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Introduction: Global Horizons and Local Interests in the Era of the Constitution of Cadiz

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Writing from London to his brother Fernando, who lived in their native Seville, the expatriate Joseph Blanco White commented on the dire domestic and international situation in which Spain found itself in 1823. In April, a French army invaded the country to overturn the constitutional regime re-introduced in 1820 and to restore the absolutist government of the king Ferdinand VII. Fernando reported to Joseph that some Spaniards hoped Britain would oppose the French forces and defend the constitutional government. But Joseph quickly dashed those hopes. While he assured Fernando that Spanish liberals had no better friend than the government of his adopted home, Britain could do nothing for Spain because “Spain is and will be divided against itself for many years.” And the source of that division was not only the monarch and the reactionaries who gathered around him but also the constitution that Ferdinand VII and the French sought to wipe out: “Years ago I wrote, and have never stopped repeating, that unless essential points in the Constitution of 1812 were corrected it would cause the ruin of the kingdom, even without the intervention of foreigners. But a poorly understood firmness, if not obstinacy, has blinded the Cortes and those who set the tone.”¹ Blanco White’s affirmation of his dislike for the Constitution of 1812, “the foolish Constitution of Cadiz”² he called it in another letter to his brother, more than a decade after its ratification reminds us of the trajectory of the constitution and of the political and social turmoil that accompanied it since the moment of its birth, not only in Spain, the object of Joseph and Fernando’s conversation, but also in broad swathes of the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the topics explored by the authors of the following articles.

The impetus for this collection of studies was the two-hundredth anniversary of the Constitution of Cadiz, promulgated on the 19th of March 1812. Between the 22nd and 25th of March 2012, dozens of historians of Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and the Mediterranean gathered at Tufts University for the annual

¹ Letter dated 7 Paradise Row, Chelsea, 31 May 1823, Blanco White Family Collection, Princeton University Library, C0075 (hereafter BWFC), series 3, subseries 3A, box 7, file 3.

² Letter dated 7 Paradise Row, Chelsea, 24 July 1823, BWFC, *ibid.* On Blanco White’s clashes with Spanish liberals during the Cortes of Cadiz, many of them friends before he left Spain in 1810, see Martin Murphy, *Blanco White: Self-Banished Spaniard* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 61-93.

meeting of the Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. Among the more than 100 papers presented were several panels dedicated to the Constitution of Cadiz, for which the authors were asked to consider it from particular vantage points: on the one hand, its role in both undermining and strengthening slavery in the Spanish American colonies, and on the other, its impact on constitutional debates and political practices beyond peninsular Spain. While these themes are front and center, readers will find several others cutting across the different studies.

As is now well known, Spain's War of Independence, the Constitution of Cadiz, and the Spanish American revolutions crippled slavery in large parts of the overseas empire, while reinforcing it in others.³ The wars in the colonies attracted important support from enslaved people, fighting for both independence and royalist forces, to such a degree that revolutionary leaders such as Simón Bolívar felt compelled to ban the slave trade and to enact gradual emancipation laws upon achieving independence. The constitution played a key role in this process. The language of freedom and liberty circulating through Spain and the colonies during this era could inspire enslaved people to spread rumors of imminent emancipation, as occurred in Puerto Rico and Cuba in 1812. Such rumors, however, were unfounded, even though Spanish and American deputies did debate proposals to abolish the slave trade and slavery in 1811. In general, the Constitution of Cadiz tacitly encouraged the persistence of slavery and slave trading, its framers acceding to the demands and interests of the powerful Havana planter class by abstaining from any action against the emerging sugar and slavery complex in Cuba.

The articles by Rafael Marquese, Tâmis Parron, Joselyn Almeida, and Charles Nicholas Saenz offer important insights into the tensions around the problems of slavery and freedom in the era of the Constitution of Cadiz. Though the constitution did nothing to challenge the slave trade or colonial slavery, in spite of the interventions of Agustín de Argüelles and José Miguel Guridi Alcocer in the 1811 debates, Havana planters remained wary of constitutional government in the metropole, as Marquese and Parron explain in detail. Comparing the attitudes of Havana's elite to those of slave holders in the two other great American slave societies of the nineteenth century, Brazil and the United States, they find that the Cubans were the most cautious about constitutions. In independent Brazil and the U.S. slave owners drafted the constitutions and took

³ See Dale Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Landham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2004); and Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom: Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

commanding roles in the governance of their countries: slavery and constitutional government went hand in hand. But in Cuba, memories of the antislavery proposals made in 1811 and their indirect links to the Aponte Rebellion of 1812 in the island led the planter elite to equate constitutional government with abolitionism and disorder.

Almeida and Saenz's articles show that the Havana planters might have good reasons for distrusting some Spanish liberals but that they could nonetheless have confidence in the support of the peninsular political elite. Almeida explores how Joseph Blanco White imbibed the influence of British antislavery, at the height of its powers during the War of Independence and its aftermath, and penned a scathing condemnation of Spanish slave-trading and Cuban plantation slavery.⁴ Blanco White tried to elicit the empathy of his Spanish readers by asking them to imagine the suffering of African captives, taken prisoner in Africa and forcibly, and cruelly, transported to Cuba, an experience parallel to their own travails under French rule. The crisis of the Spanish imperial order thus led Blanco White to promote a universal version of freedom based on empathy with the plight of others. In contrast, Saenz demonstrates that the political languages of slavery and liberation in Spain during the war against the French did not necessarily address slavery as it actually existed in the colonies; Spaniards were adept at distinguishing between their own suffering and liberation and that of colonial slaves. As he explains, slavery in early peninsular liberalism connoted a situation of political decadence that preceded the French invasion. When Spaniards rose against the foreign occupiers they reclaimed the liberties that traditionally governed Spanish society. However, their liberties were particular and historically rooted in the metropole; colonial societies had quite different histories, rules, and expectations. Freedom for Spaniards by no means indicated freedom for all, as Blanco White would have it.⁵

The travels and the impact of the constitution beyond peninsular Spain are the topics under discussion in the articles by Claudia Guarisco, Gabriel Paquette, and John Davis. Guarisco, like Marquese and Parron, focuses on the responses to the new charter in the Spanish colonies but in settings quite different from the

⁴ His *Bosquexo del comercio en esclavos y reflexiones sobre este tráfico considerado moral, política, y cristianamente* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1814).

⁵ This distinction between European liberty and colonial slavery was not limited to the Spanish Empire. See the explorations of this divergence in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Josep M. Fradera, "L'esclavage et la logique constitutionnelle des empires," *Annales. Histories, Sciences Sociales* 63 (2008), 533-60; and Miranda Frances Spieler, *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

emergent plantation society of Cuba. What impact did the constitutional order, as embodied in municipal governments, have on indigenous conceptions of politics in the two traditional cores of the Spanish Empire: Mexico and Peru? Guarisco finds that the answers vary greatly because of the pre-constitutional social, economic, and institutional regimes of these colonies. The key distinctions were deeply rooted in the economies of the two regions. In the Valley of Mexico, “commercial interactions” created a “common cultural horizon” that connected Indians, mestizos, and Spaniards and facilitated the exercise of power on the local level after 1812. In contrast Indians in the Intendancy of Lima “did not share any sense of community” with other social groups because of their economic and institutional isolation. The introduction of the Constitution of 1812 only exacerbated long-standing animosities among different strata of colonial society.

Countries once in the Spanish orbit also felt the influence of the Constitution of Cadiz. The Portuguese and Italian revolutionaries of the 1820s looked to Cadiz as a possible model for their own states. Gabriel Paquette, echoing Saenz’ description of old regime Spain, notes that Portugal was a corporate society and that its political culture was made up of distinct bodies and institutions in competition with one another for power, including the Cortes and the Crown. On the eve of the revolutionary upheavals in Europe, Portuguese writers vehemently debated the balance of power and prerogatives, some advocating a greater role for the Cortes, others demanding ever greater powers for the Crown. During the revolutionary 1820s, those who favored a sovereign and powerful Cortes embraced the Constitution of Cadiz, which had hemmed in royal power. But their conservative opponents were defiant, insisting that the Crown had always played a central role in Portuguese political life and that the kingdom already benefited from an unwritten constitution. For them, the Constitution of Cadiz was an unnecessary and unwelcome intrusion. By the middle of the decade, the conservatives had largely prevailed as elsewhere in Europe, forcing liberals to accept for the time being the quite limited *Carta* of 1826, which enhanced royal power at the expense of representative bodies. Thanks to the conservative backlash, the Constitution of Cadiz would cease to exert influence in the neighboring Iberian country during its protracted transition to constitutional government (much like Spain’s).

It suffered a similar ascent and decline in Italy in the same decade. Italian liberals drew inspiration from the Constitution of Cadiz, believing that it provided them with the means by which to head off the counter-revolutionary forces in their societies. As John Davis shows, Italians hoped that the Spanish model “offered a compromise between a political project that was monarchist (constitutional monarchy) but representative and anti-aristocratic (single

chamber).” Moreover, it “offered guarantees to the Catholic Church,” a crucial compromise because the clergy had been instrumental in whipping up anti-French *and* anti-liberal popular insurgencies at the end of the eighteenth century. Even if the revolutionaries in the north (Piedmont) and south (Naples and Sicily) feared popular counter-revolution at home, they found attractive the anti-imperial origins of the Constitution of Cadiz, born as it was in the resistance to the Napoleonic Empire. The memory of French domination and its centralizing ambitions remained vivid in the 1820s but Italians (and Greeks) were now anxious about an even more implacable imperial foe: Great Britain, which after the defeat of Napoleon exercised economic and naval hegemony in the Mediterranean. To its foreign admirers, the Constitution of Cadiz offered hope for a “liberal international” that would countervail Britain, a brief chapter in the history of the revolutionary Mediterranean that, as Davis notes, Italian nationalists had practically forgotten at mid-century when they again took up arms, now inspired by leaders such as Mazzini who were contemptuous of a Spain locked into a constitutional order controlled by the Crown and the conservative Moderate Party.

A leading scholar of the Constitution of Cadiz and its era has recently observed that: “Cadiz ... was not the only place where formulas for recomposing the Hispanic corps were produced.”⁶ As these articles show, far from Cadiz Indians in new municipal governments in the environs of Lima and Mexico City, expatriates writing and publishing in London, and slave holders in mansions and meeting rooms in Havana appropriated, revised, pondered, and rejected Cadiz’ solutions to the political crisis opened in 1808. Some grasped at freedom for themselves and for all peoples, just as others justified traditional and emergent inequalities despite speaking the language of liberation. These works also demonstrate that what originated as a cure for the afflictions of the Hispanic body politic traversed imperial and national boundaries. The Constitution of Cadiz’ transnational career was intense but brief, thwarted by conservative opposition at home and by the overweening economic and military power of Europe’s hegemons. After the 1820’s, constitutional horizons were more circumscribed as the cosmopolitan, and imperial, dreams of a liberal international or of a global Hispanic nation were unable to withstand the variety of political and economic interests unleashed and transformed during the revolutionary era.

⁶ José M. Portillo Valdés, *Crisis atlántica: autonomía e independencia en la crisis de la monarquía hispana* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2006), 24.