did not engage directly with the revolutionaries, he taught and inspired them, thus building the intellectual background necessary for future autonomy and sovereignty.

Enlightenment thinking was present in not only the political elite, but also in priests, merchants, landowners, educators and students across both New Spain and New Grenada, and in colonial Brazil. These ideas, revolutionary in their positions on equality, freedom, secular science, rational thought and the fallibility of kings, had significant influence on the political and social elite and thus a colony's decision to revolt against the Iberian crowns. This can be evidenced by the fact that the political elites were rarely involved in rebellions prior to the Bourbon reforms, which unintentionally aided in the introduction of Enlightenment thinking and news of the French Revolution to Spanish America. Additionally, the political elite began discussing revolutionary ideals and organizing movements for independence largely due to the influence of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment ideals inherent within.

The Issue of Oppression in the Enlightenment Thinking of the Colonial Elite

In spite of the overarching evidence that Enlightenment thinking did indeed play a significant role in influencing the political and social elite of a colony towards revolution, there are notable criticisms that suggest the contrary. The most significant complication to attributing Enlightenment thinking to the outcome of revolution is that, according to some scholars, the Enlightenment and the oppression of slaves and indigenous people were mutually exclusive.

Andrew White proclaimed, “there was not one chance in a thousand that any man who had once made any considerable number of these ideas his own could ever support slavery.” (Davis 1975) This claim is consistent with the Enlightenment ideal of equality and freedom for all men. However, Langley explains that although Enlightenment theorists supported the idea of equality among all men, and eventually came to the conclusion that progress depended upon it, “[they were] often torn between their convictions about individual autonomy and their desire for a rational social order with its gradations in rank” (Langley 1998, 87). This often led to rationalization amongst the Enlightenment thinkers, which in turn characterized the Enlightenment with “countervailing tendencies which encouraged the defense of Negro slavery on grounds of utility, racial inferiority, ethical relativism, or the presumed rationality of wealth-giving institutions” (Davis 1975, 48). According to Davis, abolishing slavery was essentially the relinquishment of the elites’ power over another class, which they were reticent to accept due to their desire for some form of hierarchy. Weber, however, suggests that the elites’ abuse of oppressed minorities, including indigenous people, is not in spite of the Enlightenment, but rather due to elements of Social Darwinism inherent in it: “the ‘lively optimism’ of the Enlightenment, with its sense that all of humankind might grow in

rationality and progress toward becoming more like Europeans, gave way to ‘the dour and oppressive Social Darwinism that saw progress in terms of winners and losers’” (Weber 2005, 277).

As such, although the Enlightenment rhetoric would seem to condemn slavery and oppression, the elites who interacted with the movement tended to interpret the language in a way that best suited their needs. Bolívar, for example, interpreted the Enlightenment and developed the ideals in a manner that would most benefit Spanish America, while simultaneously maintaining the essence of it (Wallace 2007). The claim that suggests that the acceptance of oppression by the political elite nullifies the presence of the Enlightenment not only allows no variance from literal interpretation, but also ignores the presence of any other aspect of Enlightenment thinking within a culture. Additionally, as Weber argues, certain ideals within the Enlightenment are intrinsically linked to the same ideals that inspired slavery and oppression of indigenous peoples, such as Social Darwinism.

Why the Enlightenment was Effective in the Spanish and Portuguese Americas

The presence of Enlightenment ideals was traced through individuals, groups such as lawyers and priests, and through case studies of particular countries, which suggests that the second and third levels of analysis were primarily responsible for analyzing the ultimate effect the Enlightenment had on the outcome of revolution. An analysis of the effect individuals had on the Enlightenment was particularly relevant with respect to why it was so effective in Spanish America in spite of its European origin and despite the demographic, social and cultural differences between the Americas and France. Looking through the lens of a realist, like Hobbes, it is no surprise that the Enlightenment was just

as effective in the colonial Spanish and Portuguese Americas as it was in France because all humans are inherently invested in the same thing; ensuring the outcome that best represents their interests, which typically boil down to the base motive of power. Therefore, the country in which an ideology was created should be applicable to any given society around the globe, as the base motives of the people who created the movement are the same as those in any society where the ideology spreads. This is evidenced by the fact that Enlightenment thinking can be found in places ranging from China to Haiti (Conrad 2012). Additionally, the broadness of Enlightenment thinking ensured that colonial Spanish and Portuguese American elite could interpret the Enlightenment and spread the interpretation that best benefitted them. As Davis and Langley stated, this is how the elite justified slavery in spite of the Enlightenment's focus on personal autonomy and equality.

Conclusion

Although there were minor criticisms regarding the purity of Enlightenment thought, it is acceptable to conclude that Enlightenment thinking was present in the political and social elite across all colonies in New Spain, New Grenada, and Brazil. All of these colonies revolted against the Iberian crowns, and the timing of the revolts can be directly tied to the introduction of Enlightenment ideals to the Americas. After the Bourbon reforms were enacted and access to Enlightenment thinking by means of books was realized, the elite of Spanish America started to become significantly more involved in the public sphere, organizing meetings to discuss revolutionary ideals, and participating in and leading an increasing number of rebellions. The ideas were spread throughout Brazil in part through contact with Spanish America, but also due to

influential educators like José Azeredo Coutinho. Individuals like Simón Bolívar and José Celestino Mutis had a similar influence on the spread and shaping of Enlightenment ideals through Spanish America. The success of the Enlightenment in inspiring revolution in Spanish and Portuguese America as well as in France is significant because it suggests that ideologies can be spread through countries in spite of cultural, societal or geographic differences without a great deal of modification. This is likely because, according to Hobbes, humans are inherently interested the same things, and thus, an ideology created in one society will be just as influential in another society.

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