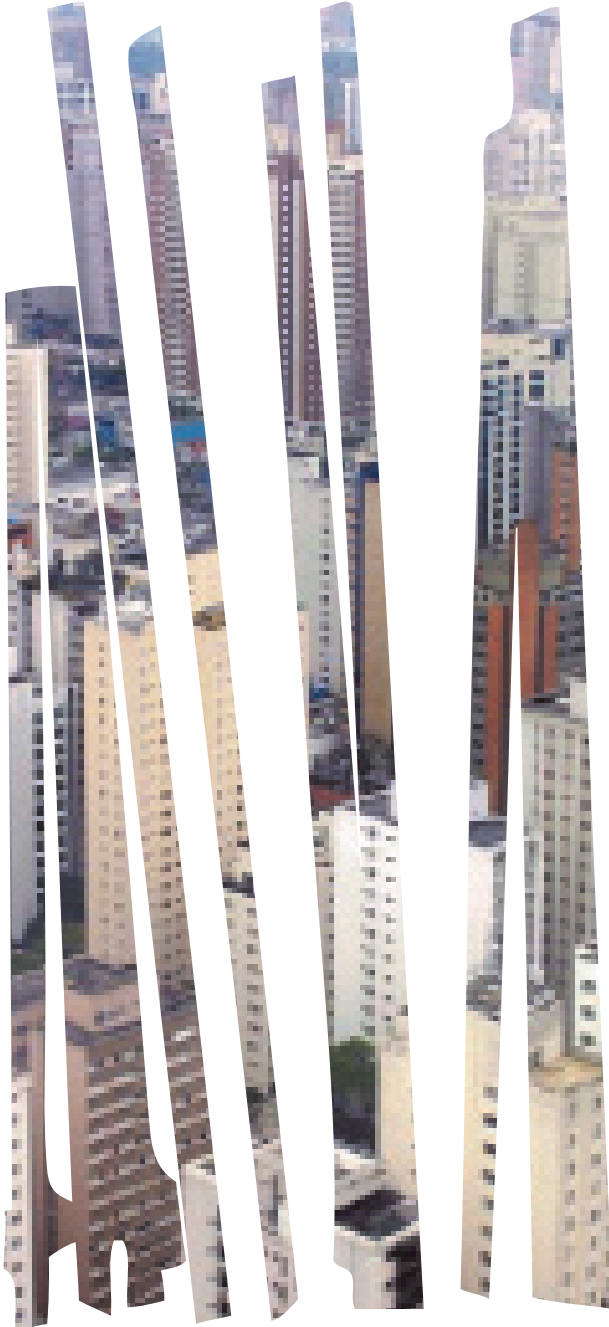# Political Citizenship, Equality, and Inequalities in the Formation of the Spanish American Republics

Hilda Sabato

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon political equality and inequalities during the nineteenth century, a period that witnessed the formation and transformation of new polities in the former Spanish colonial territories in America. There are different ways of addressing this question; in this essay, I have chosen the category of citizenship as a conceptual tool that will allow me to provide a specific focus to an otherwise broad and imprecise topic. This category is central to our contemporary political debates, but it was also part of the political concerns, languages, and practices of the nineteenth century, although with different connotations from our own.

Keywords: Citizenship | Political Equality | Republicanism

Biographical Notes

Hilda Sabato is Professor of History at the University of Buenos Aires and Research Fellow at the Argentine Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET). She is currently Vice President of the International Committee of Historical Sciences. She has been a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies (Princeton), the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (Stanford), the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. Since 2010, she is a Principal Investigator of the Network on Interdependent Inequalities in Latin America (desiguALdades.net). Her recent books include "Historia de las elecciones en la Argentina, 1805-2011", co-authored with Luciano De Privitelio, Marcela Ternavesio, and Ana Virginia Persello (Buenos Aires, 2011),"Buenos Aires en armas. La revolución de 1880" (Buenos Aires, 2008), "Pueblo y política. La construcción de la república" (Buenos Aires, 2005 and Madrid, 2010), and "La política en las calles. Entre el voto y la movilización. Buenos Aires 1862-1880" (Buenos Aires,1998 and Quilmes, 2004), published in English in 2001 as "The Many and the Few. Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires", Stanford.

Contents

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon political equality and inequalities during the nineteenth century, a period that witnessed the formation and transformation of new polities in the former Spanish colonial territories in America. In the early years of that century, the collapse of the Empire spelled the end of the former political organization of those territories, as well as of the social imaginary of the *Ancien Régime*. For centuries, the Spanish *monarquía* was understood as a body, itself made of other, natural, bodies articulated according to a strict hierarchy headed by the king. This representation of the kingdom was already challenged by other ways of understanding social relations, but it was the French invasion of the Iberian Peninsula and, above all, the captivity of the Bourbon king, which triggered a long-lasting political crisis that affected the very principles of the existing social order. New representations of the political community circulated widely, and led to the erosion of the former dominant hierarchic and corporate criteria of social organization. In the following decades, "equality" became a key political concept, as we shall see below.

There are different ways of addressing the topics I wish to deal with here. In this working paper, I have chosen the category of citizenship as a conceptual tool that will allow me to provide a specific focus to an otherwise broad and imprecise topic. This category is central to our contemporary political debates, but it was also part of the political concerns, languages, and practices of the nineteenth century, although with different connotations from our own. And, it has recently been widely used by scholars to discuss the political transformations that concern me here, which gives me a solid bibliographical starting point for my own explorations.[2]

Citizenship was a key institution in nineteenth century nation-building. In the sphere of principles and representations, it introduced the ideal of equality based upon rights, which – albeit in different versions – informed the social imaginary of several generations of Spanish Americans. At the same time, that institution played a central role in the realm of political practices. Thus, it provides a helpful observation point to address the issues of political equality and inequalities, as well as to reflect upon the forms of inclusion and exclusion from the polity in the new republics in the making.

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[2]   The present paper borrows heavily from a large number of works published in the last two decades on the political history of nineteenth-century Latin America. I have included a selected bibliography at the end of this paper.

2. Citizenship and Nation-Building after the Collapse of the Spanish Empire

The nineteenth century opened with a radical political transformation in Spanish America. In the first two decades, the Spanish Empire collapsed; its former American parts disjointed and severed the colonial bond. In the ensuing history of the formation of new polities, attempts at nation-building followed different directions, and the political map changed many times during the post-revolutionary decades. Despite this diversity, the polities in the making all adopted, sooner rather than later, republican forms of government based on the principle of popular sovereignty. And even though that principle was already circulating widely in the West, its inclusion in republican formulae that were tried on a vast scale in Spanish America was, if not an original move, one that proved quite bold and risky. The region became a field for a formidable political experiment.

Once the Spanish monarchy fell, there followed a contested, at times chaotic, double tiered, process. First: how to reconstruct a political order on the basis of popular sovereignty? This was both a theoretical and a very practical matter. Secondly: how to shape the new polities ("nations"), which were to be the sources of that sovereign power as well as the domains for its application? There was no simple answer to these questions. The model of the modern, unified nation, consisting of equal and autonomous individuals, circulated early on in the nineteenth century, but it came in many different versions and experienced successive transformations. All the while, other, corporate and plural notions of the nation coexisted and competed with the new proposals; first among them: the old Spanish doctrine of the *pactos* or covenants, which understood the nation (the Spanish Monarchy) as a hierarchic compound of multiple *cuerpos*, each of them tied to the king by means of a specific covenant that established privileges and obligations.

The new concepts, however, soon prevailed among the early revolutionary elites who sought to break with the colonial political order. The first constitutions bear witness to those alignments. They introduced the model of the modern nation, already adopted by the Spanish Constitution of Cadiz in 1812, according to which the sovereign power once attributed to the king, rather than reverting to the plural, concrete *pueblos*, as the covenant theory sustained, went back to the singular, abstract people or *pueblo*, constituted by the modern citizens. This model introduced political representation as a basic principle of government. François-Xavier Guerra (1992) has perceptively shown that popular sovereignty, representation, and nation then became closely related concepts.

In this way, the definition of citizenship came together with nation-building. The introduction of this category presumed, in Pierre Rosanvallon's words, "a complete break with the traditional views of the body politic" as "political equality marks the final entry in the world of individuals" (Rosanvallon 1992: 14). In his path-breaking work "Le sacré du citoyen" (1992), Rosanvallon points to the radical novelty brought about by the introduction of political equality, which was substantially different from civil and social equality. The former, he argues, was foreign to the world-view both of Christianity and of early liberalism; it could only be formulated within the context of an atomistic notion of the social, and an abstract equivalence among men.

In the Spanish American republics-to-be, the adoption of the institution of political citizenship entailed, in fact, the creation of an abstract universe of equals, who enjoyed the same rights (and obligations) in the new polities, and a fracture vis-à-vis the criteria that presided over the colonial socio-political order. The actual history of that institution proved more complex, but nevertheless, the principle adopted would have decisive effects in the nation-building processes triggered after independence. In what follows, I will briefly discuss the normative, as well as the practical, dimensions of citizenship, and relate them to how equality and inequalities came to function in the political realm.

3.   Defining "Citizen"

The representative model was introduced early on in the revolutionary years, together with the modern notion of the "nation". Even if its acceptance was far from smooth, sooner rather than later the principle of representative government prevailed. Hence elections became a key aspect both in the foundation of political power and in the constitution of the new polities. Spanish America became a testing field: there was little experience regarding elections in colonial times, and even if some external models were available, the locals copied and innovated, improvised, and combined new and old ways, in order to regulate elections but also to make them happen.

In normative terms, the introduction of representation required that both terms of the relationship be defined: the representatives and the represented, an operation that implied a definition regarding the borders of the polity in the making. In the post-revolutionary decades, the liberal figure of the citizen – the abstract and universal individual, free and equal to the rest – often overlapped with other notions based on the more traditional ideas of the body politic that evoked the institutions of colonial and even pre-colonial times: the *pueblos*, the *comunidades*, and above all, the *vecino* (neighbor or resident). Yet these concepts tended to meld with, be subsumed in, and wither away in favor of, the polysemic term "citizen".

Who were these "citizens" involved in representative government? Their boundaries, as defined by the scope of the right to vote, proved extremely variable. Yet from the very early days after independence, in most places the right of suffrage was widely extended among the male population. All free, non-dependent, adult males were enfranchised. Exclusion was associated to the lack of autonomy, and – but for a few exceptions[3] – no significant property or literacy qualifications were required. Nor were ethnic distinctions included. The requisites of age, sex (women were not even mentioned, they were "naturally" out of bounds), and residence were common to all areas, while in some of them, dependent males (servants, *domésticos*, single sons living with their fathers) were also excluded. Slaves were ruled out everywhere, but not Indians and free blacks. In that way, the hierarchies of colonial society were partially erased in favor of new political categories. In the following decades, these initial boundaries were often put into question, but proposals to limit the suffrage seldom found their way into law and, when they did, it was only for short periods of time.

When compared with other countries of Europe and some states of the United States of America in the first half of the nineteenth century, this was indeed a very broad definition of citizenship. And it remained broad for the rest of the century. Although universal male suffrage as such was only adopted in some places, like Mexico and Argentina, in the 1850s, the right to vote was, but with few exceptions, relatively extensive, and for most of the region, the more widespread criterion for exclusion continued to be the lack of autonomy.

The right to vote defined the active citizen. At the same time, active citizenship implied the right and obligation to bear arms in defense of the country, and these were associated with participation in the militia. This institution, which developed in several places into a National Guard, was not just a military force. It represented the people in arms, a classical trope of the republican tradition, and one of the pillars of the Anglo-Saxon and of the French revolutionary political models. There was also a colonial precedent. Since the reign of Charles the Third, the Crown had organized local militia of *vecinos* for defense purposes. But it was the post revolutionary republican governments that firmly established the institution in connection with the new definition of the body politic.[4]

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[3] The most notable exception (but not the only one) was Chile (Valenzuela 1985).

[4] For the best part of the century, these militias coexisted with standing armies. They took part in the international wars fought during the century, in the protection of the frontiers, in the internal struggles between regional and political factions, and in most of the revolutions, both as rebels and repressors. Participation of the militia in the latter was related to the ideal of the people in arms. In republican terms, the use of force was considered legitimate against a government that abused power: Acting against a despotic authority was a not only a right but also an obligation, a civic duty. Latin American revolutions were often grounded on that right. In the political road to power, where elections played a

These militias were formed by the citizens, the very same citizens that made up the electorate. Qualifications required for participating in the militia were usually similar to those established for voting, although the latter was often voluntary while the former was mandatory: all adult men were subject to recruitment. Although the close association between the citizen in arms and the citizen voter can be traced both to the Anglo-Saxon and the French traditions, the former's model of the citizen-property owner never prevailed. In the 1840s, the ideal of a militia integrated by *gente decente*, who could pay for their arms and uniforms, and choose their own officers, was put forward with some success in Venezuela, Chile, and Peru. But the prevailing definition of the militias opened the way to the participation of large sectors of the male population, including workers and peasants, Indians and free blacks (and sometimes even slaves).

A careful study of citizenship should include other dimensions, most notable the civic and the fiscal, but for the sake of brevity, in what follows I will limit my considerations to these two key aspects – the electoral and the armed. As seen above, in defining the citizen voter and the citizen in arms, the republican normative introduced crucial changes to the existing socio political order. The adoption of a broad notion of the citizen led to the erasure of former categories, and to the actual dismissal of the model of the citizen as property owner. Yet although in most of the nations-in-the-making all free adult men were granted equal political rights, these were not, strictly speaking, universal. Besides the exclusion of those considered to be dependent from others (women, children, slaves, and sometimes servants), other limitations existed, and – somewhat like in revolutionary France – they were primarily related to the establishment of moral, material, and juridical boundaries to the body politic. Those who had committed crimes were banned, as were those who did not belong to the community – which in turn meant residence but in some cases also a "honest way of life" (*modo honesto de vivir*).

The topic of education came up many times in public debate. The actual citizens often proved quite different from the blueprint put forward by the enlightened elites of the post-revolutionary era, and were subject to their critical appraisal. The main proposal to solve this contradiction between expectations and reality was the spread of education. In several countries, literacy was included as a requirement in regulations regarding citizenship, but with deferral clauses, which kept postponing this requisite for decades on end. Despite the fact that projects to extend education to the mass of the people never quite materialized, dissatisfaction with the existing men-cum-citizens seldom led to constrain the theoretical boundaries of the polity based on education.

prominent legal role, the military mobilization of the people could follow, considered to be a legitimate step in a continuum of available political actions that could culminate in a *levantamiento*.

4.   Construction of a Citizenry

The above mentioned normative frameworks provided the basic parameters for the coming to being of representative government, and the establishment of republics based on the principle of popular sovereignty. Yet like in most areas of the world at the time, political practices did not strictly correspond to the norms. In order to explore the ways of citizenship and of the construction of a citizenry, recent works have looked into the many different procedures, mechanisms, and actions of actual political life. They show a wide range of different practices, but a shared feature comes forward: after the revolutions of independence, and even where the norms were restrictive, very broad and diverse sectors of the population were mobilized, and became involved in the political life of the new polities in the making. For years, conventional wisdom saw nineteenth century politics exclusively as an elite affair, which left the rest of the population aside or barely included on the margins. Historians now claim, on the contrary, that the shaping of the Latin American republics involved not just elites and would-be elites; it also implicated larger sectors of the population in politically significant forms of organization and action. These were both formal, regulated, and usually controlled from above – like the electoral machines and the militia networks – as well as informal and more autonomous vis-à-vis the elites. In this working paper, I will only (and briefly) refer to the former, which were linked to the two dimensions of citizenship mentioned above: the citizen voter and the citizen in arms.

For most of the century, elections were the main road to public office. Even where and when military force was deployed as a means to dispute political power, success in that field required legitimization at the ballot box. In the context of these representative republics, even the most successful revolutionary leaders and popular *caudillos* had to confirm their dominion by winning elections. The key to both civic and military performance was the creation and mobilization of clienteles, formed mainly by men who belonged to the working classes. The ample base of the suffrage provided the leadership with the basic potential human resources for the creation of such forces. But these had to be organized in order to participate in the generally tumultuous and often violent elections. In that context, actual voters were far removed from the blueprint of the autonomous, individual citizen. Rather, they belonged to the collective bodies that formed the clientele or retinue of the political bosses. In this way, electoral practices contributed to the articulation of political networks that incorporated various groups of people into the electoral game. These networks had strong vertical components, but they did not necessarily reproduce the hierarchies of the social structure, and if the relationship between leadership and followers could eventually be rooted in social bonds, most of the time they were mainly forged and developed in the political realm.

The prominence of the leaders was not necessarily a consequence of personal fortune or previous social standing, but rather, of the work they did in creating these political and electoral networks.

A wide variety of men participated in the different echelons of the electoral machines that produced the votes, generating a dense web of exchanges in the process. Manipulation, political patronage and control always played an important part in this story, but also conflict and negotiation. Men (and occasionally women) from very different social and ethnic backgrounds took part in those networks, which also were the site for the construction of political traditions and leaderships.

Like the electoral networks, militias constituted hierarchical organizations with a broad base held together by vertical links of military subordination nurtured by deference and paternalism, as well as by horizontal bonds of male comradeship and *esprit de corps* among their members. The prevailing pattern of recruitment was similar to the one described for electoral forces, and while participation in the militias probably involved more people than voting, both attracted basically the same kind of people. Among the rank and file, the great majority of the recruits came from the lower echelons of society, both urban and rural. Even though men from all classes had to enroll, most of the well-to-do could skip the service, and only the young and politically ambitious among them sometimes chose to participate in positions of command that could yield prestige and a potential retinue. Higher officers usually belonged to the upper classes, but other commanding posts could easily be in the hands of men coming from the new intermediate sectors of society, such as artisans, shopkeepers, hacienda overseers, among others. There were, moreover, strong connections between electoral and militia networks, which sometimes overlapped. The organized structure of the latter was very often used to mobilize and coordinate electoral forces, and their armed skills deployed on election days in the factional strife that frequently tainted the polls with violence.

5.   Citizenship, Equality and Inequality

Most of the political practices developed within the framework of the new republics in the making were related to the institution of citizenship, which presumed political equality. At the same time, however, these practices generated spaces of inclusion and participation that were stratified, that is, unequal – such as the electoral "machines" or the militia networks. These inequalities resulted from the dynamics of politics itself, of its actions and institutions, and produced new hierarchies that structured the political realm. Briefly, then, political life founded upon the principle of equality generated

spaces of participation that were both broad and stratified, unequal yet inclusive, within boundaries that were permanently in dispute.

The mobilization triggered by the incorporation of large sectors of the population into the political game involved negotiations and contacts between the many and the few, but it also bred conflict. At the same time, it paved the way for the weaving of horizontal articulations among those sectors, which could devise and put forward their own demands. And although their chances of success were limited, very often it was the case that those in power could not easily ignore the claims stemming from below, especially when political competition required the recruitment of followers to win an election, stage a rebellion, or actively support a particular cause.

In conclusion: the nineteenth century was a republican century in Spanish America. It started with a radical gesture: the establishment of political equality among the members of the new nation in the making, a move that sought to break former ascriptions in communal structures and strata. This gesture opened the way to the mobilization and massive regrouping of peoples that came to occupy a new place in the polity. At the same time, new political hierarchies came to being, which differed from those of colonial origin. These inequalities were not incompatible with the republican order; on the contrary, they were their creatures. In this context, the distance between equality of rights and actual inequalities could give rise to sporadic tensions, but it did not put the legitimacy of the system into question. During the nineteenth century, there were no fundamental challenges to the republican principles in Spanish America, as there were in several of the European experiences. The new century, however, would bring that consensus to an end. It opened with the reaffirmation of the same principle of equality imposed during the republican decades, but in a new key: politics had to mean equality not only in relation to the normative framework of rights but also in the vast realm of practices, which required the introduction of democratic forms of organization and government. By then, political democracy had become a shared expectation, and would soon pose severe challenges to the Latin American polities of the twentieth century.

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[5]   This is a selection of recent works (mostly books) that study Spanish American political transformations in the nineteenth century. I have not included the dozens of books and articles published in 2010 on account of the Bicentennial of Independence, which focus mainly on the first two decades of that century.

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Contact

desiguALdades.net
Freie Universität Berlin
Boltzmannstr. 1
D-14195 Berlin, Germany

Tel: +49 30 838 53069
www.desiguALdades.net
e-mail: contacto@desiguALdades.net

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