Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment

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Introduction

I want to know, and to write, about the places where disparate points of view rub together—the spaces between.
Barbara Kingsolver, writer, 1995

In 1794, as he prepared to retire after a decade in office, America's first secretary of war, Henry Knox, deplored the catastrophic results of his countrymen's treatment of Indians. Westward-moving Americans, he said, had brought about "the utter extirpation of nearly all the Indians in the most populous parts of the Union." Along the nation's western borders, Americans continued to encroach on Indian lands, inciting "savages" to retaliate and dragging the United States into wars. His fellow Americans, Knox declared, "have been more destructive to the Indian natives than the . . . conquerors of Mexico and Peru."[1]

Under Knox's direction, the United States had tried to fashion an Indian policy based on conciliation rather than confrontation. Knox believed that Indians themselves, if given the opportunity, would eventually "see the desirability of an end to savagery and their acceptance of civilization."[2] Conciliation had two other advantages over war: it cost less and it would not sully the nation's honor.[3] On the other hand, Knox told one of his generals, if Americans continued to "destroy the tribes, posterity will be apt to class the effects of our Conduct and that of the Spaniards in Mexico and Peru together."[4]

Knox's countrymen would have readily understood his allusion to the Spain of Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro. Like their English and English-American forebears, citizens of the young

United States deplored what one Anglophone writer described as the Spaniards' "unparalleled inhumanity to the unhappy Indian nations they conquered, their extirpation of the inhabitants of whole kingdoms, and other horrid excesses."[5] Spain, then, had long served English speakers as a model to avoid rather than to emulate, but the Spain of the conquistadors had ceased to exist. Throughout the Spanish-American mainland by the 1790s, numerous indigenous peoples had been incorporated rather than eliminated, and most of the Natives who still lived independently along the borders of Spain's American empire had come to some form of accommodation with the Hispanic world, and it with them.

In Knox's day, men imbued with the learning and sensibilities of the Enlightenment governed Spain as they did the United States. Early in the century the tired dynasty of the Habsburgs had yielded to dynamic Bourbons. Beginning with the reign of Felipe V (r. 1700–46), the Bourbons brought fresh ideas from France to make Spain a more unified and prosperous state. To reform public administration they preferred men of ability and knowledge over nobles with pedigrees. Many members of the new governing class had training in the law and deep learning in other disciplines.[6] The economist Pedro Rodríguez Campomanes, the conde de Campomanes (1723–1802), studied Greek, Latin, and Arabic as well as the law. He published works in ancient history, modern history, archaeology, and empirical science and won membership in scholarly academies in Spain and France and in Benjamin Franklin's Philosophical Society of America. Like other Spanish intellectuals of his day, Campomanes knew the influential European books of his era and found good conversation in the salons of Madrid, eventually establishing one of his own.[7] The brilliant, dynamic José de Gálvez, who presided over Spain's American empire as minister of the Indies from 1776 to 1787, overcame his humble birth by distinguishing himself in the law and immersing himself in affairs of state. Although not Campomanes's equal as a scholar, Gálvez possessed an impressive library for his day. It included titles in history, geography, and science. Gálvez's command of French allowed him to read the works of René Descartes and the French encyclopedists in the original and gave him access to works translated into that language, like William Robertson's *History of America* (1777). Harshly critical of Spain as a colonial power, Robertson's *History* occupied a place on the Bourbons' list of prohibited reading, as did some of the other titles in Gálvez's library.[8]

Spain's Bourbon reformers, like their enlightened counterparts elsewhere in Europe and America, hoped to bring about progress by applying the methods of science to society. They streamlined administrative structures, sought ways to promote economic growth, and gathered and analyzed data. Some, like Campomanes and Gálvez, took self-conscious pride in the rationality and spirit of reform of their age. The jurist Victorián Villava understood that he lived "in the most enlightened century" and was informed by "the philosophy . . . of its brilliant writing."[9] Others, like Eugenio Espejo, regretted the limited impact of enlightened ideas. Born in Quito in 1747 to an Indian father and a mulatto mother, Espejo earned degrees in the law and medicine and steeped himself

in the ideas of enlightened thinkers, including foreigners like Adam Smith, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Charles de Secondat, the baron de Montesquieu, and Spaniards such as Benito Jerónimo Feijóo and Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos. Bitterly disappointed by the slow pace of reform in Spanish America, Espejo turned to writing satire. One of his characters thought it paradoxical to live in what he called "the era of idiocy and . . . the century of ignorance" and yet refer to it as the Age of Enlightenment.[10]

As in other eras, the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason was riven by intellectual crosscurrents. Then as now, data gathered through the use of empirical methods could be read in different ways, and ends could be achieved by different means. One man's rationality might be another's "idiocy." Gálvez, for example, defined Spain's American provinces as "colonies." In 1768, he apparently became the first Spaniard to use the word in an official document. Campomanes, on the other hand, wished to put Spain and its American provinces on an equal footing, erasing the distinction between metropolis and colony. Each man championed a different means toward the same end. Each saw his strategy as the best way to serve Spain's absolutist monarchy and to preserve Spain's position in America.[11]

At the same time that they differed over ideas, Spain's enlightened government ministers jockeyed for political influence for themselves, their regions, and their class. They formed political factions that coalesced and split and rose and fell from power within the enlightened regimes of King Carlos III (r. 1759–88) and his less than able son Carlos IV (r. 1788–1808). Whatever their intellectual and political divergences, however, enlightened Spaniards, like their opposite numbers in Europe and America, shared a belief in the application of reason to society. Nothing was to be taken on faith, except perhaps the faith that rational testing of old assumptions about politics, economics, and society would result in the further progress of humankind.[12]

As they sought to promote progress through reason, enlightened Spanish officials debated the status of the crown's impoverished Indian vassals. Were subjected Indians naturally degraded? or degraded because Spaniards had exploited them? Were Indian vassals naturally inferior and resistant to progress? or inferior and unprogressive because they lacked opportunities? The answers to those questions determined the answers to others. Should Spain's Indian vassals be maintained as a separate class that would provide cheap labor and pay tribute? Or would Indians be more productive if they were integrated into Spanish society and enjoyed the same opportunities and incentives as Spaniards? Each path promised to lead to greater economic progress for Spanish America and Spain, and each path had influential supporters among enlightened bureaucrats. Neither proponents of integration nor supporters of segregation, however, could translate their principles into enduring policy. The crown had the authority to end the impasse but vacillated and left the question unresolved. In the end, pragmatism and power usually prevailed over ideas. Spanish officials were no more consistent in acting on their convictions than Virginia planters who deplored slavery but held onto their own slaves.[13]

Although they disagreed about the best way to incorporate Indians, enlightened

1. Carlos III, 1784. Retrato de S.M. el Rey Carlos III, *oil by Mariano Salvador Maella. Courtesy, Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid.*

Spaniards like Victorián Villava believed they lived in an age of "equality and fraternity" that required humane treatment of Indians.[14] Spaniards could not "impose respect with force, nor achieve it with fear," Miguel Lastarria wrote in 1804. A Peruvian-born doctor of sacred law and legal advisor to the viceroy of the Río de la Plata, the marqués de Avilés, Lastarria rejected the past use of force against Indians as counterproductive: "Only with kindness, impartiality, and good faith can we achieve peace and commerce with the fiercest and most valiant Indians . . . and conduct to the contrary will change the most languid and timid . . . into ferocious Indians."[15]

Enlightened Spaniards resented outdated depictions of their cruel, dagger-carrying countrymen conquering Indians with dogs in a "sea of blood" (as they were represented in a book written at the time of the American Revolution by an anonymous author pretending to be an aggrieved Iroquois Indian).[16] In the late eighteenth century, the Spanish crown and the Inquisition launched a counteroffensive against writers who disparaged

Spain's sixteenth-century conquest of America, suggesting that the Indian population of America was low and denying that a holocaust had occurred. The Spanish polymath Félix de Azara, who candidly described the age of Cortés and Pizarro as a "backward time," wondered why other countries continued to vilify Spain for its treatment of Indians. Among European powers, Azara observed, only Spain had embraced "millions of civilized and savage Indians" within its colonial society, transformed an "infinity" of Indians into Spaniards through racial mixture, and adopted "a voluminous code of laws in which every sentence and every word breathe an admirable humanity and grant Indians full protection."[17] Other European nations had driven Natives off their lands, the conde de Campomanes noted, but Spain had transformed them into useful subjects.[18]

If Campomanes intended to draw an unfavorable comparison with the British colonies, he was on the mark. Incorporated Indians constituted over half of the population of the colonized areas of Spanish America, but Indians amounted to less than 6 percent of the population of English America east of the Mississippi in 1770.[19] The nature and numbers of Indians that Englishmen and Spaniards encountered in their respective parts of America help explain this stark contrast, but so too does the behavior of the colonists themselves. Initially, all the colonial powers intended to turn Indians into Europeans and incorporate them peacefully. In practice, however, Englishmen proved less interested than Spaniards in converting or intermarrying with Indians. Englishmen tended to exclude Indians from their society; Spaniards to include them.[20]

Prior to 1700, the Habsburg dynasty had enforced Spain's humane and paternalistic laws unevenly, never resolving the tension between its wish to protect Indians and its interest in exploiting Indian labor. After 1700, Bourbon Spain narrowed, but never closed, the still sizable gap between policy and practice. During the reign of the most American-oriented of Spain's enlightened despots, Carlos III, the Bourbons' administrative reforms began to be felt intensely in Spanish America. Carlos III filled the Council of the Indies, which governed American affairs, with men who had firsthand knowledge of America.[21] Like their British counterparts of the 1760s and 1770s, Bourbon officials took measures to strengthen the colonial system and make it more efficient, secure, and profitable for the mother country. In Spanish America, however, the Bourbon reformers continued their work until the 1810s, when Spain's American colonies began to slip away—a generation after England had lost most of hers.

The Bourbon reforms reached to the very edges of Spain's colonies, affecting even Indians who lived beyond Spanish political control. In the late eighteenth century, the borderlands of the Spanish Empire acquired heightened strategic importance as they gained the attention of Spain's European rivals or, in the case of North America after 1783, the young United States. Bourbon officials hoped to consolidate political control over some of those strategic frontiers, secure them from Indian raiders and foreign interlopers, and make them more productive.[22] Accordingly, Carlos III sent a wave of trained scientists and explorers to gather intelligence about resources, geography, and peoples

in the poorly understood spaces beyond the edges of the empire. He also sent professional bureaucrats to reform the two traditional frontier institutions—the military and the missions—promote civilian settlements, foster economic development, and forge alliances with Native leaders who wielded local power.

To oversee frontier defense and development, the Bourbons established new administrative structures. In the single year of 1776, New Spain's northern frontier, once governed entirely by the viceroy in Mexico City, became a semiautonomous *comandancia general* under the authority of a military commander; much of today's Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and the mineral rich area of Upper Peru (in today's Bolivia) were separated administratively from Lima and placed under a new viceroyalty, with its seat in Buenos Aires on the Río de la Plata. In that same year a half dozen provinces along the northern coast of South America were consolidated fiscally into the *intendencia* of Venezuela, with its headquarters in Caracas, and then refashioned politically and militarily as the *capitanía general* of Venezuela in 1777. Chile, governed from distant Lima by the viceroy of Peru, acquired greater autonomy as a *capitanía general* in 1778. These efforts to consolidate control over peripheral areas support the contention of some scholars that the Bourbon reforms represented a "revolution in government" that led to the "second conquest of America" and may better exemplify an effective "reconquest" than did reforms in the empire's heartlands.[23]