



V CHAM International Conference “Frontiers of Humanity and Beyond: towards new critical understandings of Borders”. Working Papers.

PANEL 11 – TRANS-IMPERIAL CIRCULATION OF MODERN POLITICS

ORGANISER: François Godicheau, University of Toulouse (France)

WORKING PAPER N.º 8

POLÍTICS WITHOUT BOUNDARIES AT THE EDGE OF AN OLD REGIME: THE REVOLUTIONARY JUNTAS OF 1808 IN SPAIN⁵⁶

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the notion of limit or frontier in the sphere of “the political” in general and of formal politics, in particular, by studying a historical process at the origins of modern history in Spain.

As coined by Alessandro Pizzorno (taking inspiration from Carl Schmitt), the notion of “politics unbound” tries to capture a context in which all aspects and dimensions of community life are regarded *sub specie politicae* (under the form of politics), and thus potentially subjected to collective decision-making through deliberation. Historically such contexts relate to states of exception, in which the existing order is challenged by overflowing situations that spur the creation of new collective identities marked by political values and referents.

The paper addresses a situation such occurred in early 19th-century Spain (and its colonial domains in America) with the formation of so-called *Juntas* in many cities and towns throughout the country. Triggered in response of a power vacuum due to the absence of the legitimate king, the shaping and performance of urban *juntas* echoed traditions of collective self-organization and popular protests throughout the *ancien régime*, yet also brought about novel experiences urged by the successful takeover of local institutions by the mobilized populace. A critical precondition for the collective military effort, the *juntas* can be interpreted in the light of a perspective that addresses subjects as

⁵⁶ Editors’ note: Working papers from the V CHAM International Conference are preliminary research drafts intended to stimulate discussion and critical comment. They are not peer-reviewed. Authors are responsible for the accuracy of the contents and for any errors. Conclusions should also be considered provisional. Comments and suggestions are welcome and should be directed to the authors.

being converted into “political animals” by resorting to the reflexive power of politics, through which the political sphere in turn expands or contracts its instituted frontiers.

Keywords

Politics – the political – friend/enemy – boundaries – reflexive power – Old Regime – Spain – constitutional crisis – collective action – self-government – popular participation

Introduction: The boundaries of politics and beyond

The idea that politics has boundaries, and that these can be created, and recreated or transgressed, is deeply embedded in Western culture (Pizzorno 1987). Indeed, politics or “the political” is, following Carl Schmitt's seminal definition, the quintessential boundary-setting mechanism: the separation between friend and foe is consubstantial to politics (Schmitt [1932] 1996). However, the number and type of borders that concern politics is not exhausted by this definition: it shows the functioning of politics only within its own sphere of action.

On the other hand, the maximum deployment of the sphere of politics normally coincides with crises of some kind of traditional order that lead to revolutionary processes, and paradigmatically with the dismantling of the *ancien régime*. In these scenarios, a change in the content or substantive composition of politics is taken for granted, originating in the transformation of the foundations of sovereignty – the shift from the divine right of kings to any formulas of non-transcendentalist sovereignty, which presuppose and/or promote a subject with the legitimacy to contribute to communal self-government. In the case of the end of the Old Regime, this is seen as the passage to modern politics, a term used to indicate that the sphere of politics acquires, on the one hand, autonomy as a dimension of community life, and on the other, centrality in the order emerging from the crisis of the traditional society (Fernández Sebastián 2005). Modern politics is defined by a tension between the formats of representation and the mechanisms of participation enabled by Liberalism, which are potentially overflowing due to the struggles for recognition activated by a new subject of politics –the citizen– who embodies a language centred on rights and liberties, and conceives of himself or herself as an individual.

It is no small thing to say about modern politics that it rises as a sphere of its own and that it is modified in its substantial content. And yet, perhaps this set of changes does not adequately capture the depth of the transformations that took place in the crisis of the Old Regime in relation to politics. For the above-mentioned views are based on a more

or less implicit common presupposition, which is that politics is a sphere of order and community life that contains itself: it can undergo internal transformations and shifts in status, but it retains its essential contours, its logic being that of the distinction between ally and adversary, who can be defined as either an agonist or classified as an antagonist to be excluded (Mouffe 2005). These would be the boundaries that are made and unmade in the establishment of modern politics.

What I argue in this paper is that politics also experiences another genuine phenomenon that does not occur in other spheres of social life: the overflowing of its conventional boundaries as a sphere within any given order. This singular characteristic is the effect of a power consubstantial to politics, which Alessandro Pizzorno has called the “reflexive power of politics” (Pizzorno 1987), originating in the appropriation by subjects of a set of interpretative resources. As a function of this reflexive power, other spheres of community life, which until then have been treated according to established conventions or following instituted norms, become subject to polemic and dispute; and eventually to collective deliberation, which is the essential core of political action.

The reflexive power of politics has often been treated under another name, namely “politicisation” (Palonen 2003). However, the use of this category does not serve to distinguish the perspective I am pointing out here: politicisation is usually understood as the subjects' awareness of the relevance of politics, that is, the taking of a position with respect to the field of politics, the established powers and the individual's capacity to intervene in political processes. But left as it is, the category rather underlines and emphasises the borders of the political sphere, and at most serves to point out that politics appeals to the subjects, forcing them to deal with it without questioning the contours of this sphere.

Politicisation is not only ambiguous but also leaves unexplained the very process it describes; it is something that happens, yet about which the category itself does not provide any understanding: politicisation must in turn be explained as the result of a process, which implies the use of other categories. More appropriate is the perspective that politics provides a series of resources that allow subjects to give meaning to the content and forces that make up the sphere of politics. This use of interpretative resources occurs at the individual level, although it is impracticable without reference to a set of values and referents whose meaning is shared by entire populations, in the form of cultures. And there is also another level of politics that is itself collective in nature, which is the exercise of deliberation, decision-making (Dryzek 2002).

The focus of this presentation is how politics brings into discussion and deliberation other areas of community life outside of politics, which under normal circumstances are fixed by convention or instituted in the form of more formal rules. This facet of politics allows us to question and break with the teleology that accompanies modern historical dynamics, exacerbated by such distinctions as direct versus delegated democracy, or that of revolution.

The 1808 Juntas in Spain as boundless politics

In the spring of 1808, some major cities on the Iberian peninsula witnessed very broad-based community mobilisations that culminated in the seizure of local power (Carantoña 2012). Despite occurring as sudden shocks and concentrated in a fairly short period of time, they were far from being spontaneous movements: the urban protests of 1808 were quite strategically organised (Fraser 2008, 124-153). They were usually led by individuals previously involved in the atmosphere of protest and conspiracy that surrounded the so-called Mutiny of Aranjuez in March, which led to the dismissal of the hitherto –and over a decade– strongman at the court of Charles IV, Manuel de Godoy. In fact, the spring cycle of mobilisation is inseparable from the context of the previous upheaval, which points to a process of “politicisation” in the leadership that had been going on for a long time.

One difference between these two contexts is that from May onwards, the central power that had been the scene of the March protest collapsed – hence the spring mobilisations adopted a decentralised format, spreading throughout the peninsula. The other, no less important, was the definition of an enemy external to the community – the Napoleonic troops – in a process of utter resignification that ultimately triggered the urban mobilisations (Hoquellet 2001). These extended throughout the country in the wake of the popular uprising in the capital and court, Madrid, and following the news of the Bourbons' renunciation of the throne in favour of the Bonaparte family.

The definition of an invader is an obvious example of the friend/foe distinction, the essential mechanism of the political; indeed, Carl Schmitt interpreted the formation of the Spanish guerrillas in the War of Independence as the pioneering example of a sovereign power for communal self-defence, and in that sense, a quintessential expression of the emergence of a collective identity by the radical exclusion of some other (Schmitt [1966] 2013). In this case, such collective identity would be the Spanish nation.

However, there is a missing piece in this whole interpretation: it moves almost automatically from cultural resignification to military self-organisation. In order for the guerrilla to take shape, a political process had to take place beforehand, which led community by community to decant local power in favour of involvement in the defence of the Bourbon dynasty and against the invasion of a foreign army. The upshot of this process was the formation of urban *juntas*, a city-scale phenomenon of self-government with projection over the territory, which drew its legitimacy from the so-called “deposit of sovereignty”, a legal figure that was part of the repertoire of measures to be enabled in the absence of the sovereign's person (Portillo Valdés 2006).

The *juntas* of 1808 are, in short, presented as the institutional response to the *vacatio regis* produced by a self-affirming Spanish national identity triggered from the rejection to the kidnapping of the legitimate monarch, Ferdinand VII. This interpretation is shared by the vast majority of Spanish historians and Americanists. And quite persuasive as it is, it raises at least one question that has not generally been addressed: why should the expression of the deposit of sovereignty take specifically the form of *juntas*?

To address this question, it is useful first to point out a notable difference between the format of *juntas* on the peninsula and in the American territories under Spanish rule. In the overseas, the *juntas* that were formed in different localities coexisted in competition with the pre-existing institutions and authorities, especially the audiencias that organised the exercise of jurisdictional power over the territory, to the point of developing into dual power –thus fitting into what is usually defined as a “revolutionary situation” (Aya 1990). In contrast, on the peninsula, the urban mobilisations of the spring of 1808 were directly directed against the powers established in the great territorial jurisdictions, known as the “Acuerdo” – composed of the court of appeals, the military authority (usually a captaincy commanding the garrison) and the *regimiento* or local governing body); and they succeeded in replacing them with *juntas* that arrogated power over the territory in the name of the deposit of sovereignty.

This different outcome and composition of power on either side of the Atlantic has been the object of explanations that are not relevant to the issue at stake (Chiaramonti 2007). Yet the comparison shows that the *juntas* were not the only authority stemming from the deposit of sovereignty in the Hispanic territories; and their contrast also illuminates the depth of the institutional alteration in the peninsula at the onset of the War of Independence: the established institutions of justice, government and militia were

suppressed, all their functions being arrogated by a *junta* established *ad hoc*, with full powers over the whole community. A change of this magnitude could not be accomplished without a significant dose of collective violence. Often the constituted authorities were reluctant to abandon their offices and positions, which only yielded to the demand after the decantation of local forces in favour of the insurgents whenever they found support in groups of military and part of the public officials; nevertheless, there were cases of active resistance, which led to the lynching of local authorities – called “*arrastres*” or draggings –, of which almost a hundred are documented throughout the peninsular geography.

In short, the *juntas* were not simply a mechanism for the temporary supplanting of sovereignty, but a device for the replacement of institutions. This alone should have given rise to a whole new direction in research and reflection still lacking to this day. The focus has, instead, been on the social composition of the *junta* movement. There are plenty of studies on the subject, but even the most refined and meticulous ones agree in that what predominated in the *juntas* was continuity in the social bases of power: among their members there were leaders emerging from the context of crisis and non-privilege background, but in general the leadership of the *juntas* reproduced the social structures and legal caesuras inherited from the Ancien Régime – being mainly stuffed by landowners, rentiers and local officials (Artola 1959; Hocquelllet 2008; Fraser 2008). It is to this consensus that Spanish historiography has clung for over half a century, concluding that 1808 could not, in any profound sense, be the triggering of a social revolution in the inspiration of the 1789 French case.

This interpretation does not seem to be questionable on the evidence it offers, but it is for other reasons. To begin with, it focuses exclusively on the institutional political sphere, emphasizing its substantive continuity given that the social composition of local power was not significantly modified. This approach does not take into account that, observed from the old institutions they replaced, the boundaries of the power represented by the *juntas* were being overflowed. This issue came to the fore in the following months in some of the main cities under the control of the insurgent – such as Valencia or Cádiz – where decisions taken by the *juntas* induced popular indignation and eventually gave way to mobilisations that successfully demanded the replacement of their officers (Sánchez León 2020). Events like these show that, at the very least, the power held by the *junta* was different in nature from the traditional legitimacy, its members being subject to accountability – though often made effective by pressure from outside. One way of

addressing this issue is by acknowledging that with the establishment of the *juntas* the boundaries of the political sphere had been considerably expanded, so that, in addition to the appointed officers, new legitimate actors had been given recognition or were empowered to question and influence the decisions taken by the *junta*.

From this perspective, the issue of why the *junta* was chosen in 1808 as institutional embodiment for the repository of sovereignty may be answered as follows: such device was more suitable to a context in which the very conception of sovereignty was being contested by new collective actors who arrogated the reflexive power that politics provides. This view challenges the usual interpretation from social history, which in its stressing of continuities proves to be an elitist approach.

For its part, constitutional historiography has answered the question by arguing that, like the deposit of sovereignty, the *juntas* were an institution of ancestry that referred to the pre-existing legal tradition (Portillo Valdés 2000). And indeed, *juntas* were a form of consultative meeting or decision-making assembly, transversal to all the institutions of the Monarchy, which were usually convened to hear all the authorised voices concerned by some matter (Andrés-Gallego 2008). However, the *juntas* summoned by the Habsburg or Bourbon authorities normally functioned as a supplement to the regular councils; they were not gathered for the exercise of power over the territory. In fact, the only urban-level *juntas* with capacity over the territory throughout the Modern period in Castile were established by the *comuneros*, the revolted against the Monarchy in 1520-21, who were repressed and left an infamous memory for generations (Sánchez León 2002).

Undoubtedly, this perception had changed by 1808, a context in which the search for the origins of a possible Castilian “constitution” was leading many authors to identify the value of the ancient urban liberties stifled by the royal power since the end of the Middle Ages (Portillo Valdés 2000). However, such traditions could not parallel in entity, rank or legitimacy to the legal tradition of the Catholic Monarchy (Lorente and Garriga 2008). And yet, even in cities where the established authorities sided from the outset with the anti-napoleonic forces, the traditional institutions were also replaced by *juntas*. From a legal perspective, the only explanation to this procedure is that the state of exception favoured a more communitarian type of legitimacy expressing the unity of all local forces around a single, all-encompassing political entity. Such political logic would be one based on a friend/foe dichotomy: the exceptionality of the war against an invader foregrounded those institutional traditions that embodied the essential exclusion and, given the magnitude of the external threat, fostered a strongly inclusive political framework.

It is likely that a rationality of this kind shaped the formation of the peninsular *juntas*; instead, it can hardly be adduced as a decisive factor in the American experience, where the invading enemy never set foot. But the main problem with this perspective from legal history is that the performance of the *juntas* does not fit into the legal culture characteristic of the Spanish Ancien Régime, which is on the other considered to have shaped the subsequent constituent process of 1810-1812 (Lorente and Garriga 2007).

Despite the *juntas* can be traced back in the traditional legal culture, the fact is that, once established, they broke with all continuities with the past in their exercise of power. *Juntas* were inconsistent with the pre-existing institutional framework from the moment they declared themselves sovereign over their surrounding territory: by definition, sovereignty can neither be shared nor distributed. Moreover, they embodied a novel kind of sovereignty. At the institutional level this expressed itself in the *junta's* direct control of the treasury and the army – the two pillars of the modern nation state, which John Pocock, referring to the seventeenth-century, named “the institutions of the Leviathan” (Pocock 1996). The issue exemplifies how, under conditions, the sphere of politics overflows its conventional boundaries, in this case as inherited from the Old Regime, and extends its jurisdiction over other established spheres, opening them to debate and eventually reshaping them through deliberation.

But the most important area of political overflow provoked by the 1808 *juntas* of 1808 has to do with the intermediate bodies. Urban *juntas* did not pave the way for the revival of the traditional body politic, which was composed of corporate entities ultimately founded on inequality before the law. Quite on the contrary, what defined the *junta* was that it dissolved all marks of privilege (only in the case of the Catalan *juntas*, in an attempt to recover a corporate local governance, a internal differentiation following division in estates was initially maintained). Social history has not adequately pointed out this feature of the *juntas*: despite they were composed of privileged members – some of which were even recruited from the titled nobility – the privileged as estate lacked any singular status or special power inside them (Sánchez León 2020).

Comparing this composition to that of the *comuneros* in early modern Castile provides a counterfactual that sheds decisive light on the shifting boundaries of politics. The town councils of 1520 – which, incidentally, also replaced the institutions of urban government – were internally shaped by the legal division between privileged knights and taxpaying *pecheros*, to the extent that the governance rebels established faced decision-making problems due to their organisation through estate divisions, their unity of action

being only guaranteed by the hegemony exerted over the councils by the lower nobility (Sánchez León 2002). In 1808, by contrast, as a collective the nobility – a tradition of collective self-organisation – was far from leading the mobilisations. Once the *juntas* were created, their capacity of leverage leaned only on their individual prestige, as shown by the fact that the *juntas* imposed taxation over the whole population according to their wealth without regard to legal status.

Although many among the hitherto privileged willingly accepted the payment of taxes, the end of the exemption is the final expression of how, under conditions, the reflexive power of politics can spread itself and subject to controversy – and eventually to deliberation – other spheres of community life, in this case those dealing with the unequal fiscal status shaping the entire Old Regime. This view provides a theoretical critique to the conventional social explanation of the *juntas*: the power of a group does not lay just in their individual members' stuffing of political institutions, but ultimately in their capacity to exert political leverage or control through collective organisation – a feature the Castilian nobility was unable to show in the context of 1808.

On the opposite side of the social spectrum – among the non-privileged –, another essential transformation took place that once again illuminates the reflexive power of politics spreading beyond its conventional sphere. In the absence of an effective corporate nobility, the only power that could claim legitimacy under emerging the state of emergency was the people. There is a terminology issue here to be addressed for a correct interpretation of 1808: sovereign power was initially arrogated by the *pueblos*, a word used both to indicate localities encompassing a community and to define a framework of institutions with the capacity to exercise power over the territory (Calderón and Thibaud 2010). However, the *juntas* of 1808 were “popular” *juntas* also from a social perspective –and not just by default, that is, in the absence of another competing power such as a corporate organisation of the nobility with effective capacity for influence.

The *juntas* of 1808 were popular in the peninsula insofar as both the process of seizing power and the new legitimacy referred from the outset to a language of “the people” that was not merely traditional: it involved a novel recoinage of the concept, after reabsorbing that of the “plebe”, coined in the wake of the Enlightenment reforms in the last third of the 18th century and which had introduced an internal cleavage in the people (Sánchez León 2020, 29-89). Accordingly, the people available before May 1808 was a fragmented entity marked by the exclusion of a plebe rated as unworthy and incapable (Sánchez León 2022). Seen in this way, the re-signified people of 1808 was less

traditional rather than a contextual and performative subject emerging anew in the crisis of the monarchy. Obviously, it was definitively a political subject collectively acting and given recognition as the sovereignty basis of the *junta*. This status acquired by the people also helps understand that throughout the constituent process leading to the 1812 Constitution, eventually the language of the people would be replaced by “the nation”, a much less political and more acceptable category for parliamentary representatives –an issue beyond the interest of this text.

In any case, even if legal inequalities disappeared, the order emerging from the *juntas* did not put an end to social inequalities internal to local communities. These were certainly economic, relating to land ownership, but not only: there existed also pre-established hierarchies of status and social capital which reflected themselves composition of the sovereign assemblies of 1808. It is in the realm of local culture and customs, with their idiosyncratic repositories of conventional valuations and referents, that the expansion of politics in 1808 encountered its limits.

Conclusion

When we applying the concept of crisis to the Old Regime, it is implicitly implied that, insofar as the modern separation between institutions and civil society had not taken place, and that it was the crisis what triggered a process culminating in such separation. Yet we miss the fact that in the Hispanic monarchy the crisis of 1808 was already an early historical expression of that separation: the organic coherence between the corporate bodies and communities was broken by the 1808 crisis which, in an unprecedented way, separated institutions from communities, and corporations from their individual members. The peninsular sovereign *juntas* between 1808 and 1810 must therefore be seen not as the building of an alternative institutional framework stemming from this fracture, but rather as an attempt to close, suture or at least bridge it by bringing the separate parts of the established order back together again.

Contrary to what interpretations of the crisis of the Old Regime assume, the *juntas* were therefore the expression of a bid for reintegrating institutions and community, between order and subjects, that the legitimacy crisis of the monarchy had suddenly laid bare. However, leaving the conclusion here does not resolve the issue at stake: after all, it is possible to argue that the state of exception generated by the Napoleonic invasion favoured such communitarian political dynamics. In fact, it is commonly added that there were two ideological orientations more or less explicit at the heart of the *juntas*: some of

its members were traditionalist, wishing for the restoration of the Bourbon institutional and estates order, while others were influenced by intellectual projections of the radical Enlightenment inspired by the Rousseauian general will.

This interpretation remains hegemonic because it seems to fit in with the later configuration of liberal and anti-liberal ideological positions, which have often been seen as already taking shape during the War of Independence. But precisely for this, the view is suspicious of tracing too much backwards the origins to what would later become the great political identities of 19th century Spain (Portillo 2017). While acknowledging that these caesuras were certainly being developed in the context of the emergence of the *juntista* movement, what is far from being proven is that they shaped the dynamics of the *juntas*.

The interpretation proposed here gives the *juntas* a constituent character at the level of each local community and in its territory. Seen in this light, it was the kind of order produced by the *juntas* what contributed to shape enduring political-ideological divisions within Spanish society emerging at the beginning of the 19th century – even influencing pro-French allegiances –, and not the other way round. In any case that could be their effect, but not their internal logic: the *juntas* as such were not controlled by any particular collective subject, least of all by those from the ranks of the privileged. Neither, of course, were they the embryonic expression of a modern politics bridging between civil society and a modern institutional framework for political participation and representation; rather, they were an experiment in radical community reintegration that on the one hand reduced the sudden breach between institutions and local society, while on the other overflowed the limits that the traditional order assigned to the sphere of politics.

The problem, or rather the contradiction, inherent to the *juntas* was that, in an attempt to stitch up a rupture in the traditional order, it introduced institutional innovations that further and definitively removed the possibility of a return to the traditional order. In this sense, the *juntas*, however legitimist they claimed to be, were anything but restorative. Yet on the other hand, the changes they impelled did not necessarily point towards the definition of citizenship, not even place the functioning of local politics on the path to modernity. They represent a case of absolute politics, generating a power that would have no place in the constitutional design of 1812, let alone the subsequent liberal Constitutions of the 1830s and 1840s. Indeed, one way of interpreting the Cadiz constitutional settlement is precisely as the attempt to recompose, now with inherited ancient legal

materials, a sovereign power legitimately supplanting the radical break with the pre-1808 institutional framework produced by the irruption of the *juntas*.

This should be a terrain for opening a dialogue with the legal and constitutional history. Recent interpretations in this field have departed from the teleology that until recently dominated studies on the Constitution of Cadiz; however, the growing consensus in favour of a prospective approach to the legal culture of 1812 is currently not being applied to the period from 1808 to 1812, where approaches become retrospective once again: interest in meaning to the resulting constitutional framework, the events from the Mutiny of Aranjuez and 2 May 1808 to the summoning of the Cortes in 1810 are read from the final outcome of the constituent process.

My way of approaching the issue is that the *juntas* did not empower a modern citizen, but neither did they leave the traditional neighbour (*vecino*) in its place. On their part, combined or intermediate neighbour/citizen categories should be avoided, as they reproduce the teleology underlying the imaginaries of modernity. This is why I have proposed to start from a collective conception of the subject as a people, and to leave aside the conventional dichotomy tradition/modernity, looking instead at the issue from the “spatial” perspective of a politics that overflows its conventionally instituted borders.

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