

The Americas' More Perfect Unions: New Institutional Insights from Comparative Political Theory

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The disparities in per-capita wealth and national productivity that divide the United States and Latin America today have often been understood as results of institutional variations introduced during each region's period of imperial rule. According to this interpretation, path-dependent processes preserved institutions installed by Britain, Spain, and Portugal across the centuries, propagating their positive or negative economic effects, and eventually producing a marked "development gap" in the hemisphere. This article aims to improve this account by highlighting the direct and indirect economic effects of the success or failure of the political unions established *after* independence in both the United States and Latin America. It demonstrates that influential political theorists throughout the hemisphere understood the developmental advantages to be gained from unifying former colonies and employing the political authority newly at their disposal to abolish the stifling institutional legacies of European rule, suggesting that if Spanish America's unions had endured, or conversely, if the United States had collapsed, the two regions' economies might not have diverged as dramatically as they subsequently did. This illustrates an important contribution that the emerging subfield of "comparative political theory" can make to comparative political science in general, and to the new institutionalism in particular, by providing uniquely direct insight into the choices available to political actors in consequential moments of institutional genesis and change, and revealing the contingency of institutional variations that might otherwise appear inevitable.

The states of the Isthmus of Panama as far north as Guatemala will perhaps unite in federation. This magnificent position between two great oceans could become, with time, the world's emporium, its canals shortening global distances and strengthening commercial ties between Europe, America, and Asia, bringing tribute to this happy region from the four quarters of the globe. Maybe here alone it will one day be possible to establish a global capital, a new Byzantium for the modern world!

– Simón Bolívar, 1815¹

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Quite far from claiming their collective mantle as the new Byzantium, today the five separate states of Central America are, by most measures, amongst the poorest societies of the Western Hemisphere. In retrospect, Bolívar's optimism looks naïve, even ludicrous. As social scientists, though, rather than dismissing the Liberator's dashed hopes as a historical curiosity, we should allow them to unsettle our assumptions and pose the disunity and under-development of Central America as puzzles requiring explanation. Why is it that what appeared on the eve of independence to be a land blessed by its location with limitless possibility in an expanding global economy is now known for political instability and persistent poverty?

Contemporary scholars of comparative politics, economic history, and historical sociology place *institutions* at the center of compelling answers to this age-old question. The Central American states—like many developing countries—struggle to achieve the potential offered by their favorable geo-strategic position because the legal and political systems, modes of labor organization and profit distribution, and cultural practices that structure their economies do not provide an adequate framework for innovation, exchange, investment, and economic growth. This institutional deficit has, in turn, been understood as a legacy of imperial rule. Studies have shown

that much of the present-day variation in national wealth and productivity amongst former European colonies can be explained by the persistence of advantageous or disadvantageous institutions after independence. Central America's divergence from the promising course Bolívar envisioned was the predictable effect, then, of problematic institutions established by Spain in the course of its nearly-three-hundred-year-long *imperium* in the Americas.

Yet, by adopting this interpretation we ignore the premise Bolívar explicitly acknowledged for his optimism: political unification. After gaining independence in 1824 Central America did in fact unite, adopting a constitution modeled on that of the United States and seating a federal government in Guatemala City. But this new state soon faced strong challenges from regional leaders intent on greater autonomy, and from the incumbent administration's political opponents. The fighting, already extensive by 1829, caused Bolívar to sharply revise his earlier prognosis:

Is there any coup Guatemala has failed to undergo? Legitimate authority is overthrown, provinces rebel against the capital, . . . towns attack towns, cities attack cities, each one claiming its own government, each street calling itself a nation. There is nothing but bloodshed and terror in Central America!²

Though the Federal Republic of Central America endured for another decade after Bolívar wrote, it did finally fall, ceding sovereignty to the five states that govern the region today. The demise of unified government also brought a decisive end to an ambitious program of economic reforms that the Federal Republic's founders had set in motion, extending the institutional legacies of Spanish rule in the separate societies that succeeded its collapse. It seems possible, then, that the failure of Central America's union had long-term effects on its constituent states' developmental trajectories. If the state established immediately after independence had overcome the perils of its early years, would it now more closely resemble the world emporium that Bolívar envisioned?

An affirmative answer to this question would have important implications for how we understand the relationship between empires, institutions, and economic development throughout the Americas and around the world. The Federal Republic of Central America was not the only union founded with great fanfare in the aftermath of the Americas' independence, nor the only one that eventually succumbed to secession and civil war. In this article I compare arguments offered in support of unification by the founders of the United States, the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata (comprising present-day Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia), Gran Colombia (comprising present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama), and Mexico (originally comprising present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the western United States). I show that influential political thinkers

and actors in each of these polities understood the direct developmental advantages to be gained from uniting former colonies under common governments, and also outlined plans to employ the political authority newly at their disposal to abolish the stifling institutional legacies of European rule.

Of course, these analogous unifying and reformist ambitions were realized to very different degrees in different parts of the hemisphere. Regional resistance and partisan opposition shattered unions and thwarted reforms throughout Spanish America, while the United States survived the trials of its early years territorially intact and institutionally equipped for industrialization and economic growth. Retrospect tends to make this important point of departure look natural, giving the Americas' current configuration of national boundaries and economic disparities an air of inevitability. But the strong ideological similarities I describe indicate that alternative arrangements were possible in the critical juncture that followed the Americas' independence. They remind us that the hemisphere's contemporary political geography, and the economic disparities it has helped engender, are as much the contingent products of post-colonial politics as the inevitable legacies of imperial institutions. If Spanish America's unions had endured, or conversely, if the United States had collapsed, the two regions' economies might not have diverged as dramatically as they subsequently did.

This inference illustrates an important contribution that the emerging subfield of comparative political theory can make to comparative political science in general, and to the new institutionalism in particular. In recent years, political theorists have paid more attention to previously neglected traditions of political thought from outside Western Europe and North America, often uncovering familiar themes in unfamiliar works: critiques of rationalism and concepts of liberal citizenship in Islamic political thought, theories of democracy in Chinese political thought, political realism in Indian political thought, and discourses on popular sovereignty and race in Latin American political thought, to cite only a few examples.³ So far, comparative political theorists have mainly been concerned with the normative implications of these cross-cultural "equivalences," which some have seen as the basis for political theories capable of claiming "a more genuine universalism . . . beyond the spurious 'universality' traditionally claimed by the Western canon."⁴

I offer another possible application of the approach, drawing insights into the causes of development and underdevelopment from points of ideological equivalence in the American and Latin American independence movements. Though the political ideas I examine cannot conclusively demonstrate the effects of state breakdown on institutional persistence and economic growth in the Americas, they do provide uniquely direct evidence of the

choices available to political actors in a consequential moment of institutional genesis and change, highlighting historically plausible paths not taken that could have produced very different results over the long run. In this way, I suggest, comparative political theory offers a means of overcoming the notorious difficulties involved in constructing the counterfactual narratives we need in order to understand how institutions have shaped the past and can shape the future.

The article proceeds in four sections. I first review existing new institutionalist explanations of comparative economic development in the Americas, focusing on studies by Douglass North, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, and James Mahoney, amongst others, that locate the institutional origins of present-day economic disparities in the colonial era. Though there is much to be learned from this approach, I argue that it could be improved by a better account of the immediate aftermath of independence, a critical juncture that not only left important institutional legacies of its own, but also influenced whether, and for how long, inherited institutions persisted. In order to understand the options available to political actors at the time, and construct a plausible counterfactual history of the hemisphere, I then compare the political thought of the founders of four American states, one of which survived and three of which did not. I show that political union and institutional reform were regarded everywhere as indispensable to consolidating independence in the present and clearing the way to prosperity in the future. These shared ideas offer insight into alternative political boundaries and economic institutions once possible in the Americas, establishing a basis for thinking that the interrelated success or failure of early efforts to unite former colonies and reform inherited institutions had important effects on subsequent economic development.

The observations of the period's political theorists and actors also suggest that the United States and Spanish America's different experiences of post-colonial politics were not inevitable. Indeed, as I describe next, the United States came very close to charting the course its neighbors later followed from partisan conflict into civil war and separation. I also briefly consider the case of Brazil, which demonstrates that post-colonial political unity, though important, provided no guarantee of economic growth when it was unaccompanied by institutional reform. To conclude, I return to the aims and methods of comparative political theory, and consider the normative and prescriptive implications of the article's empirical conclusions, emphasizing, in particular, the prospects for and promise of political union in present-day Latin America.

Empires, Institutions, and Economic Development in the Americas

Understanding why some countries are so rich while others are so poor has long been a concern for social

scientists. Though some prominent scholars still seek to explain cross-national variations in wealth by reference to geography, climate, and culture,⁵ the most influential theories focus on the effects of institutions: informal rules and norms of social interaction as well as formal laws and forms of political organization that structure economic investment, exchange, and growth. Today, the "new institutionalism" is a mature school of thought, comprising a range of analytical approaches. Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor have helpfully described three main varieties: rational choice institutionalism emphasizes how institutions help solve collective action and social choice problems; historical institutionalism examines the often unequal ways that institutions distribute scarce resources and decision-making authority amongst contending individuals or groups; and sociological institutionalism studies how existing institutions determine countries' and corporations' receptivity to new organizational ideas and technological innovations.⁶

Each of these institutionalisms has been applied to questions of comparative economic performance. Douglass North's rational choice approach argues that countries with institutions that effectively enforce contracts give trade partners confidence in the quality of goods and services they exchange, lowering transaction costs and facilitating efficient divisions of labor.⁷ Meanwhile, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's historical account focuses on political influence, showing how institutions that equalize access to justice and uniformly impose the rule of law promote innovation and growth by allowing individuals to invest capital without fear that better-connected competitors will expropriate their future earnings.⁸ Finally, James Mahoney's important new sociological explanation stresses the sorts of collective actors that institutions bring into being, and their different orientations to industry and trade. Countries with institutions that create entrepreneurial elites interested in expanding commercial opportunities develop faster, he argues, than countries with institutions that foster rent-seeking elites invested in the maintenance of market restrictions and rigid social hierarchies.⁹

Despite their differences, the authors above all agree that the Western Hemisphere's history of economic divergence nicely illustrates their theories. Specifically, each argues that the United States' relatively early industrialization and rapid growth are attributable to institutional advantages established while the country was an English colony, while Latin America's developmental delays stem from problematic institutional legacies left behind by Spain and Portugal.¹⁰ By connecting present-day economic disparities to imperial institutions, North, Acemoglu and Robinson, and Mahoney add to a large new institutionalist literature that has made the formerly colonized world a favorite site for empirical study.¹¹ In these accounts, the Americas offer a particularly

telling instance of a general pattern, in which the economies of once-prosperous and densely-populated regions in Spanish America were gradually overtaken and then decisively outpaced by the former wilds and imperial backwaters of British North America.¹² The hemisphere's striking "reversal of fortunes" makes it apparent, as Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson write, that "whatever factors are important in making former colonies rich today are very different from those [that] contribut[ed] to [their] prosperity in 1500." Climate and geography did not vary in the interim, so, they argue, the cause must lie in the institutions established under European rule. Where these institutions enforced contracts, protected property rights, and limited social stratification—as in the British colonies that became the United States—capital investment, technological innovation, industrialization, and growth followed. Meanwhile, where institutions made property rights contingent upon membership in a small, well-connected elite and created a durable caste system—as in much of Latin America and the Caribbean—investment and trade were inhibited, and industrialization and development were delayed.¹³

New institutionalists differ as to why European empires established different institutions in different parts of the Americas. Some scholars point to the institutional traditions that different imperial powers carried over the Atlantic and into their colonies, contrasting Spain's political absolutism and economic mercantilism with England's constitutionalism and economic liberalism.¹⁴ Others emphasize the conditions that colonists encountered upon arriving in the Americas. Where they found a difficult disease environment, a large, sedentary indigenous population, or soil and climate conditions convenient to commercial agriculture, settlers of every European origin built hierarchical institutions designed to extract labor and maximize remittances, while those who settled in more salubrious, sparsely-populated zones ended up living in more homogenous, equal societies under more liberal governments.¹⁵ Proponents of both theories agree, though, that once these imperial institutions were established, they became "locked-in": subject to path-dependent processes of reproduction that propagated their advantageous or disadvantageous economic effects across the centuries and up to the present day.¹⁶

This is the contention that I question here. In recent years, new institutionalists have shifted their attention from the processes that cause institutions to persist across long periods of time, to the moments in which new institutions emerge or old institutions are changed.¹⁷ In these "critical junctures," institutional path dependency weakens or breaks down, giving political actors an opportunity to undertake reforms. Contingent outcomes of arguments or conflicts amongst competing leaders and parties generate modified institutions, which themselves become resistant to change after the critical juncture has closed.

Thus, small differences in the politics of critical junctures can give rise to institutional variations across cases that, over time, drive dramatic developmental divergences and result in large disparities.¹⁸

Though clearly important, critical junctures have proven analytically intractable. The consequences of a given critical juncture can be assessed by comparing its *actual* institutional results and their long-term effects with the *counterfactual* effects of alternative institutional arrangements that *could have been* established at the time, but were not.¹⁹ However, it can be difficult to determine exactly which institutional alternatives were *possible* in a given critical juncture, or, said another way, to know what counterfactual trajectories are *plausible*, and thus relevant to assessing the critical juncture's consequences.²⁰ Indeed, in retrospect it can be difficult to be sure if or when a critical juncture occurred at all. "Hindsight bias" tends to rob critical junctures of their profound contingency, giving their institutional results an unwarranted air of inevitability and erasing the paths not taken that were available to political actors in the moment.²¹ It is especially easy, as Giovanni Capocchia and Daniel Keleman have observed, to miss critical junctures that resulted in the "re-equilibration" of existing institutional arrangements rather than dramatic change.²²

Here, I suggest, comparative political theory has an important role to play. Unlike other forms of empirical evidence, political ideas provide a record of institutional alternatives that were seriously considered but never established, conveying a sense not only what *did* happen, but also what *could have* happened at consequential historical conjunctures. The preserved books, articles, letters, and speeches of political thinkers, especially those actively involved in the political events of their time, offer uniquely direct testimony on the possible outcomes of the critical junctures they observed.²³ By comparing the ideas contained in these artifacts, we can learn exactly which counterfactuals are relevant to explaining phenomena attributable to institutional variations, like the developmental divergence of the Americas. Here, by comparing arguments offered on behalf of political unification and institutional reform in the aftermath of independence, I argue that new institutionalist accounts of the Americas' economic divergence have missed or misunderstood an important critical juncture—a moment in which contingent differences produced institutional variations with significant consequences for the hemisphere's subsequent economic development.²⁴

The new institutionalist literature on the Americas' comparative economic history takes for granted the territorial boundaries that define where the United States ends and Mexico begins, or that distinguish Venezuela from Colombia, and Argentina from Uruguay, using them to delimit empirical units of analysis. But it was not always inevitable that the United States would extend

across a continent, as it does today, or that the former Spanish Americas would be comprised by nineteen separate states. Rather, as I shall demonstrate, political theorists and statesmen throughout the hemisphere argued that large states, unifying former colonies, were indispensable to securing freedom in the present, and achieving prosperity in the future. Such unions were actually established not only in the United States, but also in the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, in Gran Colombia, and in Mexico. There are good reasons to think that the post-colonial political struggles that resulted in the success or failure of these parallel projects in political unification had significant effects, both direct and indirect, on subsequent patterns of economic development in the Americas.

As a substantial literature has shown, political unity is, in and of itself, an institutional impetus for economic growth. Compared to separate, smaller states, larger unions exploit greater economies of scale in public goods provisions, and draw upon a larger tax base to support public expenditures on infrastructure and education critical to industrial development. Larger unions offer ready internal markets for domestic industries, with lower transaction costs, free from the tariffs and other barriers to trade that often hamper international commerce. And larger unions contain more sectoral, financial, and climatic diversity, allowing different regions to insure one another against the natural and unnatural economic shocks that afflict smaller, more homogenous economies.²⁵ I demonstrate that under plausible alternative configurations of the Americas' political geography, Spanish Americans might have enjoyed the same advantages that citizens of the United States derived from their country's large territory. Or, conversely and perhaps even more plausibly, that the United States might have succumbed to separatist struggles similar to the ones that split up its Spanish American counterparts. In either case, contemporary inter-American economic disparities would likely be smaller than they actually are today.

Post-colonial consolidation also offered indirect advantages for economic development, allowing states to undertake institutional reforms conducive to industrialization. Studies of the East Asian "miracles"—previously agrarian societies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan that industrialized and achieved sustained high rates of growth during the second half of the twentieth century—have shown that effective state intervention in the economy can change a country's economic fortunes. Though unfettered market forces might have dictated a future on the underdeveloped periphery of the world system, these "developmental states" forced their way into the industrial center by subsidizing select economic sectors, regulating interest rates, and closely managing infant industries' exposure to competition.²⁶

The Americas, North and South, also became independent as primarily agricultural and raw-material economies.

Without state-led reforms, the literature on late development implies that they might have remained net consumers of European manufactures over the long term. However, as I detail below, activist administrators like Alexander Hamilton pushed the federal government of the United States to enact policies explicitly intended to speed industrialization by dismantling the institutional legacies of imperial rule.²⁷ These legacies lasted longer in Latin America, but not for lack of analogous efforts on the part of Hamilton's counterparts in each original capital of independent Spanish America. The same civil wars and secessions that reduced the size of these early states frustrated proposed reforms, allowing imperial institutions to persist until the late nineteenth century, by which time a substantial economic gap had grown.²⁸ Often overlooked parallels in political thought suggest, then, that our understanding of the mechanisms driving institutional persistence in the Americas should also be complicated, to take better account of variations contingent on the outcomes of post-colonial politics.

Union and Reform in the Aftermath of American Independence

The prospect of independence thrust a singular problem before the Americas' early statesmen: defining and defending the territorial dimensions of the polities that would rise from the ruins of the European empires they had overthrown. Both British and Spanish Americans inherited ideas about forms of political organization from their imperial forebears,²⁹ and the empires also inspired proto-nationalist attachments to the kingdoms, colonies, and other imperial subunits that structured Americans' political life prior to independence.³⁰ In practice, though, the boundaries of these districts were poorly understood. The empires' administrative, judicial, and fiscal jurisdictions overlapped or nested inside one another, providing ambiguous directions.³¹ As a result, the actual sizes and shapes of the emerging American states were influenced but underdetermined by imperial legacies as the empires themselves retreated. The statesmen who redrew the maps after independence had an opportunity to radically restructure the geographic outlines of their political existence.

In this critical juncture, a common pattern of political thinking emerged in each of the new American polities. Throughout the hemisphere, founders and framers argued that unifying former colonies would yield independent states that were more capable of defending themselves against foreign enemies, more competitive in the global economy, and thus more apt to survive in the present and thrive in the future. Typically, these federative visions first appeared in patriotic calls for unity during wartime. But later, by writing constitutions to formalize sovereign authority and strengthen new national governments, statesmen sought to preserve the unions forged in the heat of battle, arguing that through active, state-led

economic intervention, the stifling institutional legacies of imperial rule could be abolished, and the way could be cleared to industrial development, domestic and international trade, and long-term prosperity.

Three major factors drove this ideological convergence around political union and institutional reform after independence. First, American political theorists imitated one another. Early independence and rapid economic progress gave ideas and institutions from the United States a particularly pervasive influence, but some Latin American founders, like Simón Bolívar, also attracted foreign followers to the cause of unity.³² Second, both British and Spanish Americans drew inspiration from the same European examples and intellectual traditions. Montesquieu's famous contention that republican government was best suited to small states was recited everywhere, but its relevance in a world characterized by extensive global commerce and continuous great power conflict was already being questioned in both Europe and the Americas.³³ American state-builders refashioned ancient "amphictyonic leagues" and "confederations" into "extended republics," that would unite large areas of the former British and Spanish American empires and reconcile neo-Roman antinomies of liberty and greatness.³⁴ They studied state-led institutional reforms undertaken by "Court" ministers and jurists in London and Madrid, as well as the more radical, but equally statist proposals of English Utilitarians and Cádiz liberals, and they learned modern political economy from French, Italian, and Scottish masters.³⁵ Third, the political theorists of the American revolutions arrived independently at similar answers to the similar questions their similar situations thrust before them.³⁶ I describe strong similarities in the unionist and reformist political thinking of four American states—one of which survived, and three of which did not. The contingent outcomes of the post-colonial political conflicts that selectively stymied some Americans' shared aspirations, I shall suggest, had important consequences for subsequent economic development.

Continentalism in the United States

Amongst the founders of the United States, Alexander Hamilton stands out as the most consistent "continentalist," expending immense energy on life-long efforts to unify the former colonies, empower their central government, and actively manage the new nation's economy, with an eye to quickly attaining the military and financial wherewithal to compete with the great European powers of the day. Thus, Hamilton's ideas can be regarded as something of an ideal type, exemplifying a pattern that, as I shall show, can be found in variations throughout the Americas.

As George Washington's aide-de-camp, Hamilton gained a thorough familiarity with the difficulties involved in coordinating the war efforts of thirteen political entities that, considering themselves sovereign, only begrudgingly

conceded men and money to the struggle for independence. As early as 1780 he had decided, and asserted in private correspondence, that the loose alliance structured by the Articles of Confederation was "defective and requires to be altered; it is neither fit for war, nor peace."³⁷ A year later, he published his views, arguing in a newspaper editorial that "nothing but a well-proportioned exertion of the resources of the whole, under the direction of a Common Council, with power sufficient to give efficacy to their resolutions, can preserve us from being a CONQUERED PEOPLE now, or can make us a HAPPY PEOPLE hereafter."³⁸ With military victory, the peacetime advantages of a larger state came to the fore. Hamilton took a maximalist position at the Philadelphia Convention, only declining to suggest that the state governments be "extinguished" because he did not wish to "shock the public opinion by proposing such a measure."³⁹ He made his reasons for this view clear in his contributions to the *Federalist Papers*. For Hamilton, the "more perfect union" that the Constitution's preamble promised to establish was a necessary condition for the nation's future prosperity, providing the institutional foundation for a system of interstate commerce that would, in years to come, permit regions to pursue comparative advantages and gains from specialization, and reduce the administrative costs of tax collection and public service provision.⁴⁰ Against those who objected that "whether the States are united or disunited, there would still be an intimate intercourse between them which would answer the same ends" he insisted that without political unity, "this intercourse would be fettered, interrupted, and narrowed by a multiplicity of causes."⁴¹ Hamilton's thought, then, clearly illustrates the connection that, as we will see, many American statesmen drew between union and economic growth.

Amongst his colleagues, Hamilton was a decided Anglophile, more willing than most to concede that the government they had overthrown was the "best in the world."⁴² But he was not blind to its defects, and he considered the American colonies' escape from the British Empire's mercantilist regulations an accomplishment of world-historical significance.⁴³ He also understood that overcoming the economic legacies of imperialism would involve more than removing political constraints on production and trade, arguing that the powers of the new federal government should be used positively, to encourage the development of manufacturing in the United States. Industrialization held numerous attractions for Hamilton, including decreased reliance on European—especially English—imports, greater prospects for economic growth from innovation and the division of labor, and a larger market for America's agricultural goods.⁴⁴ However, he recognized that despite these advantages, industrializing a predominantly agricultural society would not be easy, because inherited institutions, both formal and informal, stood in the way:

Experience teaches, that men are often so much governed by what they are accustomed to see and practice, that the simplest and most obvious improvements, in the most ordinary occupations, are adopted with hesitation, reluctance and by slow gradations. . . . In many cases they would not happen, while a bare support could be ensured by an adherence to ancient courses; though a resort to a more profitable employment might be practicable. To produce the desirable changes, as early as may be expedient, may therefore require the incitement and patronage of government.⁴⁵

As other studies have shown, the powers of the federal government that Hamilton played such an important role in defining and defending would be called upon again and again in the republic's early decades. State-led interventions in the economy stabilized public debt and lowered interest rates for private borrowers, patronized infant industries and enforced tariffs limiting their foreign competition, defended shippers against piracy and deprived Native Americans and Mexicans of land, financed infrastructure critical to capitalist development, and dismantled the extractive institutions—especially slavery—left behind by British rule.⁴⁶ Though, as in the other societies I shall discuss, these reforms aroused opposition intense enough at times to threaten the continued existence of the union, the United States overcame its secessionist challengers. As a unified and ever-expanding nation, with an active federal government, it went on to achieve rates of economic growth that, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, decisively outpaced the rest of the hemisphere.

Uniting the Platine Provinces

Spanish Americans failed to follow the course charted by Alexander Hamilton in their early independence, but not for lack of trying. Many voiced similar commitments to political unity and institutional reform even before they had freed themselves from imperial rule. The city of Buenos Aires was particularly noisy on the eve of independence, issuing regular editorials, reports, and petitions finding fault with aspects of the Spanish Empire's economic system. Their precociousness in this respect was not random; the Bourbon Court's reformers had made Buenos Aires a centerpiece of their efforts to revive the empire's profitability after years of steady decline.⁴⁷ In 1776, a major administrative reorganization created the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, bringing a massive portion of South America—comprising present-day Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia—under the command of a bureaucracy stationed in Buenos Aires, which also took over the export of Andean silver to the metropole. Two years later, the Crown removed barriers to trade between Spanish ports in the Americas, permitting ranchers in the city's hinterlands to begin exporting hides and salted beef directly to other Spanish colonies. These policies made Buenos Aires a major commercial hub, and for a time made its inhabitants rich. But the Napoleonic Wars disrupted trade and

transport, threatening the city's incipient wealth and arousing demands for further reform.⁴⁸

The reformists were professionals with close ties to commerce, trained in traditional Spanish canon law but familiar with the new thinking of the French physiocrats and Italian and Scottish political economists. Writing on behalf of a group of Buenos Aires landowners in the midst of the economic downturn precipitated by the Napoleonic Wars, Mariano Moreno sought to convince the Viceroy to open the city's ports to English merchants.⁴⁹ The recommendation does not appear particularly radical in retrospect, but Moreno recognized that permitting English trade would represent an institutional sea change, from a colonial system designed to maximize transfers of wealth, mainly in precious metals, to the metropole, to one that permitted a broader, and freer trade that would enrich both sovereign and subjects. He gave "thanks to God that we do not live in those obscure centuries when, the interests of vassals being separate from those of their Lords, the stockpiling of treasures was esteemed even when it left the people in misery."⁵⁰ By defending a policy permitting Buenos Aires to trade with England, then, Moreno was recommending reform of precisely the mercantilist system that the new institutionalists just reviewed have blamed for the relative underdevelopment of Spain's former American colonies.

About six months later, following news of serious setbacks to the Spanish resistance against Napoleon, a *Junta* of Buenos Aires notables assumed provisional authority over the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. Moreno, writing as their secretary, promised publicly to maintain "these possessions in the most constant fidelity and adherence to [their] much loved King, Sr. D. Fernando VII, and his legitimate successors,"⁵¹ but he also circulated a private *Plan de Operaciones* for the government of what he called the "United Provinces of the Río de la Plata," specifying the measures that should be taken, "now that South America has proclaimed its independence, so that it can enjoy a just and complete liberty."⁵² Moreno's *Plan* contained detailed strategies for the liberation and unification of the entire former Viceroyalty. He also suggested that Buenos Aires should collaborate with England in the "dismemberment of Brazil," and annex a substantial portion of the Portuguese colony to the United Provinces. Moreno defended these measures as means of securing independence,⁵³ but other members of his circle emphasized how unification and expansion would enhance the long-term prosperity of the United Provinces. In an article on the "Causes of the destruction or the conservation and growth of nations," the lawyer, economist, and general Manuel Belgrano argued that "lack of religion, poor institutions and laws, abuses of governmental authority, and the corruption of traditions" were "no more than side-effects, or antecedents of . . . disunion," the central cause of decline in human history.⁵⁴

For the United Provinces' economic future, it was particularly important to maintain control of the region known as Charcas (present-day Bolivia), the primary source of silver in South America and the fount of Buenos Aires' late-colonial wealth. Belgrano personally led a liberating army into the Andes in 1812, but was unable to overcome local opponents of the revolution and their royalist allies. Deprived of the income that Charcas had provided, the provisional government in Buenos Aires was forced to take on debt at ruinous rates of interest. Farmers, ranchers, traders, and textile manufacturers suffered from the loss of an important market for their goods, and worse was yet to come. The United Provinces soon also lost control of Paraguay and its agriculture, and became entangled in repeated conflicts with Brazil over the *Banda Oriental* (present-day Uruguay), home to a profitable cattle industry, and was eventually forced to cede control there as well. Finally, Buenos Aires faced a revolt of the interior provinces of present-day Argentina, leading to a complete collapse of unified government in 1819.

The idea of a greater union emerged once more during a short period of relative peace in the 1820s, under the influence of Bernardino Rivadavia. Rivadavia spent the first decade of the revolution overseas, as a representative of the United Provinces to the courts of England and France. There he absorbed Europe's contemporary intellectual currents, and became a philosophical devotee of Jeremy Bentham. He returned to Buenos Aires in 1821, ready to apply utilitarian principles to a complete renovation of its political and economic institutions. In a famous 1822 letter to Bentham, he described his efforts to eliminate

ancient abuses of all kinds found in our administration, and to prevent the establishing of others . . . to favour the establishment of a national bank upon a solid basis; to retrench (after having allowed them a just indemnity) those civilians and military who incur uselessly the state; to protect individual property; to cause to be executed all public works of acknowledged utility; to protect commerce, the sciences and the arts; [and] to promulgate a law . . . that reduces very materially the custom-house duties.⁵⁵

Rivadavia and his supporters eventually managed to push through a new constitution, reuniting the provinces and giving the president broad powers to oversee the nation's economy. Rivadavia was the first man elected to the post, and he immediately announced an ambitious program of reforms. But his plans were swamped by a new wave of provincial opposition, and once again the country descended into civil war.

Despite their failure, Moreno, Belgrano, and Rivadavia's ideas indicate what was possible in the critical juncture following the independence of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata. They provide evidence of a plausible counterfactual path, upon which Platine South America, like the United States, would have embarked on independent life enjoying the advantages of a large territory and

reformed institutions capable of stimulating early industrialization and rapid economic growth.

Creating a Greater Colombia

Simón Bolívar, whom we met at this article's outset, began his revolutionary career in the Captaincy-General of Caracas, corresponding roughly to present-day Venezuela. He watched as both the first Republic of Venezuela, established in 1811, and the second, established in 1813, succumbed to internal rebellion and Spanish reconquest, and drew the same lesson each time: "until we centralize our American governments, our enemies will have the most complete advantage. We will be inevitably drawn into the horrors of civil war, and humiliatingly conquered by the handful of bandits that infest our regions."⁵⁶ Thus, he began his third, and finally successful campaign by announcing plans to liberate and unify not only Venezuela, but the entirety of northern South America. He named the state he proposed to found Colombia,⁵⁷ and included in its territories all of present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador (historians usually refer to this entity as *Gran* or "Greater" Colombia to distinguish it from the present-day state of the same name). Bolívar acknowledged that the creation of Gran Colombia was originally inspired by military necessity, but he also projected that with time the country's enviable location "between two oceans which nature has separated and which we will reconnect with long, wide canals," and its great abundance of precious metals and fertile lands would make it the "unifier, center, and emporium of the human family."⁵⁸ Bolívar, then, like others before him, understood the advantages that a large territory encompassing diverse regions with complementary comparative advantages might offer in a new world of global commerce.

Gran Colombia received its first constitution in 1821. The Constituent Congress, convinced that addressing the invidious legacies of Spanish rule could not await the first official legislative session, also passed a series of institutional reforms.⁵⁹ The internal customs barriers and tariffs that Spain had established to limit inter-colonial trade were eliminated, along with colonial guilds and grants of monopoly, entailed properties, and ecclesiastical mortmains. At the same time, a system of varying tariff rates for foreign trade was established, which gave preference to nations that recognized Colombian independence and completely excluded Spain from trading in her former colonies. Foreign corporations willing to invest capital and share expertise in road, railroad, canal, and steamship infrastructure development were offered limited exclusivity, and Europeans willing to settle in Colombia were offered a swift route to full citizenship, reversing the strict limitations on immigration that Spain had upheld and which some new institutionalists have singled out for special censure.

Bolívar also understood that the government could give a positive impetus to industrial development by protecting infant industries. He had described the reduction of Americans to “mere consumers” of European manufactured goods amongst the primary injuries inflicted by imperial rule, highlighting the threat economic dependence would pose to political independence once it was won.⁶⁰ Gradually, protectionist economic policy in Gran Colombia began to reflect a fundamental shift in thinking, away from mercantilist maximization of state income and service of special constituencies and toward a vision of state intervention as a means of securing necessities that free trade would undersupply. Leading this shift was Francisco de Paula Santander, a trained lawyer and revolutionary general, who as Bolívar’s Vice President actually did most of the governing in Gran Colombia while the Liberator was away at war. Santander steadfastly refused to “directly promote either agriculture or mining, [established industries] whose prosperity results from individual effort and resources,” unaided by government intervention. Instead, he argued, “exclusive privileges can be conceded only for those things difficult to introduce without a substantial capital, or without very special knowledge.”⁶¹ As in the rest of the Americas, the state itself was central to the success of these reform efforts. In the regions of Gran Colombia where the central government’s agents were thin on the ground, life proceeded in established colonial patterns: African slavery and forced indigenous labor continued, taxes went uncollected, and infrastructure remained inadequate to the needs of a modern economy.

Bolívar’s armies completed the liberation of Gran Colombia in 1822, but did not stop there. Instead, they marched on the continent’s last remaining loyalist holdouts in Charcas and the former Viceroyalty of Peru. Bolívar hoped to incorporate these territories into a single union, a “Federation of the Andes,” drawing Bolivia, Peru, and Gran Colombia together in a system “tighter than that of the United States.”⁶² At the same time, in an act that would win Bolívar his most lasting renown, he invited the other newly-established governments of Spanish America send ministers to a Congress in Panama. At first he envisioned a “confederation” that would “serve in peace and war as a shield for our new destiny . . . perpetuating, if possible, the duration of these governments.” But it is clear that with time, Bolívar hoped that the Congress could evolve into something more: a permanent supranational legislative body for the entire region, and perhaps even a model of international organization for the entire world. He predicted that one day, the “Isthmus of Corinth,” capital of the ancient Hellenic League, “will pale in comparison with that of Panama.”⁶³

Though their primary functions would have been political and military, both the Federation of the Andes and the Congress of Panama were envisioned as engines of institutional reform and economic development.

The Constitution Bolívar drafted for newly-liberated Charcas (renamed “Bolivia” in his honor), and which he hoped would be adopted by the Federation as a whole, would have abolished slavery—“a contradiction that impugns only our reason more than our justice”⁶⁴—and dismantled the hereditary offices, exclusive trading privileges, and indigenous tribute systems left behind by Spain, establishing uniform property laws and free trade over an immense area of South America. The Panama Congress, meanwhile, would have established a pan-Spanish American free-trade zone, and an economic collective capable of negotiating more favorable terms with foreign trading partners than any individual country could demand alone. Ultimately, though, neither of Bolívar’s most expansive visions came to fruition, and he lived to see a rebellion raised in his native Caracas bring Gran Colombia down as well. Nonetheless, his writings, and those of his ministers, make it clear that institutional alternatives were available to Andean South Americans in the aftermath of their independence that might have positioned the region to assume a more prominent place in the emerging global economy.

Maintaining an Empire in Mexico

World-renowned for the wealth of its mines, its large and relatively urbane population, and its claims to a territory encompassing all of present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, as well as the western United States as far north as Oregon and as far east as Texas, the Kingdom of New Spain was the crown jewel of Spain’s American empire. The famous Prussian explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who spent a year in New Spain from 1803–1804, thought this reputation was deserved, noting that “if the political power of two nations depended only on the space they occupied on the globe, and the number of their inhabitants . . . the kingdom of New Spain could be placed alongside the American republic.” However, he noted that at the moment “the United States, though less favored by nature in climate and soil, grows much more rapidly,” attributing the difference to the “perfection of [the United States’] social institutions.”⁶⁵ Humboldt’s ideas exercised a powerful influence on New Spanish Creoles, leading some to conclude that, were it not for the stifling restrictions imposed from Madrid, their homeland would rank amongst the world’s wealthiest nations.⁶⁶ Thus, when independence was finally established, institutional reform was a primary item on the agenda.

New Spain emerged from Spanish rule unified, introducing itself to the world as the “Empire of Mexico” in 1821. After the abdication of Emperor Agustín I, Mexico peacefully renounced its hold on Central America—which seceded to form an ill-fated federation of its own—and adopted a new, republican constitution in 1824. As in other parts of the Americas, the statesmen who came to power

in the First Republic of Mexico were divided by their allegiances to “doctrinaire” theories of free-market liberalism and more “pragmatic” policies, which carved out a central role for governmental support in economic development.⁶⁷ Importantly, though, even liberal purists sought to make the state an instrument of their purposes. Here, the state’s prerogatives with respect to the Church became an area of special concern. Liberals hoped to disentail the Church’s landholdings and make uncultivated lands available for agriculture, and to abolish the compulsory tithes and special tax exemptions that the Church had enjoyed under Spanish rule, thereby shoring up depleted state finances. José María Luis Mora, a former priest who became the most sophisticated political liberal in early republican Mexico, defended these measures as part of a broader institutional shift, from a system in which property rights varied according to their possessors’ political connections or corporate memberships, to a regime of equality before the law. He could find “no reason to think that [the Church] should be the only [corporation], among all those that society has created, that exempts itself from the laws that have been or will be made for [entities] of its kind.”⁶⁸ Here, Mora clearly seems to have regarded the state as a vital means of replacing the patchwork quilt of economic policies Mexico had inherited from Spain with a uniform system capable of sustaining a modern economy.

Other Mexicans called for the new government to take an even more active role in the economy. They were led primarily by Lucas Alamán, a mineral scientist and statesman who served as Minister of External Relations and Internal Affairs under four different administrations. From his first official report to Congress in 1823, Alamán called for measures that would help revitalize mining in Mexico, describing the new purposes that the industry could serve now that its products would no longer be extracted for direct export to the metropole. Mining employed large numbers of workers and animals, and required extensive machinery and other industrial products. Thus, by rehabilitating the country’s mines, Congress would “give a powerful impulse to agriculture, arts, and commerce.”⁶⁹ Here Alamán’s arguments are strongly reminiscent of the ones made by Alexander Hamilton with respect to manufacturing; both understood that in a large state with a diversified economy, complementary industries could provide each other with stable and accessible markets for their products. Also like Hamilton, Alamán saw a role for government in the direct, financial support of nascent industries. In his ministerial report of 1831, he highlighted the plight of the country’s textile manufacturers. Prohibitions on imports, though capable of “liberating an established industry from prejudicial competition,” could not help a new one adopt the modern technologies necessary for sustainable growth, “because they cannot create the

capital, nor give the instruction which is necessary.”⁷⁰ Thus, he oversaw the establishment of a national investment bank, capitalized out of import duties on foreign cotton, which he hoped would provide direct stimulus to Mexican manufacturing.

A final concern, of particular interest here, were the *baldíos*, or vacant lands, which made up most of Mexico’s northern territories. Most of the north’s inhabitants were indigenous, spoke no Spanish, and felt as little loyalty for the new government in Mexico City as they had for its predecessor in Madrid. Even more troubling, the eastern-most portions of the region were rapidly filling with illegal immigrants from the United States. Early on, Alamán expressed great hopes for the north, and a wary admiration of the United States:

The almost magical transformation that lands of this kind have undergone in the new states of the Union in the North of our continent, where deserts continually exposed to the barbarian invasions have been in a few years changed into populous and flourishing provinces, cannot but invite our country to seek similar rewards. . . . The colonization of these provinces, by their situation, demands the preferential attention of Congress and the government.⁷¹

Alamán was initially confident that if Mexico, like the United States, adopted policies designed to stimulate settlement and economic development in the north, it could duplicate the United States’ success. He helped write a Law of Colonization in 1830, which proscribed additional immigration from the United States and offered free land to Mexicans willing to move north. When provincial dissent—originating in the department of Coahuila y Tejas, which was making a tidy profit from land sales to illegal Anglo-American immigrants—undermined the enforcement of this law, Alamán and his allies pushed through a major constitutional reform and sent federal troops north to secure the border. Anglo-American settlers rioted in response, and then seceded, eventually seeking annexation by the United States and provoking the Mexican-American war, which had disastrous consequences for Mexico. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed while the U.S. Army occupied Mexico City, transferred half of Mexico’s territory to the United States, completing the latter’s continental ambitions and providing an enormous developmental windfall following the discovery of gold in the Sacramento Valley.⁷² Mexicans, meanwhile, argued bitterly over the causes of their defeat, eventually descending into a civil war that delayed, for another decade, any attempt to reform their institutional inheritances.

Richly ironic in retrospect, the history of Mexico’s northern territories neatly illustrates just how far from inevitable the Americas’ present-day national configuration was in the immediate aftermath of independence. The failed plans of political thinkers like Mora and Alamán, Moreno, Belgrano, and Rivadavia, Bolívar and Santander, suggest how profoundly different Spanish America’s

institutional and economic development might have been if its independent states had persisted in their original, unified forms.

The Origins of the American Development Gap Reconsidered

Comparing the political ideas of the American independence movements reveals substantial areas of ideological convergence that have gone largely unremarked in studies of the Americas' political and economic development. As we have seen, not only British North Americans, but also their Spanish American counterparts viewed the end of European rule as an opportunity to unite large territories with complementary regional economies, and thus establish a framework for future economic growth. Both British and Spanish American statesmen worked hard to abolish the restrictive colonial practices, mercantilist economic policies, and extractive modes of production that new institutionalist analyses have blamed for Latin America's relative underdevelopment. This suggests that the hemisphere's present-day disparities in per-capita income, national production, and wealth were not inevitable at the time the Americas achieved independence. Rather, the American revolutions opened a critical juncture, in which alternative outcomes were possible that would have furnished Latin Americans with the territorial and institutional advantages enjoyed by their northern neighbors.

Recognizing that that the present-day configuration of political borders in the Americas was not inevitable, that alternatives were established, which, in failing, critically influenced subsequent institutional and economic development, raises new questions: Why were similar ideas announced around the same time realized to such different degrees in the United States and Spanish America? Why did the union of rebellious colonies first established in Philadelphia survive and even expand after independence, while those established in Buenos Aires, Bogotá, and Mexico City succumbed to civil war, foreign invasion, and state breakdown? A small number of new institutionalist studies have considered these questions, but rather than treating the aftermath of independence as a critical juncture, with a profoundly consequential, but *contingent* outcome, they have argued that the success or failure, respectively, of the United States and Spanish America's early unions were themselves inevitable results of institutional legacies left behind by imperial rule. As the subjects of a relatively "liberal" empire, British North Americans gained more experience in the arts of self-rule than their Spanish American counterparts, who learned no such lessons under Spain's despotic yoke. It's not surprising, then, that when the restraints imposed by imperial rule were released, Spanish America exploded in civil war, and was unable to achieve the stable, productive unity modeled by the United States.⁷³ This account cannot be decisively

answered by a comparative study of political ideas, but the period's thinkers give us reason to doubt that the sharp divergence in political fortunes that followed the Americas' transition to independence was inevitable. In particular, they can help us recall just how close the United States came to charting the unfortunate course Spanish America would soon follow.

Despite their monumental achievements, at the end of their lives many of the leaders introduced earlier shared a deep sense of despair. In 1802, Alexander Hamilton remarked in a letter that his was "an odd destiny": "Perhaps no man in the U[nited] States has sacrificed or done more for the present Constitution than myself. . . . Yet I have the murmurs of its friends no less than the curses of its foes for my rewards. What can I do better than withdraw from the Scene?"⁷⁴ Many of his Spanish-American counterparts did in fact withdraw: Mariano Moreno died on a ship bound for England. José María Luis Mora and Bernardino Rivadavia spent their final years in France and Spain, respectively. Simón Bolívar was on his way out of the country when he succumbed to tuberculosis on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. One of his last letters contained a depressing list of lessons learned in twenty years of revolutionary leadership: "(1) America is ungovernable, for us; (2) Those who serve revolution plough the sea; (3) the only thing one can do in America is emigrate;"⁷⁵ For his part, in 1850 Lucas Alamán described Mexico as "a country that proceeded directly from infancy to decrepitude, without having enjoyed more than a glimmer of the freshness of youth nor given any other sign of life than violent convulsions."⁷⁶ The cause of each man's late depression was the same: the rise of sectional opposition parties that sought to halt or reverse institutional reforms by dismantling the unions that had formed after independence.

From a certain perspective, this turn of events is unsurprising. Politics in the newly independent Americas followed a pattern that can be found in the aftermath of most successful revolutions, particularly anti-colonial struggles. The sudden absence of a common enemy dissolves patriotic unity and exposes divisions—whether based on regional loyalties, economic interests, or bare individual ambitions—which had been suppressed during wartime. But the American republics were perhaps uniquely unprepared for party politics, their leaders and political thinkers being almost universally convinced that factionalism of any kind was unacceptable and dangerous.⁷⁷ As Seymour Martin Lipset perceptively noted in his comparative study of post-colonial politics,

To accept criticism as proper requires the prior acceptance of the view that opposition and succession are normal, and that men may be loyal to the polity and yet disapprove of the particular set of incumbents. This view does not come easily to men who have themselves created a polity, and cannot, therefore,

conceive of it functioning properly without them or in ways other than they think best.⁷⁸

In the Americas both incumbent administrations and their challengers reacted badly to the rise of ideological opposition. Incumbents refused to concede any legitimacy to their opponents, and sought to employ the powers at their disposal to suppress dissent and exile dissenters. Challengers, in response, deepened the stakes of conflict, making effective use of rapidly-expanding independent press outlets to portray their enemies as would-be aristocrats or tyrants, and betrayers of the revolutions they had so recently led. As a result, party politics brought all of the hemisphere's newly independent polities to the brink of dissolution, and it is at this brink that we find the origins of American divergence. While the United States negotiated a treacherous passage through its post-colonial political conflicts, the new states of Spanish America broke apart on the reefs of partisan infighting.

Though retrospect makes the United States' successful consolidation look natural, contemporary observers might have been surprised—indeed, they frequently predicted that the dissolution of the union was imminent.⁷⁹ Alexander Hamilton's proposed institutional reforms, described earlier, aroused intense antagonism in the southern states, where many felt that the establishment of a national bank, in particular, being a boon to manufacturers, must also pose a threat to the South's economic dominance of a predominantly agricultural nation.⁸⁰ Frequent denunciations in the opposition press goaded the Federalist administration of John Adams into a desperate move: the notorious Alien and Sedition Acts, passed in the summer of 1798. These measures effectively turned the federal government, and particularly its executive branch, into a weapon for partisan combat. In response, opposition leaders Thomas Jefferson and James Madison each drafted resolutions, passed by the state legislatures of Kentucky and Virginia, respectively, which denounced the Acts as unconstitutional. Jefferson went so far as to assert a novel state prerogative, to *nullify*, or declare “unauthoritative, void, and of no force,” federal laws which were determined to have exceeded the federal government's delegated authority. He also threatened that the federal government's continuation in its present path would “necessarily drive these States into revolution and blood.”⁸¹ So here, having barely completed a decade in service, the United States Constitution was under assault from two sides, with an incumbent party employing all means at its disposal to silence its opponents, and an opposition party ready to dissolve the union to escape economic policies imposed by the federal government. Strikingly similar conflicts culminated in the collapse of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, Gran Colombia, and the First Republic of Mexico.⁸²

Nor was this the last time the United States approached the brink of dissolution. By 1809, the tables had turned, and trade embargoes imposed by the Madison administration on the eve of the War of 1812 inspired New England Federalists to embrace first nullification and then, eventually, to contemplate secession at a Convention called for the purpose at Hartford in 1814.⁸³ Southerners went back into the opposition during the presidency of John Quincy Adams, and again threatened nullification in response to protective tariffs imposed in 1828. South Carolina's legislature passed an actual “Ordinance of Nullification” in 1832, and readied its state militia to resist federal enforcement if necessary.⁸⁴ Travelling in America at the time, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that “if conflict were to erupt today between the sovereignty of the Union and the sovereignty of the states, it is easy to foresee that the former would succumb.”⁸⁵ In the late 1830s, the annexation of Texas, a slave state, and the resulting shift in Congressional representation led northerners to contemplate dissolution once again, and only last-minute compromises forestalled armed conflict over further territorial acquisitions in the Mexican-American War.⁸⁶ Given this prelude, David Hendrickson writes, the fact that regional struggles did finally cause civil war in the United States in 1861 “should not be considered as an accident or an anomaly but a reversion to the mean suggested by the historical experience of previous ages—a resumption of history, as it were, among a people (or peoples) who had entertained the enthralling but ultimately naïve hope that they had found history's end.”⁸⁷

It is impossible to observe the counterfactual trajectory the United States would have followed if any of these conflicts prior to 1861 had produced a civil war, or if the actual Civil War had not ended in a Union victory, but the experience of Spanish America suggests that the effects of early political breakdown on economic development would have been very large and very negative. Apart from the direct benefits of size—in the form of complementary regional comparative advantages unmitigated by customs duties or regulations, economies of scale in the provision of public goods and the collection of taxes, and insurance against shocks to particular industries—unity placed the new nation in a much better position to pursue its interests abroad. A smaller, less stable set of polities would not have secured the loans from foreign, and especially English, investors at rates that enabled the United States to make large investments in industry, infrastructure, and territorial expansion through the Louisiana Purchase. A group of warring neighbors would not have created the navy that protected American ships from French and English depredations in the Caribbean and from pirates in the Mediterranean, or the army that conquered Mexico and the indigenous communities of the west, allowing Americans to realize their manifest destiny. Finally, it is far from clear when the United States' own “peculiar

institution”—as extractive as any imperial inheritance in the hemisphere—would have been abolished in a separate, southern Confederacy, but it is quite clear that the South would not enjoy the prosperity it does today if it had successfully resisted northern aggression in the 1860s.⁸⁸

The United States was not the only new American nation that survived the trials of its transition to independence intact. Brazil accomplished the same feat, but failed to achieve sustained economic growth until the twentieth century, leaving it with the rest of Latin America on the wrong side of the development gap. So why didn't political union produce economic success in Brazil after independence? Among many features that make Brazil exceptional, here its distinctive path to independence is especially important. Portugal lost its American empire not in a republican revolution, but a palace coup. In 1808, after Napoleon invaded the Iberian peninsula, King Dom João VI moved his court across the Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro. He ruled from there until 1820, and left his son Dom Pedro behind as Regent upon his return to Lisbon. When the Portuguese *Cortes* moved to rein in the autonomy Brazil had enjoyed under its King in exile, the Regent declared independence, styling himself Dom Pedro I, Emperor of Brazil.⁸⁹

A man of progressive pretensions, Dom Pedro I appointed a cabinet of reform-minded Creole ministers, led by the scientist, poet, and political theorist José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, to help craft his policy.⁹⁰ Like the other statesmen described above, José Bonifácio worked to centralize authority in Brazil, fashioning a state that could dismantle the country's institutional inheritance and foment economic development. Early measures protected private property against seizure, lowered taxes and tariffs, and curtailed the slave trade. As in every other American state, these efforts aroused strong opposition and a secessionist movement, but unlike his unfortunate neighbors, the Brazilian Emperor overcame this challenge and maintained his empire's territorial integrity. He did not, however, maintain his commitment to institutional reform and state intervention in the economy. Instead both Dom Pedro I and his heir, Dom Pedro II, who assumed the throne in 1840 and ruled until 1889, sought to stabilize their personal authority by accommodating the conservative “slavocrats” of the Empire's southeast, and distancing themselves from José Bonifácio and his proposed reforms.⁹¹

This retreat had two particularly consequential results for Brazil's economic development. First, Brazil's sugar, cotton, and coffee exporters continued to rely on slave labor, actually increasing the number of new arrivals from Africa until British intercession put an end to the trade in 1850. Slavery itself was not abolished in Brazil until 1888.⁹² The availability of slaves depressed wages for free labor, causing many Brazilians to remain outside the exchange

economy, working small subsistence farms throughout the interior. Low labor costs also diminished incentives to invest in capital, leaving Brazilian producers behind a rapidly advancing technological frontier.⁹³ Second, the low taxes preferred by Brazil's slaveholding aristocracy left the Empire in a perpetual state of revenue shortage, restricting investment in transportation infrastructure, especially the railroads that were so central to the United States' industrial development. By 1900, Brazil and the United States were comparable in land area, but the United States had laid almost twenty times as many miles of railroad track. Thus, while Brazil was politically unified after independence, it was economically disconnected, a condition that stifled domestic trade, prevented efficient intraregional allocations of capital and labor, and delayed industrialization.⁹⁴ Sustained economic growth had to await the collapse of the monarchy, the abolition of slavery, and a marked increase in public spending in the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁹⁵ By that time, the Americas' development gap was already quite wide, but it bears noting that today Brazil is often mentioned—alongside other “BRICs”⁹⁶ of exceptionally large dimensions—as a nation poised to become one of the world's wealthiest.

Conclusion

By comparing the ideas of the United States' and Latin America's struggles for independence, I have uncovered important areas of ideological convergence, usually left out of intellectual histories of the period, with suggestive implications for new institutionalist theories of economic development. From their capitals in Buenos Aires, Bogotá, and Mexico City, founders of now-forgotten American states demonstrated that they understood the advantages that political unification and institutional reform would offer for their countries' future prosperity, suggesting that if the polities they founded had survived, or conversely, if the union of former colonies established in British North America had failed—as it very nearly did on several occasions—present-day disparities in economic productivity and wealth might not be as pronounced as they are today. This complicates the account of the American development gap given in new institutionalist analyses, highlighting an important role for post-colonial political ideas and arguments in shaping the persistence of imperial institutions after independence, and thus in determining the long-term effects of colonialism's institutional legacies on the Americas' economic development.

The key to these insights was a turn to comparative political theory. The under-studied books, pamphlets, and letters of Spanish America's leading political thinkers give us direct evidence of the range of alternatives available to political actors in the critical juncture that followed the Americas' independence. Read alongside the well-known discourses of their British American counterparts, these

ideas provide an empirical basis for considering plausible counterfactual histories of the hemisphere, highlighting the related effects of political unification and institutional reform on the United States and Latin America's comparative economic development. We should expect that, as comparative political theorists become better versed in Muslim, South Asian, East Asian, African, and Latin American political thought, more opportunities to apply the field's distinctive insights to established social-scientific paradigms will arise.

Addressing questions raised by empirical social science shouldn't require comparative political theorists to put aside their interest in the normative dimensions of processes like economic development or the prescriptive potential of historical ideas. Here I have treated the United States' rise to relative productivity and prosperity as an admirable accomplishment, but the political unity and territorial expansion that, I have argued, supported this rise entailed grave harms, particularly to the indigenous peoples dispossessed in the process. Economic development itself has involved ruthless exploitation of free and unfree labor in the United States, and while it has raised average incomes and living standards, it has not erased deep inequalities and deplorable deprivation. On the other hand, disunity and under-development have not spared Latin America similar dispossessions, exploitation, inequalities, and deprivation. Indeed, as Karl Marx once observed of his native Prussia, Latin Americans "suffer not only from the development of capitalist production, but also from the incompleteness of that development."⁹⁷ Well-entrenched economic elites take home larger portions of smaller national products,⁹⁸ effectively excluding the poor from participating in unstable political systems often further destabilized by foreign interventions.

Thus the question arises, what can the policy-makers of the present learn from the political thinkers of the past? Though famous for insisting early in his career that we moderns must "do our thinking for ourselves," the eminent historian of political thought Quentin Skinner has allowed, of late, that intellectual history could serve a practical purpose in the contemporary world, helping us to "appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds." Studying the history of political thought, Skinner writes, can "prevent us from becoming too readily bewitched" by the dominant ideas and institutions of our own time, allowing us to recover, in the manner of an archaeologist, the "buried intellectual treasure" of the past, to "dust it down, and . . . reconsider what we think of it."⁹⁹ The comparative approach I've employed here could contribute to this archaeological project by illuminating the long-term consequences of our predecessors' choices, and guiding us to the past ideas that, upon reconsideration, will be found to be worth recovering.

This study suggests that political union in Latin America is one such idea, though I am far from the first to reach this conclusion. Simón Bolívar's dream of "forming a single body politic" in Spanish America did not become a reality during his lifetime, but it did not die. Since his time, a series of important Latin American political thinkers have argued that uniting the region would unlock its economic potential.¹⁰⁰ In these works, the ideas articulated by Bolívar and others in the aftermath of independence remain important points of reference, but attitudes toward the United States gradually transform. Once viewed as a model of post-colonial union and institutional reform fit for emulation, by the turn of the twentieth century many Latin American statesmen and intellectuals regarded the expanding nation to their north with wariness, as an imperialist threat in its own right. Latter-day theorists of Latin American integration defend unity not only as an impetus for economic growth and institutional reform, but also as a means of resisting the imposition of new institutional impediments to widespread prosperity.¹⁰¹ The causes and consequences of this profound shift in Latin American political thought pose interesting questions for comparative political theorists to consider, and offer insights relevant to ongoing debates in comparative politics on economic development and democratization.

Until his death last year, the most prominent contemporary advocate of Latin American integration was the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías. Most of the substantial political science scholarship on Chávez has focused on domestic politics, especially on explaining the collapse of Venezuela's longstanding two-party system, and on defining the regime type that Venezuela assumed during his time in office.¹⁰² Relatively little has been written on Chávez's efforts to unite Latin America under the auspices of a "Bolivarian Alternative" (*Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas*, or ALBA) to U.S.-dominated regional organizations and economic treaties like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).¹⁰³ From the first, Chávez described the ALBA as a return to the unionist projects proposed in the aftermath of independence, calling upon Latin Americans to join him in creating an organization based on "a new concept of integration which is nothing new, but rather the recovery of a vision that we still think is possible."¹⁰⁴ Of course, there are important differences between Chávez's proposal and the older ones I describe above. The mercantilist and extractive institution of Spanish imperial rule that aroused early reformers' ire have been replaced, in Chávez's twenty-first century Bolivarianism, by the "neoliberal model" of economic development and integration promoted by the United States through the OAS and the FTAA. Still, there are continuities that give credence to Chávez's claim to the Liberators' mantle. As a true political union rather

than a treaty organization, Chávez argued, the ALBA could foster cooperation, rather than competition, amongst member states, allowing Latin Americans to realize gains from specialization and trade between regions with complementary comparative advantages, while also pursuing reforms aimed at sustained growth by reducing entrenched inequalities and diversifying domestic industries.¹⁰⁵ In this sense, like his predecessors, Chávez clearly understood the direct and indirect impetus political unification could give to Latin America's economic development.

This is not the place for a full evaluation of this program, or for a prediction as to its prospects after Chávez's passing, but by highlighting the unfortunate effects disunion has had in Spanish America since independence, and by demonstrating that at one point in the past a different path was possible, this study offers reasons to support the Latin Americans who continue working today to make Bolívar's dream a reality. It should also encourage political scientists interested in historical institutionalism to revisit the history of ideas. The debates Americans conducted immediately after independence furnish unique insight into how historical possibilities are actualized or foreclosed, and can help us understand why some early post-colonial aspirations continue to resonate in the present day.

Notes

- 1 Bolívar 2009, 82.
- 2 Bolívar 2009, 339.
- 3 Euben 1999; March 2009a; Ackerley 2005; Mantena 2012; Ochoa Espejo 2012; von Vacano 2012.
- 4 Parel 2003, 12; Dallmayr 2004, 253. For alternative accounts of comparative political theory's normative applications, see also Jenco 2007; Godrej 2009; March 2009b; Freedman and Vincent 2013; Williams and Warren 2014.
- 5 Diamond 1997, Sachs 2001, Landes 1998.
- 6 Hall and Taylor 1996.
- 7 North and Thomas 1973; North 1989, 1990, 1991.
- 8 Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001, 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012.
- 9 Mahoney 2010.
- 10 North 1989, 1326–30; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 7–44; Mahoney 2010, 229–242; 254–7.
- 11 See also Lange, Mahoney, and vom Hau 2006; La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, and Shleifer 2008.
- 12 As late as 1750 Spanish America's largest cities (Mexico City, population 112,000; Lima, population 52,000; Havana, population 36,000) dwarfed British North America's (Boston, population 16,000; Philadelphia, population 13,000; New York, population 11,000); Elliott 2006, 262. Per capita incomes across the two empires converged gradually from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and then, after reaching a rough parity on the eve of independence, diverged sharply, leaving the average U.S. citizen almost five times richer (earning \$28,129 per year) than the average Latin American (earning \$5,844 per year) by the year 2000; Przeworski and Curvale 2008, 101–6.
- 13 Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2002, 1260.
- 14 North 1990; Lange, Mahoney, and vom Hau 2006; La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, and Shleifer 2008.
- 15 Coatsworth 1993; Engerman and Sokoloff 1997, 2000; Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001, 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012. Mahoney 2010 combines elements of each view, arguing that the size and complexity of pre-colonial populations determined the intensity with which imperial powers with different economic orientations (mercantilist or liberal) established institutions in different parts of the Americas.
- 16 As Przeworski notes, that institutions are “endogenous,” or sustained over time by self-reinforcing processes, is one of the new institutional literature's two definitive propositions; 2004, 165. See also Mahoney 2000, Pierson 2000.
- 17 Clemens and Cook 1999; Thelen 2003; Pierson 2004; Orren and Skowronek 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010.
- 18 Beside the works cited earlier, see also Collier and Collier 2002, 27–39; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007.
- 19 Engerman 1980; Mahoney 2000, 513; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007.
- 20 The problems involved are well canvassed in the large literature on counterfactuals in social science. See especially Fearon 1991; Tetlock and Belkin 1996; Ferguson 1999; Lebow 2000; Mahoney and Goertz 2004.
- 21 Lebow 2000, 558–60.
- 22 Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 352.
- 23 Unlike what we might call the “theoretical” account of possibility proposed by Mahoney and Goertz 2004, according to which “an outcome should be seen as possible if at least one independent variable of the theory under investigation predicts its occurrence” (657), here I offer an “empirical” account of possibility, according to which an outcome should be seen as possible if there is evidence that influential political actors seriously considered pursuing it.
- 24 The new institutionalist studies that have examined the aftermath of independence have, in keeping with the general thrust of the literature, argued that the Americas' variant *post*-colonial experiences, and their long-term consequences, were themselves the results of imperial institutions. See North, Summerhill, and Weingast 2000; Przeworski and Curvale 2008. Compare Prados de la Escosura 2008, who offers

- a better sense of the possibilities available at independence (503). I return to this argument in the next section of the article.
- 25 Indeed, the advantages of large size are so compelling that a basic puzzle in the political economy literature on the size of states is why there are separate states at all. See Bolton, Roland, and Spolaore 1996; Bolton and Roland 1997; Alesina and Spolaore 2003. For a broader consideration, see also Dahl and Tufté 1973.
 - 26 See Johnson 1982, Rueschemeyer and Evans 1985, Onis 1991, Evans 1995, Waldner 1999.
 - 27 A recent, revisionist historiography of the early American republic has substantially upended the long-accepted image of the United States as an exceptional, “stateless” society, demonstrating in numerous studies the indispensable impetus both state and federal governments gave to industrialization and economic growth throughout the nineteenth century. See Smith 1977; Kulikoff 1992; John 1997, 2006; Edling 2007; Balogh 2009.
 - 28 For late nineteenth century liberal reforms in Latin America, see Bushnell and Macaulay 1994.
 - 29 Elliott 1992, Greene 1986, LaCroix 2010.
 - 30 Anderson 1991, 47–65.
 - 31 Lalonde 2002, 24–60.
 - 32 For the influence of the U.S. Constitutional model, see Bushnell 1976; Kolesar 1990; Miller 1997; Gargarella 2005; Billias 2009, 105–141; for Simón Bolívar’s influence, see Méndez Reyes 1996.
 - 33 Shklar 1990, Levy 2006.
 - 34 Hendrickson 2003; Armitage 2004; de la Reza 2009. The literature on the reception of classical republican or “neo-Roman” political thought in the Americas is enormous. For the United States, see Pocock 1975 but compare Rahe 1992; for Spanish America, see the essays collected in Aguilar and Rojas 2002.
 - 35 For English Court thinking in the early American republic, see Elkins and McKittrick 1993, Edling 2003. For Bourbon reformism and *Gaditano* liberalism in the Spanish-American revolutions, see Benson 1966, MacLachlan 1988, Rodríguez O. 1998, Breña 2006, Guerra 2011. For Bentham’s disciples in Latin America, see McKennan 1978, Harris 1998. For European political economists in the Americas’ early independence, see McDonald 1979, Riesman 1987, Adelman 1999.
 - 36 In particular, as I have argued elsewhere, the nature of the social position shared by the Creole elites who led the independence movements throughout British and Spanish America can explain some points of ideological convergence that are not attributable to either inter-American or European intellectual influences; see Simon 2012b.
 - 37 Hamilton 1961–87, II, 401–2.
 - 38 Hamilton 1961–87, II, 665, emphasis in original.
 - 39 Hamilton 1961–87, IV, 187–195.
 - 40 Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2003, 52–59.
 - 41 *Ibid.*, 51. In a later number arguing for a similar point, Hamilton favorably cites Diderot’s analysis of the “German empire,” whose political disunity made the region’s “fine streams and navigable rivers . . . almost useless.” The point neatly anticipates new institutionalist critiques of geographic determinism; *ibid.*, 99.
 - 42 Hamilton 1961–87, IV, 187–195.
 - 43 In dealing a blow to the “arrogant pretensions of the European,” he crowed, Americans had “vindicate[d] the honor of the human race”; Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2003, 52.
 - 44 Hamilton 2001, 647–734.
 - 45 *Ibid.*, 670–1.
 - 46 See Smith 1977; Kulikoff 1992; John 1997, 2006; Edling 2007; Balogh 2009.
 - 47 For the Bourbon Reforms and their impact on the Americas in general, see MacLachlan 1988; Lynch 1989. For Argentina’s political history in the period surrounding independence, see Halperín Donghi 1975. For the intellectual background of Buenos Aires’ economic reformers, see Adelman 1999.
 - 48 Adelman 1999.
 - 49 Moreno 2007, 96.
 - 50 *Ibid.*, 108.
 - 51 Moreno in Romero and Romero 1977, I, 255.
 - 52 Moreno 2007, 38.
 - 53 *Ibid.*, 75–83, 81 for the quoted portion.
 - 54 Belgrano 1954.
 - 55 Rivadavia in Bentham 1838–43, IV, 592–3.
 - 56 Bolívar 1950, III, 541–4.
 - 57 Bolívar 2009, 82.
 - 58 Bolívar 1950, III, 696.
 - 59 The best account of Gran Colombia’s political history remains Bushnell 1970. For a more focused treatment of economic policy see McFarlane 1987, and for Bolívar’s economic thinking, see Lynch 2006, 159–66.
 - 60 Bolívar 2009, 75. For Bolívar’s classical republican account of economic dependence and political independence, see Simon 2012a.
 - 61 Cited in Bushnell 1970, 129–30 and 142.
 - 62 Bolívar 1950, II, 362–3.
 - 63 Bolívar 1950, II, 50–52.
 - 64 Bolívar 2009, 285.
 - 65 Humboldt 1822–36, I, 14–15.
 - 66 Brading 1991, 514–534.
 - 67 I adopt these terms from the classic account of Hale 1968.
 - 68 Mora [1834] 1987, III, 181–2.
 - 69 Alamán in Rivera 1987, 64–5.
 - 70 Alamán in Rivera 1987, 388–9.

- 71 Alamán in Rivera 1987, 76–77.
 72 Henderson 2007.
 73 North, Summerhill, and Weingast 2000; Przeworski and Curvale 2008.
 74 Hamilton 2001, 986.
 75 Bolívar 1950, III, 501.
 76 Alamán 1968, V, 567.
 77 Hofstadter 1969; Ackerman 2005.
 78 Lipset 1963, 43–4.
 79 Hendrickson 2009, *passim*, and especially 201.
 80 Banning 1978.
 81 Jefferson 1984, 449 and 454.
 82 See Halperín Donghi 1975, 308–376; Bushnell 1970, 287–318; Stevens 1991.
 83 Wood 2009, 692–6.
 84 Howe 2007, 367–410.
 85 Tocqueville 2004, 425.
 86 McPherson 1988, 47–77.
 87 Hendrickson 2009, 202.
 88 Majewski 2009.
 89 Macaulay 1986.
 90 Viotti da Costa 2000, 24–52.
 91 Bushnell and Macaulay 1994, 247–62.
 92 Bethell 1970.
 93 Leff 1997, 37–42.
 94 *Ibid.*, 42–57.
 95 *Ibid.*, 57–60.
 96 The acronym “BRICs,” for the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, was coined in O’Neill 2001.
 97 Marx [1867] from Tucker 1972, 193.
 98 While the top ten percent of earners in the United States took in 29.9 percent of gross national income in 2000, the same decile took 37.5 percent of GNI in Argentina, 38.4 percent in Peru, 41.4 percent in Mexico, 47.0 percent in Colombia, and 47.7 percent in Brazil; World Bank 2000.
 99 Skinner 1998, 112, 116–17.
 100 See, for example, Lastarria et al. 2013; José Martí 2005; Vaconcelos 2010; Prebisch 1959; and Zea 1999.
 101 Grandin 2006; Gobat 2013.
 102 See Mainwaring 2012 for a recent review and Ciccariello-Maher 2013 for a longer-term account of the popular politics leading up to Chávez’s election.
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