

argues that political, material, ecological, social and fiscal crises have played an important role in the process of assembling extractivism.

This is an important book that significantly contributes to our understanding of the foundations for high-intensity and capital-driven forms of resource extraction that are dominant in Latin America today. It is also a great example of the importance of adopting a long-term perspective for our understanding of the present in order to hopefully steer our future more effectively. I very much enjoyed reading it and I strongly recommend it.

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## **Peter Blanchard, *Fearful Vassals: Urban Elite Loyalty in the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata, 1776–1810***

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When trying to explain the origins of the crisis of Spanish rule in the Americas, two big-bang theories collide. Led by John Lynch, one of them found that dissent in the Spanish colonies increasingly expanded since the Spanish Bourbon kings introduced administrative, economic, military and religious reforms in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Since the Bourbon Reforms discriminated against the Creoles purely on the basis of their place of birth, discrimination was followed by discontent, which transformed into hostility and resulted in a separate identity for American-born Creoles. Eventually, all these feelings were directed at the Spaniards in the colonies and then at the Spanish rule itself. Reforms were successful in their results but fed anger, resistance and even rebellion.

The Bourbon Reforms' theory fitted perfectly into the official narratives of each of the Spanish American nations, which stated that the process of independence had started in 1810 as a result of the maturity of a Creole identity. Nevertheless, in the atmosphere of a renewed historiographical discussion promoted by the bicentennial of the French Revolution, François-Xavier Guerra revisited Lynch's thesis.

Guerra, who was writing about the crisis of the Spanish regime while the Soviet Union was collapsing, found that although both crises were preceded by reforms, their real impact in the Spanish world was not significant. Guerra stated that what triggered the end of the Spanish rule was not an internal reform but an external aggression. The invasion of the French troops in 1808 and the immediate abdication of the Spanish monarchs created a set of different reactions: first in Europe and then in the Americas and ultimately led to the birth of new nations in the two

continents. Guerra created a vigorous revisionist school of thought that scholars like Jaime Rodríguez and Roberto Breña, among others, have followed since then.

While not convinced that the Bourbon Reforms had a profound effect everywhere, Peter Blanchard believed that there must have been something happening before 1808 to explain the rapid change of behaviour throughout the colonies following the French invasion. However, as he analysed the *rioplatense* world, he found an absolute loyalty to Spain and the Crown. This startling discovery is the core of his book *Fearful Vassals: Urban Elite Loyalty in the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata, 1776–1810*.

Challenging the hypothesis of his thesis supervisor Lynch, Blanchard examines the bonds of loyalty in the viceroyalty of Río de la Plata from its creation in 1777 to the May Revolution of 1810. Based on the notion that urban centres were pivotal for Spanish rule in the Americas, Blanchard focused his study on the elites of three of the viceregal principal cities: Buenos Aires, the capital; Montevideo, the main port; and Córdoba, the educational and strategic centre.

The book is organised methodologically. In each chapter, Blanchard gives one reason to explain why *rioplatense* Creoles had no incentives for independence. In Chapter 1, Blanchard argues that urban elites remained loyal to the Crown as it guaranteed them both access to Spanish markets to sell their goods, and to non-Spanish suppliers who provided goods that Spain could not. Both Chapters 2 and 3 deal with status. The elites turned to the king either to maintain their position while keeping the masses in their place, or to solve their internal disputes, placing the monarch as the ultimate arbiter.

If Chapters 1–3 are written from a cost–benefit analysis perspective, Chapters 4–7 are then written from a perspective coming from fear. In Chapter 4, the author depicts how the Enlightenment, whose ideas led to the French Revolution, haunted the elites since it could infect lower classes and slaves.

Threats to the elites' position came not only from subversive ideas but also from internal actors in the viceroyalty. The topic of Chapters 5 and 6 is the racial menace, rooted in the growing number of slaves in the region and the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s, and from potential rebellions that could have erupted among Indigenous communities, as it happened in the Andean region in the 1780s. These fears, along with the threat posed by Portuguese incursions across the border from Brazil as described in Chapter 7, give Blanchard more reasons to explain why the majority of the influential inhabitants of the viceroyalty wanted to keep their valuable ties with the Spanish Crown.

Blanchard creates suspense on how he will argue the most controversial of his claims. As one immerses in a manuscript that flows smoothly, one wonders how the author will explain that *porteños'* self-confidence did not turn into a call for autonomy after the English invasions; and how he will explain that the *rioplatense* urban-elite loyalty turned so drastically to self-rule in 1810. Blanchard saves the last two chapters to answer these questions.

In Chapter 8, the author describes how one of the elite's fears became real. In 1806 and 1807, British expeditions occupied Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Since the invasions were both defeated by local residents with almost no assistance from Spain, some scholars pointed out that these events were the beginning of the undermining of Spanish rule in Río de la Plata. However, what Blanchard finds is

the opposite. Commitment to the Crown may have never been stronger. After the victories, Creoles restored the old system as quickly and firmly as possible. Everything changed with the French invasion and the abdication of Fernando VII in 1808. The loyalty to the king was then redirected to the gradual creation of new, national loyalties, the author states in the concluding chapter. Times changed rapidly and loyalties shifted.

Some of the arguments of the concluding chapter open new debates on the subject. If independence was not demanded in 1810 in Río de la Plata, unlike other parts of Spanish America, as Blanchard correctly points out, was it not then a strong desire for self-rule that derived from the self-confidence after the local victory over the British Army? The urban elites of Buenos Aires already knew how to negotiate with lower classes that were already a political group, without the need of the Spanish Crown. That is a crucial difference between Buenos Aires and the rest of the cities of the viceroyalty. This resulted in the *porteño* city, unlike any other places of Spanish America, remaining as the only place outside of royalist control since 1810.

*Fearful Vassals* is a passionate, persuasive book that comes as a new reinterpretation of the independence process. The book is beautifully written. With a structural elegance, Blanchard patiently explores the different reasons for the urban elites' loyalty. This book could be mandatory reading for scholars studying Spanish American independence. Based on a rich and intimate knowledge of the *rioplatense* world, this is a compelling work that reopens the discussion about the conventional narrative on the *porteño* exceptionalism.

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