

State-Civil Society Cooperation and Conflict in the Spanish Empire: The Intellectual and Political Activities of the Ultramarine *Consulados* and Economic Societies, c. 1780–1810*

GABRIEL B. PAQUETTE

Abstract. This article analyses the intellectual and political activities of the newly-created *consulados* and Economic Societies in Spanish America between 1780 and 1810. It argues that these institutions decisively shaped both the formulation and implementation of metropolitan policy. Colonial elites used the *consulados* and Economic Societies as a vehicle to pursue licensed privilege and moderate, incremental reform in the context of a revived, socio-economically stable Old Regime. They embraced the Bourbon reforms and used them to their advantage. Judging from *consulado* documents, the prevailing relationship between civil society and the state in Spanish America, at least until the late 1790s, was amicable and mutually supportive. After that time, mainly due to the disruption of Atlantic commerce, close co-operation gave way to conflict, but always within the framework of a cohesive empire. Drawing on archives in Argentina, Chile, Cuba and Spain, this essay traces the coalescence of numerous local intelligentsias that collaborated, to varying degrees, in the renovation of imperial governance and, simultaneously, incubated a robust public sphere in the nascent polities which gradually emerged after the collapse of Spanish royal authority in 1808.

Introduction

In their *Voyage to South America* (1748), Antonio de Ulloa and Jorge Juan derided the ‘innate sloth and indolence’ of the Americans which prevented

Gabriel B. Paquette is Junior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge.

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them from ‘cultivating the gifts of Nature’.¹ They bemoaned the attitudes and institutions which, they maintained, corroded the sinews of the expanding colonial state. Such disparagement of the New World and its inhabitants, both indigenous and creole, was symptomatic of a broad, pervasive discourse of civilisation and barbarism in eighteenth-century Europe.²

Yet in spite of the low regard in which Americans were held in metropolitan circles, Bourbon reformers recognised that the flora, fauna, mines and men of Spanish America were instrumental to their geopolitical ambitions. Since the sixteenth century Madrid had colluded with selected elites in colonial society in order to establish and maintain effective control. As a result, creoles had gained access, especially between 1640 and 1760, to decision-making positions within the American bureaucracy, though this was an informal rather than institutionalised arrangement.³

From 1760 until 1780, royal reformers reversed course and sought to fashion subservient colonies from what had once been considered equal and integrated parts of the Spanish Crown (henceforth referred to as the Crown). During the reign of Charles III (1759–1788), Spanish reformers aspired to design a centralised bureaucracy equipped with the revenue-generating mechanisms necessary to restore the prestige and solvency of the monarchy. Armed with regalist precepts of governance and deep-seated antipathy for corporate privilege, the Bourbon reformers sought to demolish the autonomy of the American elites, severely restricting their right to hold office and tightening peninsular control over colonial trade.⁴ They believed that these measures would produce economic growth which, in turn, could be siphoned to meet the burgeoning requirements of the fiscal-military state.⁵ Building on

¹ Antonio de Ulloa and Jorge Juan, *A Voyage to South America* (London, 1760), bk. 1, ch. 1, p. 47.

² See, in particular, Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic 1750–1900* (Pittsburgh, 1973); David Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492–1867* (Cambridge, 1991); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, 2001).

³ Brian Hamnett, ‘Process and Pattern: A Re-Examination of the Ibero-American Independence Movements, 1808–1826’, *JLAS* vol. 29 (1997), pp. 283–4.

⁴ M. A. Burkholder and D. S. Chandler, *From Impotence to Authority: The Spanish Crown and the American Audiencias 1687–1808* (London, 1977); Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Independence of Spanish America* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁵ See, in particular, Kenneth Andrien, *The Kingdom of Quito, 1690–1830: The State and Regional Economic Development* (Cambridge, 1995); Jacques Barbier, *Reform and Politics in Bourbon Chile, 1755–1796* (Ottawa, 1980); David Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763–1810* (Cambridge, 1971); A. J. Kuethe and G. D. Inglis, ‘Absolutism and Enlightened Reform: Charles III, the Establishment of the *Alcabala*, and Commercial Reorganization in Cuba’, *Past and Present* vol. 109 (1985), pp. 118–43; Anthony McFarlane, *Colombia Before Independence: Economy, Society and Politics under Bourbon Rule* (Cambridge, 1993); and Stanley Stein and Barbara Stein, *Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III* (Baltimore, 2003). For an analysis of the most recent scholarship, see Gabriel B. Paquette

partial victories over privileged corporations, including the Church, Bourbon reformers sought to deprive the *Consulados* of Cádiz, Lima and Mexico City of the stranglehold they collectively exercised over colonial commerce. The successive free trade decrees, especially those of 1765, 1778 and 1782, and the creation of privileged trading companies in which the Crown invested heavily were among the measures devised to undercut the entrenched mercantile oligarchies and to make the Spanish Empire more uniformly prosperous.⁶

In spite of its growing prosperity, Bourbon attempts to raise revenue through administrative and fiscal centralisation helped to spark widespread disaffection and resistance throughout Spanish America.⁷ Creoles, now deprived of the ancient liberties which they believed they possessed by natural right, continued to conceive of themselves as members of a composite monarchy at a time when this notion had become anathema to the Crown.⁸ In the wake of the revolts of the 1780s, the Bourbon reformers shifted strategy and recognised that metropolitan government must at least placate, and perhaps collaborate with, discontented and restless colonial elites.⁹

'Empire, Enlightenment and Regalism: New Directions in Eighteenth-Century Spanish History', *European History Quarterly* vol. 35 (2005), pp. 107–17.

⁶ One must distinguish between intentions and results. Cádiz continued to handle the overwhelming proportion of transatlantic trade: 76 per cent of imports from Spanish America in terms of value between 1782 and 1796, and 84 per cent of the return traffic in the same period: see John Fisher, 'Commerce and Imperial Decline: Spanish Trade with Spanish America, 1797–1820', *JLAS* vol. 30 (1998), p. 462. The Bourbon focus on trade policy on the imperial periphery should not obscure the Crown's reliance on bullion, mainly from Peru and Mexico, which accounted for 77 per cent of the cargo value of imports into Spain until at least 1778: see David Brading, 'Bourbon Spain and its American Empire', *Historical Journal* vol. 39 (1981), pp. 961–9.

⁷ See especially Kenneth Andrien, 'Economic Crisis, Taxes and the Quito Insurrection of 1765', *Past and Present* vol. 129 (1990), pp. 104–31; Anthony McFarlane, 'Rebellions in Late Colonial Spanish America: A Comparative Perspective', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* vol. 14 (1995), pp. 313–38; John Leddy Phelan, *The People and the King: The Comunero Revolution in Colombia, 1781* (Madison, 1978); and Sergio Serulnikov, *Subverting Colonial Authority: Challenges to Spanish Rule in the Eighteenth-Century Southern Andes* (Durham NC, 2003).

⁸ J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (London and New Haven, 2006), p. 319; Anthony Pagden and Nicholas Canny, 'Afterword: From Identity to Independence', in *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton, 1987), p. 275.

⁹ As Anthony McFarlane argued, these rebellions and conspiracies 'did not generally indicate desire for independence from Spain [but were] aimed at perpetuating past practices, not with overthrowing them Enmity toward metropolitan Spaniards was insufficiently strong or widespread to underpin nationalistic sentiment or to provide a focus for rebellion against Spain': see McFarlane, 'Identity, Enlightenment and Political Dissent in Late Colonial Spanish America', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. vol. 8 (1998), p. 322. Other historians argue that it was the death of José de Gálvez in 1787 that brought 'an abrupt halt and repeal of some of the key measures already enforced': see John Fisher, *Government and Society in Colonial Peru: The Intendant System, 1784–814* (London, 1970), p. 60.

This awareness became acute in the late 1790s as the wars sparked by the French Revolution triggered an imperial crisis. The combined force of internal resistance and external threats did not dissolve Bourbon contempt for privileged corporations and semi-autonomous provinces. It did, however, compel compromise, bargaining, and mutual concessions.¹⁰

In the 1780s and 1790s both crown reformers and political writers attempted to envisage a new relationship between the peninsular and ultramarine kingdoms which, in spite of ruptures caused by global conflict, would mollify creoles and retain for Madrid the advantages of dominion. ‘America’, the enlightened reformer Victorián de Villava prophesied in 1797, ‘due to its size, its distance and great wealth, is not naturally governed from Europe’. He proposed a reorganisation of colonial government on a federalist model, the dismantlement of the viceroalties, and the empowerment of creole-dominated *audiencias*. Through decentralisation and refashioned administrative institutions, Villava suggested, the dissolution of the Spanish empire could be delayed, if not averted.¹¹ Other officials rejected the voluntary dismemberment of empire, but acknowledged the urgent need to ‘tighten the bonds’ uniting the peninsula with America in order to ‘preserve perpetually the union’.¹² Creole loyalty could be fostered, another reformer proposed, by ‘transplanting’ young men from America to the Iberian peninsula, reserving scholarships in the *colegios* for them, and, ultimately, employing them in tribunals.¹³ The Crown thus embraced limited concessions and endeavoured to reinvigorate attenuated cultural bonds in order to guarantee the security and promote the longer-term prosperity of its American empire.

Yet more sceptical commentators failed to accept the logic by which better governed ultramarine provinces and cultivated fondness for Spain would satiate those American subjects dissatisfied with the overall frameworks of commerce and politics, which overwhelmingly favoured the metropolis. One political writer mocked Madrid for treating Spanish America like a

¹⁰ Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, pp. 324, 365.

¹¹ Victorián de Villava, ‘Apuntes para una Reforma de España’ (1797) in Ricardo Levene (ed.), *Vida y Escritos de Victorián de Villava* (Buenos Aires, 1946), p. cxvii; Villava was a peninsular professor of political economy who became an *oidor* of the Audiencia of Charcas.

¹² Francisco Silvestre, Governor and *Visitor* of Antioquia (New Granada), quoted in Margarita Garrido de Payan, ‘The Political Culture of New Granada, 1770–1815’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1990, p. 35.

¹³ Biblioteca del Palacio Real (Madrid) [hereafter BPR] II/2866, Josef Fuertes, ‘Pensamientos, o Proyecto Sobre Volver a Reconciliar con la Madre Patria las Provincias Discolas de la América Meridional’ (1781), fo. 261 v. Such a scheme was not peculiar to Spain. John Fothergill’s *Considerations Relative to the North American Colonies* (1765) had made the identical point: see Richard Warner Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence: The International History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1965), p. 28.

‘sheep that should be affectionate for cutting its wool and lapping up its milk’.¹⁴ As a particularly candid official conceded, on the eve of the French Revolution, government policy could achieve little with a ‘small population, miniscule industry, and limited agricultural activity’.¹⁵ The ultimate objective, then, became the economic development of the colonies, a goal bound to satisfy potentially recalcitrant mercantile and agrarian elites. This wealth, in turn, eventually could be harnessed to further the Crown’s geopolitical objectives.

Spain’s strenuous effort to control the flow of precious metals, curb contraband, and implement new revenue-enhancing mechanisms thus led to innovative alliances with American elites on the imperial periphery which stressed mutual interest. The Crown devolved a small degree of authority to new *consulados*, creole-controlled administrative and deliberative bodies, in the rapidly developing fringes of the empire. It empowered new elites on the expanding periphery, attempted to disempower those entrenched in the core colonies of Peru and New Spain, and simultaneously bolstered its own objectives in the Old World and the New.

As war crippled Spain’s oceanic commerce during the incessant wars against France (1793–1796) and, subsequently, against Britain (1796–1802; 1804–1808), the Crown would increasingly depend on these nascent civil society institutions, which shared its goal of greater prosperity, to stave off the atrophy and, ultimately, the collapse of its trade regime.¹⁶ The requirements of revenue and imperial defence softened traditional regalist hostility toward corporate privilege and permitted alliances based on mutual interest to develop.¹⁷ Colonial elites, for their part, enthusiastically co-operated with the Bourbon state and contented themselves with the exercise of licensed privilege and moderate, incremental reform within a revived,

¹⁴ Valentín de Foronda, ‘Carta Sobre Lo Que Debe Hacer un Principe que Tenga Colonias a Gran Distancia’ (1800) in *Escritos Políticos y Constitucionales* (Vitoria, 2002), p. 249.

¹⁵ Archivo General de Indias [hereafter AGI] Santo Domingo 2665, Navarro to Valdes, 16 April 1789, fos. 327–28.

¹⁶ The American contribution to the Crown’s ordinary income increased in both absolute and relative terms between 1790 and 1810, rising from 25 per cent in 1790 to 40 per cent in the 1802–1804 period, before increasing again to 50 per cent between 1808 and 1811: see Carlos Marichal, ‘Beneficios y costes fiscales del colonialismo: las remesas americanas a España 1760–1814’, *Revista de Historia Económica* vol. 15 (1997), p. 478; Civil society is defined here as a ‘complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-government institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-governing, self-reflexive and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that “frame”, construct and enable their activities’: see John Keane, *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 6; this article stresses co-operation between the Bourbon state and Spanish American civil society institutions.

¹⁷ Although this article focuses on the mercantile privileges extended by the Crown, other concessions were extended as well, for example the *fuero militar*: see Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, p. 300.

socio-economically stable Old Regime. They participated in the reform process and influenced both the formulation and implementation of commercial and agricultural policy. This collaboration, marked more by cooperation than conflict, prefigured what contemporary sociologists now describe as ‘state-society synergy’; that is, a situation in which civic engagement strengthens state institutions which, in turn, foster an environment conducive to civic engagement.¹⁸

The dynamic imperial periphery enticed Bourbon reformers with its potential windfall revenues for the Crown. Since material betterment would permit Spain both to realise its fiscal-military ambitions and to mollify restless colonial elites, symbiotic collaboration proved irresistible.¹⁹ Indeed, the ‘dismal’ situation lamented by Ulloa in the 1740s had metamorphosed remarkably a few decades later. In 1781 the Intendant of Caracas reported that the creoles ‘today are in a very different state than that of some years ago. They have been enlightened greatly in a short time. The new philosophy is making much more rapid progress here than in Spain’.²⁰ By all accounts, the late colonial period witnessed the efflorescence of scientific, literary and academic culture in Spanish America.²¹ Scientific and botanical expeditions multiplied, leading Alexander von Humboldt to remark with admiration that ‘no European government had sacrificed greater sums than that of the Spanish to advance the knowledge of plants’.²² The emergence of a periodical press further attests to the multiple avenues for literate, social and intellectual exchange which flourished in Spanish America at the turn of the nineteenth century.²³

This spirit of improvement and patriotic intellectual enquiry was best embodied in two civil society institutions which the Crown sanctioned and elevated to a quasi-official status: the Economic, or Patriotic, Societies and the *consulados*. These associations promoted the advancement of technical

¹⁸ This concept is developed by Peter Evans, ‘Introduction’ in Evans (ed.), *State-Society Synergy: Government and Social Capital in Development* (Berkeley, 1991), p. 2.

¹⁹ For a contrasting view, which construes the creation of *Consulados* as an ‘explicit manifestation of [the Crown’s] impotence’, see Manuel Lucena Giraldo, ‘¿Filántropos u Oportunistas? Ciencia y Política en los Proyectos de Obras Públicas del Consulado de Cartagena de Indias, 1795–1810’, *Revista de Indias* vol. 52 (1992), pp. 627–46.

²⁰ Quoted in Peggy K. Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Network of Trade and Revolution, 1713–1826* (Baltimore, 1983), p. 128.

²¹ On the emergence of a public sphere in the late colonial period, see Victor Uribe-Uran, ‘The Birth of the Public Sphere in Latin America during the Age of Revolution’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 42 (2000), pp. 425–57.

²² Quoted in Iris Engstrand, *Spanish Scientists in the New World: The Eighteenth-Century Expeditions* (Seattle, 1981), p. 11.

²³ For the case of New Granada, see Renán Silva, *Los Ilustrados de Nueva Granada, 1760–1808: Genealogía de una Comunidad de Interpretación* (Medellín, 2002), p. 583.

methods and the dissemination of 'useful' knowledge which would, in turn, stimulate improvements in agriculture, industry and commerce.²⁴ Public education, scientific experiments, and the exploration of little-known wilderness were seized upon as a mode of improving commerce and mercantile affairs. As the leading member of *Consulado* of Cartagena observed, 'Knowledge of the earth is the first step, the very foundation, of a flourishing agricultural system. We have better knowledge of China's terrain than we do of the land which we inhabit'.²⁵

This article examines the main ideas which animated the intellectual and political activities of the *consulados* and Economic Societies in three major cities of the imperial periphery – Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, and Havana – between 1790 and 1810, although some attention is also devoted to Caracas, Cartagena de Indias and VeraCruz. *Consulado* documents provide insight into the colonial response to the Bourbon reforms and suggest how policy-making within an absolutist empire remained subject to, and restricted by, complex negotiation and compromise between the metropolitan decision-makers and the increasingly restless elites of Spanish America. These elites, operating in state-sanctioned civil society institutions, did not pursue independence from Spain. Initially, at least, they sought licensed privilege and moderate, incremental reform within the structures of Old Regime. Working through the *consulados* and Economic Societies, the intelligentsias of the imperial periphery shaped metropolitan objectives and solidified their socio-economic pre-eminence. Ultimately, but by no means immediately, the limited self-determination exercised in *consulados* enhanced creoles' sense of belonging to a separate, perhaps imagined, political community, and helped to incubate a vibrant civil society in the primordial polities that replaced the defunct Spanish empire after 1808.²⁶

²⁴ The major work on the Economic Societies remains Robert Jones Shafer, *The Economic Societies of the Spanish World 1763–1821* (Syracuse, 1958). On the discourse of 'improvement' in the contemporary British empire with significant application to other European empires, see the pioneering study by Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven, 2000). John Lynch has pointed out that 'the Enlightenment remains one of the understudied subjects of Latin American History ... The ideological origins of the Spanish American revolutions is still waiting to be written': see Lynch, 'Spanish American Independence in Recent Historiography' in Anthony McFarlane and Eduardo Posada-Carbó (eds.), *Independence and Revolution in Spanish America: Perspectives and Problems* (London, 1999), pp. 35–6.

²⁵ José Ignacio de Pombo, 18 April 1807, reprinted in *Escritos de Dos Economistas Coloniales: Don Antonio de Narvaez y la Torre y Don José Ignacio de Pombo* (Bogotá, 1965); for the intellectual context of the *Consulado's* activities, see J. F. Wilhite, 'The Enlightenment and Education in New Granada, 1760–1830', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1976, esp. pp. 248–315.

²⁶ On the formation of separate, creole identity as a prelude to independence, see Anthony Pagden, 'Identity Formation in Spanish America', in Pagden and Canny (eds.), *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World*, p. 92.

The rise of the new consulados of the Spanish Empire

Since the thirteenth century the *consulado* had functioned as a maritime tribunal and guild in Spain and its empire, directing its energies to the protection of property rights, ships and cargo against piracy and other depredations.²⁷ Three *consulados* dominated Spanish oceanic trade from its inception: Seville (founded 1543), Mexico City (1594) and Lima (1613). Together with the Casa de Contratación, the *Consulado* of Seville arranged the outfitting and dispatch of the fleets, controlled the size of cargoes, and effectively determined the prices of goods in America. In Mexico and Peru the *consulados* functioned as a chamber of commerce, adjudicating disputes over contracts and bankruptcy while administering the *alcabala* and other duties.²⁸ These corporations, enjoying a special mercantile *fuero* and possessing considerable autonomy from the Crown, became the bulwark of Spain's commercial monopoly in America and, over the centuries, steadily accumulated financial and political power.

In the wake of the *comercio libre* decrees, which increased the number of ports permitted to trade with the Americas, Charles III created new peninsular *consulados* in La Coruña, Santander and Málaga in 1785. These new mercantile bodies further undermined the grip of the *Consulado* of Cádiz which, in 1720, had assumed Seville's position in the American trade. Less than a decade later *consulados* were established on the imperial periphery: Caracas and Guatemala (1793), Buenos Aires and Havana (1794), and Cartagena, Santiago de Chile, Guadalajara and VeraCruz (1795).²⁹ The Crown's decision to charter additional colonial *consulados* was underpinned by two factors: first, the regalist intention to supplant the entrenched corporations of its American empire with institutions more amenable to metropolitan manipulation; second, the recognition of mutual interest uniting the metropolitan state and the emerging elites of the imperial periphery. The *comercio libre* legislation and new *consulados*, then, were two mechanisms by which the Crown planned to wrest control of its American markets and supersede monopoly corporations that thwarted its aims.³⁰

Established in the wake of the modifications to viceregal jurisdiction of the late 1770s, the new American *consulados* further eroded the dominance of

²⁷ Robert Sidney Smith, *The Spanish Merchant Guild: A History of the Consulado, 1250–1700* (Durham, NC, 1940), pp. 3–15.

²⁸ C. H. Haring, *The Spanish Empire in America* (Gloucester MA, 1973), pp. 256, 300.

²⁹ There had been an earlier attempt to establish a *Consulado* in New Granada in 1694, but it had dissolved in 1713. In 1784, a *Consulado* for Mompo was formed, but soon became defunct: see Garrido de Payan, 'The Political Culture of New Granada', p. 50.

³⁰ Brian Hamnett made a similar point in relation to New Spain: 'Mercantile Rivalry and Peninsular Division: The *Consulados* of New Spain and the Impact of the Bourbon Reforms, 1789–1824', *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* vol. 2 (1976), p. 276.

the established *Consulados* of Lima and Mexico City.³¹ In many ways, their creation was the culmination of earlier Bourbon policy. From the early 1750s, Madrid actively sought to curb creole participation in public affairs, especially in the *audiencias*, in Mexico and Peru.³² In 1754, the lease on tax farming enjoyed by Mexico's *Consulado* was terminated and its administration placed firmly under crown control. By 1779, all leases for taxation in New Spain had been recalled in favour of direct royal administration. In 1795, when the *Consulado* of VeraCruz received its charter, Mexico City's merchants complained bitterly and called for the Crown to abolish its new rival.³³ New civil society institutions, bestowed with the same name but possessing fewer privileges than the antecedent corporations, were established to counterbalance the accumulated authority of the old, siphoning away their previously unchallenged dominance.³⁴

By creating *consulados* both in the less developed parts of the empire and on the periphery of the core viceroyalties, then, the Crown adopted a more flexible approach to governance, a trend which gained momentum after the outbreak of war in the early 1790s. Colonial officials on the frontier, overwhelmed by increasing responsibilities engendered by expanding commerce, agricultural output, and population in their jurisdictions, were prepared to codify informal alliances with elites out of sheer necessity.³⁵ Though their creation required some limited dispersal of political authority, the creation of *consulados* in peripheral regions promised three irresistible benefits to the Crown: economic growth, efficient administration, and the eradication of contraband.

The improvement of agriculture and commerce, the Intendant of Caracas reassured the Minister of the Indies, was the 'source of [creole] happiness and the principal link of [their] indissoluble union with the metropolis'. A *consulado*, composed of landowners and merchants, he continued, would

³¹ On the *Consulado* of Lima in the period, see Patricia H. Marks, 'Confronting a Mercantile Elite: Bourbon Reformers and the Merchants of Lima, 1765–1796', *The Americas* vol. 60 (2004), pp. 519–58.

³² Burkholder and Chandler, *From Impotence to Authority*.

³³ Hamnett, 'Mercantile Rivalry and Peninsular Division', pp. 274, 278.

³⁴ The new measures were an assault on the corporate power and privileges, not the profits, of Mexico and Peru. According to John Fisher, 'agricultural economies in regions hitherto marginalised from the official routes of transatlantic trade – notably in the Río de la Plata, Venezuela, Central America and Cuba – experienced upsurges in export-led production, but not at the expense of traditional centres of Spanish authority, Mexico and Peru, which maintained their majority shares of commercial activity in their respective regions, particularly because of the continuing predominance of silver in exports to Spain': see Fisher, 'Commerce and Imperial Decline', p. 461.

³⁵ In Mexico royal bureaucrats, especially at the local level, became embedded in family and commercial networks and more often acted out of motives of greed than good governance: see Linda Salvucci, 'Costumbres viejas, "hombres nuevos": José de Gálvez y la burocracia fiscal novohispana (1754–1800)', *Historia Mexicana* vol. 33, (1983), pp. 224–64.

recognise and codify this ‘reciprocal encouragement’ which would ‘promote and influence happiness’. Until this institution was established, the colonists would continue to conceive of their ‘happiness’ as ‘dependent solely on the action, and perhaps despotism, of the chiefs of the province’.³⁶ A Viceroy of New Granada concurred, praising the potential ‘utility and necessity’ of the *consulado* which ‘surely will foster the opulence and prosperity’ of the colony. Not solely a tribunal of convenience, he envisaged the *consulado* as a ‘body of zealous patriots who promote public happiness’.³⁷ One of his successors recommended establishing a *consulado* in Bogotá, praising that city’s merchants for ‘bringing together their faculties and *las luces* for the good of the state. They are very useful and granting one for this capital is highly necessary’.³⁸

The creation of a commercial court would free crown officials from the tedium of adjudicating mercantile disputes and improve the conduct of commerce. Because the majority of the backlogged judicial cases involved ‘debts and mercantile contracts whose judgment should be rendered as summarily as possible’, the Governor of Trinidad commented, the creation of a *consulado* was recommended there. Its absence, he argued, meant that ‘bad faith invents numerous subterfuges disguised by [the pretext of] law’.³⁹ A commercial court could resolve such conflicts, Caracas’s intendant stated, ‘rapidly and summarily, consonant with the style of commerce’ whose previous delays ‘resulted in the complete ruin of several very useful vassals’.⁴⁰

To economic growth and expeditious justice, the advocates of *consulados* noted a third potential benefit: the eradication of contraband. Merchants, Caracas’s intendant mused, always ‘know what contraband is being carried out, who introduces it, of what goods it consists, as well as the actors, the accomplices, and the participants’, but failed to inform the authorities for fear of antagonism or ‘staining [their reputations] with the mark of an informer’. A *consulado*, he claimed, ‘would reduce the need to fret over this prospect and would guard most vigilantly against clandestine trade. Not even

³⁶ AGI Caracas 908, Francisco de Saavedra to Gálvez, 2 May 1785.

³⁷ AGI Santa Fe 957, Juan Francisco Gil y Lemos to Antonio Valdes, 15 March 1789; *ibid.*, 30 Oct. 1790.

³⁸ Viceroy Pedro Mendinueta to his successor Antonio Amar y Borbón (1803), in José García y García, (ed.), *Relaciones de los Virreyes del Nuevo Reino de Granada* (New York, 1869), 508. Many officials, it must be conceded, held creoles in contempt. New Granada’s Viceroy in the 1780s, for example, complained that his subjects were ‘incapable of understanding the justification for royal taxes. All they aspire to is their own self-interest, which is absolute and unlimited libertinism ... The goal of government must be to force the plebeians to respect public authority so that their subordination and obedience is preserved’: F. Gutiérrez de Piñeres to Gálvez, quoted in Phelan, *The People and the King*, p. 33.

³⁹ AGI Caracas 152, José María Chacón to Antonio Valdes, 25 Jan. 1788.

⁴⁰ AGI Caracas 908, Francisco de Saavedra to José de Gálvez, 2 May 1785.

the officials of the Royal Treasury are as interested in the extinction of contraband as these merchants are'.⁴¹

Bourbon aims coincided, in this instance at least, with those of colonial merchants and planters. This confluence facilitated the growth of quasi-governmental bodies on the imperial periphery which institutionalised previously informal collaboration. The creation of *consulados* normally received the support of municipal government as well. The endorsement of the Caracas *cabildo* (municipal council), for example, employed the same rationale and language as that of the intendant.⁴² Merchants themselves strove to emphasise this mutual advantage, contending that the *consulado* would pursue not merely the 'particular' interests of its constituent members, but rather the 'universal public good'. 'Our ideas', New Granada's merchants pledged before their *consulado* was chartered, 'would unite individual interests with public happiness'. In this way, this 'patriotic body of good citizens' would 'stimulate and breathe life [into the economy] with prizes awarded for the cultivation of the fields, the discovery of precious things, and the exportation of provincial produce'.⁴³

As stipulated in its royal *cédula*, a *consulado* was designed to fulfil two purposes. Its primary function, discussed earlier, delegated to a tribunal, guaranteed merchants a swift and quasi-independent judicial procedure to handle their professional disputes. *Consulados* heard cases relating to bankruptcy, demands for the payment of debts, cession of goods to creditors, sales of property at auction arising from such cases, the administration of wills and effects of deceased merchants, merchants suspected of smuggling and, for those convicted, supervised the dispersal of their confiscated goods.⁴⁴ The second function of a *consulado*, delegated to its *Junta Económica y de Gobierno*, concerned the 'protection and encouragement of commerce'. This responsibility entailed:

[Using] all possible means for the advancement of agriculture, the improvement in the cultivation and benefit of its products, the introduction of the most advantageous machines and tools, the facilitation of internal circulation [of goods]; in sum,

⁴¹ *Ibid.* ⁴² AGI Caracas 908, *Cabildo* to the Council of the Indies, 16 July 1788.

⁴³ AGI Estado 54, no. 3, Lazaro Maria de Herrera and José Ignacio de Pombo to Viceroy Caballero y Gongora, March 1789. Notwithstanding these pledges, the rise of the colonial *Consulado* was a gradual process. In Buenos Aires, for example, it was preceded by the emergence of informal merchant associations (*Juntas de Comerciantes y Mercaderos*). There was often a sizable lag between the initial petition – the majority of which were presented in the early 1780s – and the grant of a royal charter, the majority of which were approved in the mid-1790s. Susan Migden Socolow argued that this lengthy petition process is evidence that the merchants possessed 'virtually no power vis-à-vis the entire colonial empire and in metropolitan Spain': Socolow, *The Merchants of Buenos Aires 1778–1810: Family and Commerce* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 173.

⁴⁴ R. L. Woodward, *Class Privilege and Economic Development: The Consulado de Comercio of Guatemala 1793–1871* (Chapel Hill, 1966), pp. 25–6.

whatever seems most conducive to the growth and extension of all the branches of cultivation and commerce.⁴⁵

The *consulado* discharged this duty by founding schools of commerce, assuming custodial duties at maritime ports, introducing and experimenting with new-fangled agricultural techniques, and undertaking infrastructural improvements to expedite the transport of agricultural products from the hinterland to the port cities.⁴⁶ This economic development function ensured that membership was open not only to merchants, but to planters as well, membership being limited to property-owners of sufficient status.⁴⁷

In default of adequate provision within colonial budgets to finance these initiatives, the *consulados* were empowered to collect a small tax to defray the capital expenditures that infrastructure and education projects entailed. This tax, known as the *avería*, was an import-export duty determined directly by the Crown, fluctuating between 0.5 per cent and 1.5 per cent.⁴⁸ The *Consulado* of Santiago was permitted to collect a 0.5 per cent *avería* on exports and imports in Chile in order to finance its projects, the vast majority of its income deriving from commerce transacted in Santiago and at the neighbouring port city of Valparaíso. In 1796, the paltry sum collected barely covered its meagre salaries and overhead costs, causing Santiago's *Consulado* to lament its 'impoverished condition'. Without an increase, it claimed, it could not 'protect and foment' commerce, introduce machines and tools into Chile, or provide public instruction to merchants and farmers, 'the most efficacious method to promote agriculture'. The *Consulado* of Buenos Aires initially levied the same level of *avería*. Even after an increase to 1.0 per cent, however, it continued to operate at a loss and many of its grandiose projects failed to materialise.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Real Cédula de Erección del Consulado de Chile* (Madrid, 1795), p. 20. The *cédula* for the creation of the *Consulado* of Buenos Aires employed identical language: see AGI Buenos Aires 583.

⁴⁶ Pedro Navarro Floria, *Manuel Belgrano y el Consulado de Buenos Aires, Cuna de la Revolución (1790–1806)* (Buenos Aires, 1999), p. 48; for an appraisal of this *Consulado's* accomplishments, see German O. E. Tjarks, *El Consulado de Buenos Aires y sus Proyecciones en la Historia del Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires, 1962), vol. I, p. 103; vol. II, 874; on colonial *Consulados* more generally, see Manuel Nunes Dias, *El Real Consulado de Caracas (1793–1810)* (Caracas, 1971), esp. pp. 232, 574.

⁴⁷ P. J. Lampros, 'Merchant-Planter Cooperation and Conflict: the Havana *Consulado*, 1794–1832', unpubl. PhD diss., Tulane University, 1980, pp. 14–28.

⁴⁸ As Carlos Díaz Rementería wrote, the *avería* began as a 'special tax by which interested parties collaborated to finance the costs of *armadas* to protect the *flota*' in Ismael Sánchez Bella, Alberto de la Hera and Carlos Díaz Rementería, *Historia del Derecho Indio* (Madrid, 1992), p. 381; R. S. Smith, 'Origins of the *Consulado* in Guatemala', *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 26, no. 2 (1946), p. 159. Some *Consulados* also were empowered to take the *peage*, a toll collected on vehicles and pack animals using the roads.

⁴⁹ AGI Chile 445, *Consulado* to Gardoqui, 16 June 1797: the figures are extrapolated from a chart entitled: 'Estado que Manifiesta lo que ha producido el $\frac{1}{2}$ percent de avería concedido por SM a este Real Consulado en 1796'; AGI Buenos Aires 586: the figures are

The improvement of infrastructure – the extension of roads, the maintenance of ports and the construction of bridges – was deemed a precursor to economic growth. The burgeoning interest in public works in Spanish America paralleled developments elsewhere in Europe. Most notably, the French physiocrats demonstrated concern for the improvement of transport facilities. Dupont de Nemours, for example, maintained that ‘society needs to have as many public works carried out as possible, at the least expense’.⁵⁰ In Spain itself, as early as the 1720s, Uztáriz called for the state to invest in infrastructure on both sides of the Atlantic through an extensive public works programme, contending that agricultural improvement, expanded trade, and manufacturing growth were inconceivable without such projects.⁵¹ In America the situation was more desperate: even in the late eighteenth century, river and land communication was unreliable, hazardous and extremely slow. In New Granada, for example, the journey from Cartagena to Bogotá could last up to two months.⁵² Calls for highways linking the remote interior with coastal cities, ‘making navigable those rivers’ currently unfit for commerce, and other ‘public works of urgent and well-known utility’ are recurrent in *consulado* reports to the Crown.⁵³ In most parts of America, public investment in the economy remained negligible and colonial officials busied themselves with extracting resources and shipping them to Spain, instead of undertaking long-term projects.⁵⁴ By the early 1780s, this neglect had become unsustainable as increased revenues from America were judged the best way to fund Spain’s geopolitical ambitions.

Inadequate infrastructure was berated universally as an impediment to commerce. In Cuba, for example, the most widespread complaint concerned the scarcity of suitable roads for the transport of agricultural products.⁵⁵ In the Río de la Plata, the proponents of a *consulado* emphasised the

extrapolated from a chart entitled: ‘Productos correspondientes al Tribunal de Consulado por el medio por ciento de avería cobrado ... en 1796’.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Terence Hutchinson, *Before Adam Smith: the Emergence of Political Economy, 1662–1776* (Oxford, 1988), p. 290.

⁵¹ Stanley Stein and Barbara Stein, *Silver, Trade and War: Spain and America in the Making of Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, 2000), pp. 164–72.

⁵² Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia 1770–1835* (Chapel Hill, 2004), p. 48.

⁵³ AGI Caracas 908, Francisco de Saavedra to José de Gálvez, 2 May 1785. The Viceroy of New Granada also cited road construction as a principal rationale for the *Consulados*: see AGI Santa Fe 957, Juan Francisco Gil y Lemos to Antonio Valdes, 15 March 1789.

⁵⁴ Andrien, *The Kingdom of Quito*, pp. 214–5.

⁵⁵ Nicolas Calvo y O’Farrill, ‘Sobre la Necesidad de Construir Caminos en esta Isla, Medios de Hacerlos y Dirección que Deben Tener’ in *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana* (Havana, 1795), vol. III, appendix, doc. 2. Before the establishment of the *Consulado* in 1794, there had been strenuous efforts by the Governor-General, in collaboration with the sugar magnates, to compel inhabitants to volunteer personal labour in order to maintain bridges and roads: see Sherry Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* (Gainesville, 2001), pp. 129–35.

long-neglected ‘relations between the provinces’ and dedicated themselves to devising a ‘means of facilitating communication, by means of roads, canals and rivers’. They sought to eradicate the ‘obstacles which impede the easy communication of the provinces with one another’.⁵⁶ Public works, Trinidad’s Governor argued, ‘were not pursued with the same rapidity as [colonists’] imagination conceived of them and necessity required’. Roads and bridges were necessary before the island could be properly inhabited and cultivated. The colonists suffered due to this absence, he asserted, and ‘remained inactive’.⁵⁷ In Mexico, the viceroy endorsed the intention of the *Consulado* of VeraCruz to build a road linking it with the capital, a ‘dignified object [of attention]’ to facilitate the ‘reciprocal communication between these admirable and opulent provinces’, for which ‘nothing had been done’ in 200 years. He focused on the ‘export of [mineral] wealth and precious produce which mutually revives and supports Old and New Spain’.⁵⁸

Public works garnered praise not only for their economic benefits, but also as a symbol of good government. ‘The wharfs of London and Amsterdam are dignified monuments for posterity of what commerce creates when buttressed by government support’, a member of the *Consulado* of VeraCruz declared.⁵⁹ One of his colleagues elaborated:

In the eyes of the well-seasoned traveller, public roads preview the large and delectable avenues of the city. They provide a glimpse of the beauty of great cities, thereby suggesting the majesty of the state. Their construction and preservation, therefore, are linked with the interests of the state. The most celebrated nations of antiquity never neglected them.⁶⁰

If public works indicated efficacious and commendable governance, their disrepair was nothing short of an embarrassment. ‘By an incomprehensible misfortune, we see abandoned roads and rivers without bridges throughout the kingdom’, the Viceroy of New Granada groaned in 1796. ‘Everything is found pitifully uncared for and this issue begs the most serious attention of the government’.⁶¹ In order to redress these deficiencies, the *consulados* sometimes pursued public projects in conjunction with their counterparts in other colonies. A proposed road from Santiago to Mendoza, for example,

⁵⁶ AGI Buenos Aires 585, unsigned, first (top) document in *legajo*.

⁵⁷ AGI Caracas 152, José María Chacón to Antonio Valdes, 25 Jan. 1788.

⁵⁸ AGI Estado 25, no. 41/1, Marqués de Branciforte to Godoy, n.d. fos. 1, 4.

⁵⁹ Vicente Basadre, ‘Memoria sobre la Construcción de Sumideros para Purificar la Atmosfera’ (1797), in Javier Ortíz de la Tabla DuCasse, ed., *Memorias Políticas y Económicas del Consulado de VeraCruz, 1796–1822* (Seville, 1985), p. 15.

⁶⁰ José Donato de Austria, ‘Memoria Sobre la Construcción de un Camino Carretero desde VeraCruz a México’ (1800), in *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶¹ BPR II/2896, ‘Relación del Gobierno del Exmo. Sr. D. Josef de Ezpeleta (...) a su Sucesor el Exmo. D. Pedro Mendinueta’ (1796), fo. 274v.

generated avid interest in both Santiago and Buenos Aires around 1800, but failed to yield concrete results.⁶²

While the improvement of infrastructure and the fomenting of economic growth were heralded as mutually beneficial to both the Crown and the creole elite, *consulado* projects often provoked conflicts with both royal officials as well as other privileged groups within colonial society. The *consulados* enjoyed, to be sure, a modicum of autonomy, but they ultimately operated at the mercy of crown officials who conceived of these institutions as a buttress to their authority. Antagonistic relations soon developed in Cartagena de Indias, for example, where the governor suspended the *consulado* in 1795. He declared that it had ‘caused confusion and disorder, pursuing activities which surpassed the limits determined by its charter’, asserting itself to be superior to the ‘chiefs and tribunal of this place, disturbing public tranquility, and causing great anxiety among all the people. [The *consulado*] even prescribed methods, rules and norms for the best fulfilment of my own obligations as governor’.⁶³ In 1806, the *Consulado* of Cartagena was at loggerheads with the viceroy over its request for a new printing press. The request was rejected, the viceroy argued, because it would have been ‘exposed to abuses’, particularly the ‘introduction of dangerous writings and pamphlets’ inconsistent with the overall ‘goal’ of the *consulado*.⁶⁴ As their prestige and influence grew, the *consulados* jealously guarded their new-found autonomy against the usurpation of crown officials. Particularly irksome was intervention in mercantile disputes. In 1808, the *Consulado* of Chile complained of the ‘unjust desire’ of the Captain-General to meddle in the ‘private and particular affairs’ of the *consulado*, an act that it claimed would ‘discard’ the law of the kingdom.⁶⁵

Since the new *consulados*, by definition and membership, usually pursued the interests of the planter and merchant community in the city in which they were founded, they also became embroiled in disputes with groups from other regions, with whose interests their activities collided. The Cartagena *Consulado*, for example, was criticised harshly by economic elites of the interior who complained that the coastal *consulado* did nothing to advance or protect their interests. Similar disputes, between the ‘newer’ merchants of VeraCruz and the ‘older’ merchants of Mexico City, occurred in New Spain. As their power and ambition increased, then, *consulados* were assailed both by rival groups within creole society and colonial officials who once had confidently heralded their utility.⁶⁶

⁶² AGI Chile 445, *Consulado* to Miguel Cayetano Soler, 13 June 1800.

⁶³ AGI Santa Fe 957, Joachim de Cañaveral to Diego de Gardoqui, 3 Nov. 1795.

⁶⁴ Viceroy Amar y Borbón, quoted in Silva, *Los Ilustrados de Nueva Granada*, pp. 629–30.

⁶⁵ AGI Chile 445, *Consulado* to Cayetano Soler, 15 July 1800.

⁶⁶ McFarlane, *Colombia Before Independence*, p. 316; Hamnett, ‘Mercantile Rivalry and Peninsular Division’; Lampros, ‘Merchant-Planter Cooperation and Conflict’.

In spite of these disputes, the *Consulados* pursued initiatives which dovetailed with the aims of Bourbon reformers. The emphasis on public works epitomised the mutual advantage which was openly acknowledged. The expansion of transportation links, the construction of canals and bridges, and the improvement of maritime facilities promised to generate improvements in trade, general welfare and tax revenues. If the goals were common and means were beyond the dispute, however, the ideas which led to this consensus differed. For Madrid's regalists, robust state action alone would bring about the desired result. For the *consulados*, by contrast, state power would be strictly defined and limited. For most *consulado* members, the commitment to the principles of political economy implied recognition of the limits they set on politics. Laws would rule society, and the state would merely serve as their guardian.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the most important convergence was the priority allotted to economic growth by both the *consulados* and crown reformers, a priority which minimised the likelihood of confrontation and made civil society-state interdependence a pillar upon which prosperity could be erected.⁶⁸

The political and economic ideas of the American consulados

The *consulados* did not always fulfil their extravagant promises concerning the economic prosperity that their activities would produce. The *Consulado* of Cartagena, for example, according to one eminent scholar, 'failed to become a beacon for promoting economic development' in New Granada.⁶⁹ Regardless of their ultimate success in facilitating mercantile affairs or the completion of the infrastructure projects they undertook, the *consulados*, together with the Economic Societies with which they often shared members, served as a key conduit through which new political and economic concepts infiltrated policy. *Consulados* endowed creoles with a modicum of self-government and directly encouraged economic development by diffusing economic ideas and technical knowledge.

The extensive activities of the *Consulado* of Buenos Aires support the view that these bodies helped to galvanise intellectual life in the colonies. Manuel Belgrano (1770–1820) articulated his political and economic ideas in his

⁶⁷ David McNally, *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism: A Reinterpretation* (Berkeley, 1988), especially pp. 124–5.

⁶⁸ This analysis draws on Albert Hirschman's observation that, 'the by-product of individuals acting predictably in accordance with their economic interests was therefore not an easy balance, but a strong web of interdependent relationships ... Ambition, the lust for power and the desire for respect can all be satisfied by economic improvement': Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 51, 110.

⁶⁹ McFarlane, *Colombia Before Independence*, p. 316.

capacity as secretary of the *Consulado* of Buenos Aires. Beginning in 1794, Belgrano presented an annual *memoria* which disseminated – in abridged and rather loose translations – the ideas of, among others, Quesnay, Dupont de Nemours, Galiani and Genovesi. Echoing Quesnay's and Mirabeau's tract *Rural Philosophy* (1763), Belgrano proclaimed that free trade could be a motor of revival and asserted that land was the unexploited patrimony of the colony. He contended that 'agriculture is the true destiny of mankind ... Everything depends and results from the cultivation of land; without it, the primary products for the arts would not exist and, consequently, industry would have nothing to which to apply itself, and thus commerce would be impossible. In an agrarian state, any other type of wealth is precarious'.⁷⁰

Belgrano's embrace of physiocracy was shared by the merchants of Buenos Aires who contended that 'the principal source of wealth' is 'cultivated land'.⁷¹ This formulation enabled them, as Jeremy Adelman has indicated, to 'query components of mercantilism without overturning the architecture of a highly controlled and regulated commerce'.⁷² Belgrano thus espoused political and economic ideas which did not explicitly undermine the Spanish colonial trading system. Instead, he called for changes in policy which could be accommodated within the present trade and political regime. In this way, Belgrano and other colonial *consulado* figures were simultaneously patriotic and cosmopolitan in their approach to ideas: cosmopolitan in their engagement with political economy regardless of its provenance; patriotic in their commitment to using the knowledge encountered to improve their own society.⁷³

⁷⁰ Manuel Belgrano, 'Medios Generales de Fomentar la Agricultura, Animar la Industria, y Proteger el Comercio en un País Agricultor' (1796), in Museo Mitre, *Documentos del Archivo Belgrano* (Buenos Aires, 1913), vol. I, p. 59; on the impact of physiocracy in the Spanish empire, see Ernest Lluch and Lluís Argemí i d'Abadal, 'La fisiocracia en España', in *Agronomía y fisiocracia en España (1750–1820)* (Valencia, 1985); on the translation of works of European political economy into Spanish, see Vicent Llobart, 'Traducciones españolas de economía política (1700–1812): catálogo bibliográfico y una nueva perspectiva', *Cromohs* 9 (2004), pp. 1–14.

⁷¹ AGI Buenos Aires 585. Such an embrace of physiocracy would have not been construed as politically radical. As McNally suggested in his examination of Quesnay, 'the unity and stability of the social order presuppose a centralised political authority which can establish the framework by which private interests unintentionally further the general welfare': see McNally, *Political Economy*, p. 124.

⁷² Jeremy Adelman, *Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World* (Stanford, 1999), pp. 58, 63; for additional treatment of Belgrano's economic ideas, see Oreste Popescu, *Studies in the History of Latin American Economic Thought* (London, 1997), pp. 156–71, and Navarro Floria, 'Notas para un estudio del ideario económico y político de Manuel Belgrano', *Quinto Centenario* 13 (1987), p. 183; on the importance of Campomanes in Belgrano's thought, see Jorge I. Segura, *El Pensamiento Económico de Manuel Belgrano* (Mendoza, 1953), p. 7.

⁷³ On this idea, see John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 38. In relation to the Spanish Atlantic world, Jorge

Assertions of the primacy of agriculture and its intimate connection to commerce also may be found in Caracas and Santiago. The *Consulado* of Caracas described ‘the intimate link between agriculture and commerce, the one creates and supplies the other ... [Agriculture] is the primordial seed of the abundance of states’.⁷⁴ This enthusiasm was shared by Manuel de Salas (1754–1841), *síndico* of the *Consulado* of Santiago, who lamented Chile’s over-reliance on mineral extraction and asserted that agriculture, if developed, could become the guarantor of prosperity. ‘I believe that the decadence [of Chile], he argued, is due to a ‘defect of its constitution, as has been the case in other lands solely dedicated to mining’.⁷⁵ A discernible conviction in the primacy of agriculture animated his *memorias* to the Chilean *Consulado*: ‘No nation [*nación*] that encourages agriculture has not enjoyed a large population, or improved industry, or failed to establish an advantageous commerce’.⁷⁶ Many obstacles blocked this efflorescence. Merchants lamented that under-population precluded genuine development of abundant resources, leaving the colonies with ‘treasures that we cannot cultivate due to the absence of labour’. Population was lauded as the ‘greatest treasure and true wealth of a state’ and its increase was actively encouraged through a series of both prudent and outlandish schemes.⁷⁷ Deficient population, combined with faulty agricultural techniques, led the *consulado* to conclude that previous policy had proved a colossal failure: Chile, ‘the most fertile [colony] in America and the most adequate for human happiness’, lamentably stagnated and remained ‘the poorest of Spain’s dominions’.⁷⁸

The *consulados’* fascination with political economy intersected with their explicit invocation of foreign practices as models of reform for

Cañizares-Esguerra described political economy as part of a ‘patriotic epistemological discourse at the core of the Spanish enlightenment ... of a “cosmopolitan” kind’: ‘Eighteenth-Century Spanish Political Economy: Epistemology of Decline’, *Eighteenth-Century Thought* vol. 1 (2003), pp. 301, 314.

⁷⁴ AGI Indiferente General 2467, Real Consulado de Caracas to Madrid, 18 April 1801.

⁷⁵ Manuel de Salas to Diego Gardoqui (1796), in *Escritos de Manuel de Salas* (Santiago, 1910), vol. I, p. 161; for an older but very thorough treatment of the organisation and activities of Santiago’s Consulado, see Elsa Urbina Reyes, ‘El Tribunal del Consulado de Chile: sus orígenes y primeros años’, *Boletín de la Academia Chilena de la Historia* vol. 29 (1962), pp. 104–43.

⁷⁶ Archivo Nacional (Chile), Tribunal del Consulado, vol. 34, ‘Representación al Ministerio de Hacienda sobre “El Estado de la Agricultura, Industria y Comercio en Chile”’, Jan. 1798. Hereafter national archives are referred to as AN followed by the name of the country.

⁷⁷ AGI Chile 443, ‘Memoria de Consulado de Chile’, 29 February 1797. On population expansion schemes, see Gabriel B. Paquette, ‘Governance and Reform in the Spanish Atlantic World, c. 1760–1810’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2006, esp. Chaps 3 and 4.

⁷⁸ AN (Chile) Tribunal del Consulado, vol. 34, ‘Representación al Ministerio de Hacienda sobre “El Estado de la Agricultura, Industria y Comercio en Chile”’, Jan. 1796.

Spanish Americans to emulate. Belgrano argued that colonial societies required exposure to foreign economic ideas for such ‘principles are constant and the happy state that England, France, Germany and Italy have achieved is well-known. Some [peninsular] writers have observed the usefulness and advantageous consequences of their methods’.⁷⁹ In spite of this adulation of foreign and peninsular practices, Belgrano cited few specifics, asserting only that his propositions were imbued with such insights. Agricultural improvement depended, the Chilean *Consulado* contended, on the acquisition and adequate dissemination of scientific knowledge, and praised the ‘great influence’ of the academies and economic societies of France, Berne, London and Spain in the ‘progress of the happiness of the human species’ through their ‘brilliance and research’.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, even in the mid-1790s, only a smattering of documentary evidence for engagement with new-fangled ideas is evident in the *consulado* minutes, though Britain routinely was praised, in vague terms, for the ‘beautiful *luces* which illuminate its sciences’.⁸¹

The entry of foreign ideas and practices helped to transform attitudes toward commerce still dominant in the Spanish Atlantic world. Belgrano, for example, participated in efforts, initiated by Campomanes’s treatises on popular industry, to remove the stigma associated with commercial activities and to invest them with honour.⁸² In order to realise this aim, Belgrano suggested that ‘honour and prizes’ are the ‘motors of the human heart which ensure that the spirit of man does not slumber’. He cited the ‘great’ Antonio Genovesi, the Neapolitan political economist, to bolster his argument that performance incentives should be adopted by ‘enlightened governments’, on the basis that they are ‘drawn from Nature and human history’.⁸³

The scarce diffusion of such foreign ideas, however, was a source of frustration for the local American intelligentsias. ‘Commerce, a profession subject to rules and principles’, an exasperated Salas berated his fellow members of the Santiago *Consulado*, ‘here has solely been the art of buying cheap and selling high’.⁸⁴ But this primitive approach may have been due

⁷⁹ Belgrano, ‘Medios Generales de Fomentar la Agricultura’ in Roque Gondra, *Las Ideas Económicas*, p. 156; for an examination of the critical emulation of foreign political and economic ideas during the Bourbon reform period, see Paquette, ‘Governance and Reform’, especially Chap. 2.

⁸⁰ AN (Chile) Tribunal del Consulado, vol. 34, Memoria, Jan. 1799.

⁸¹ AN (Chile) Tribunal del Consulado, vol. 34, ‘Memorial Sobre Educación Popular’, 1808.

⁸² William Callahan, *Honor, Commerce, and Industry in Eighteenth-Century Spain* (Boston, 1972).

⁸³ Belgrano, ‘Memoria’ of 14 June 1798, reprinted in Roque Gondra, *Las Ideas Económicas*, p. 194.

⁸⁴ AN (Chile) Tribunal del Consulado, vol. 34, ‘Representación al Ministerio de Hacienda sobre “El Estado de la Agricultura, Industria y Comercio en Chile”’, Jan. 1796; Luis Celis Muñoz, *El Pensamiento Político de Manuel de Salas* (Santiago, 1954), p. 50.

less to obstinate ignorance than unfamiliarity with newer modes of thought. As one astute commentator noted in the early nineteenth century, ‘Guatemala, founded in 1524, has not contemplated the teachings of political economy for nearly three centuries’.⁸⁵ The mere arrival of European ideas could not by itself transform colonial society which remained ‘neither agrarian, nor industrious, nor commercial’. On the eve of independence, Santiago’s *Consulado* announced that Chile ‘only required enlightenment’, and this could be acquired by the establishment of an Economic Society in the capital.⁸⁶

Even when these institutions – the University, *consulado* and Economic Society – were established, however, *consulado*-affiliated intellectuals resigned themselves to the apathetic reception of the ideas they disseminated by culturally inert colonists. This pessimism is exemplified by Chilean Juan Egaña’s exhortation to draw inspiration from ‘great men’ such as Condillac, Uztáriz, Genovesi and Filangieri who ‘inspire us with their *luces* and example so that we can profit from their work and cease being the humiliation of humankind’. He lamented that colonial ‘literary establishments languish in mediocrity’ instead of benefiting from these ‘shining models [offered by] wise and generous Europe’.⁸⁷ In Cartagena, José Ignacio Pombo expressed a similar frustration that his contemporaries had ‘wasted time translating [foreign] novels which can only corrupt good taste and sound customs’, complaining that to such misplaced priorities must be attributed the failure to translate Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) into Spanish until 1794.⁸⁸

Whereas most of the South American *consulado* documents reveal frustration with the slow diffusion of foreign, purportedly ‘enlightened’ ideas due to a faith in their efficacy, the *Consulado* of Havana firmly believed that the state should bring about Cuba’s collective prosperity by any means necessary, whether through the introduction of new-fangled ideas or special preferential measures. The expanding wealth of Cuba’s sugar-planting patriciate nourished its conviction in the state’s responsibility for the promotion and protection of its interests. ‘The class that at all times and in all countries’, one *consulado* document declared, ‘has been, and will be, the most valuable, the foundation of the state, on which it relies in the most urgent

⁸⁵ Quoted in Woodward, *Class Privilege*, p. 107.

⁸⁶ AN (Chile) Tribunal del Consulado, vol. 34, Memoria of Anselmo de la Cruz, Jan. 1807.

⁸⁷ Juan Egaña, ‘Oración Inaugural para la Apertura de los Estudios de la Real Universidad de San Felipe en el Año 1804’, in *Escritos Inéditos y Dispersos* (Santiago, 1949), pp. 14–17.

⁸⁸ Pombo (1810), quoted in Silva, *Los Ilustrados de Nueva Granada*, p. 399; on the translation and dissemination of Adam Smith in the Spanish Atlantic World, see R. S. Smith, ‘*The Wealth of Nations* in Spain and Hispanic America, 1780–1830’, *Journal of Political Economy* vol. 65 (1957), pp. 104–25.

times, the masters of agriculture'.⁸⁹ By the mid-1760s, a new understanding had developed between the Crown and the American elite. The former indulged the latter with unprecedented special commercial privileges, more titles of Castile, new opportunities for military rank, and a hefty *fuero* for the militia.⁹⁰ These concessions indicate that a dynamic partnership between the Cuban elite and the Crown flourished, an alliance predicated on government policy conducive to the expansion of Cuba's wealth.

Chartered during the gubernatorial tenure of Luis de las Casas in the early 1790s, Havana's *Consulado*, like those of Santiago and Buenos Aires, assumed responsibility for the 'protection and encouragement' of agriculture and commerce.⁹¹ Often defining the contours of the *consulado* debates was its *síndico* and *asesor*, Francisco Arango y Parreño (1765–1837), who, like Belgrano in Buenos Aires, delivered orations which claimed to utilise the 'discoveries' of European political economy in order to solve local policy conundrums.

After returning from Spain, where he, like Belgrano, studied civil law, Arango, in his maiden speech to the *consulado* in 1794, asserted that Havana's agriculture was a 'victim of an exclusive monopoly company that shackled its industry'. While paying lip-service to the 'tragic surrender to the English' in 1762 in the closing moments of the Seven Years' War, he lauded the unintended, yet beneficent, consequences of the occupation, which brought 'considerable wealth' to the island. Arango argued that, 'with their [African slaves] and free commerce, [Britain] accomplished more [in nine months] than we had in the previous seventy years'.⁹² In 1794, employing similar arguments, Havana's *Sociedad Patriótica* eulogised the 1765 Bourbon *comercio libre* decrees as the grand moment when Cuba:

broke free from its ancient shackles ... [which] suppressed a multitude of possibilities, imprisoned our industry, and enervated activity; with a single action, it made all of us happy, destroying that detestable monopoly which enriched, at

⁸⁹ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 101, doc. 4990, José Ignacio Echegoyen, 20 Feb. 1798; on collaboration between planters and crown officials in Cuba, see Johnson, *Social Transformation*, pp. 128–66.

⁹⁰ A. J. Kuethe, *Cuba 1753–1815: Crown, Military and Society* (Knoxville, 1986), p. 74.

⁹¹ For an overview of the Consulado's activities, see Salvador Arregui Martínez-Moya, 'El Real Consulado de la Habana, 1794–1834', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Murcia, 1992; and Lampros, 'Merchant-Planter Cooperation and Conflict'.

⁹² Francisco Arango y Parreño, 'Discurso Sobre la Agricultura de la Habana y Medios de Fomentarla' in *Obras* (Havana, 1952), vol. I, pp. 117–118; W. Pierson, 'Francisco Arango y Parreño', *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 16 (1936), pp. 467–8; Francisco J. Ponte Domínguez, *Arango Parreño: Estadista Colonial Cubano* (Havana, 1937), esp. pp. 6–77; Dale Tomich, 'The Wealth of Empire: Francisco Arango y Parreño, Political Economy, and the Second Slavery in Cuba', *Comparative Studies in History and Society* vol. 45 (2003), pp. 5–7; for a negative view of Arango's activities, see Johnson, *Social Transformation*.

most, four people to the detriment of the rest of the colony ... from this happy metamorphosis, our *patria* has been converted into a cultured, brilliant and populous city.⁹³

The unregulated, plentiful entry of slaves and the removal of mercantile restrictions in 1762–1763 greatly benefited Havana's sugar planters. Though these laws were repealed with the return of Spanish administration, Havana's intelligentsia recognised that the *comercio libre* decrees of the mid-1760s had also, though to a lesser degree, benefited their interests. The revival of these 'English' policies and the deepening of *comercio libre* constituted the main pillars of the commercial reforms sought by Havana's *Consulado* and Economic Society.⁹⁴

In subsequent orations, Arango purveyed a vision of the *consulado* as a catalyst of economic expansion. He criticised the first *consulados* which had been organised in a 'defective manner' and, subsequently, had 'degenerated significantly' through a monumental failure to exercise their commercial functions, and thus perfunctorily acted 'like an ordinary judicial tribunal'.⁹⁵ Arango contended that the *consulado* should play a more dynamic role in exploiting the island's economic potential, which, he believed, could best be accomplished through emulation of the successful practices of rival European states. Far from mere intellectual fashion, Arango described the urgency imposed on Cuban agriculture by imperial rivalry. It was necessary to 'transplant to our soil the advantages achieved by foreign nations by means of their greater knowledge'. In view of the 'great advances which the English have achieved in their establishments in Sierra Leone', he warned, 'we must not lose a single moment'. In the mid-1790s, Arango journeyed to Spain, Portugal, England, Barbados and Jamaica, at the request of the *consulado*, in order to acquaint himself with techniques potentially applicable to Cuba. Arango marvelled at the 'comfort which [Portugal and Britain] enjoy in relation to the supply of [African slaves]' and implored his colleagues to find a 'means by which we may enjoy similar advantages'.⁹⁶

⁹³ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana* (Havana, 1794), vol. II, pp. 133–4.

⁹⁴ Arango and his fellow champions of less-regulated trade conveniently failed to mention the major injections of capital which Cuba regularly received from the mid-1760s. As Stein and Stein indicate, 'an impressive proportion of [New Spain's] surplus funds was earmarked for financing Cuba's defences': *Apogee of Empire*, p. 353; see also Carlos Marichal and Matilde Souto Mantecón, 'Silver and *Situados*: New Spain and the Financing of the Spanish Empire in the Caribbean in the Eighteenth Century', *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 74 (1994), pp. 588–9.

⁹⁵ Arango y Parreño, 'Reflexiones Sobre la Mejor Organización del Consulado de la Habana, Considerado como Tribunal' in *Obras*, vol. I, p. 209.

⁹⁶ Arango y Parreño, 'Discurso Sobre la Agricultura de la Habana y Medios de Fomentarla' in *ibid.*, p. 153.

Like many of his contemporaries in the Spanish Atlantic World, Arango heaped elogiums on Britain's 'opulence', the 'beauty of its countryside', the 'perfection of its cultivation'. Unlike many of his contemporaries who contented themselves with vague and effusive praise, however, he praised specific institutions. 'Why don't we shift our gaze to wise England?', Arango frequently implored. With regard to colonial agriculture, the quality and 'low price of machines and tools' which British colonial planters employed impressed him most. He reported that these same devices, if widely distributed, could be indispensable to the accelerated growth of Cuba's sugar industry. In Jamaica, he praised the 'methods which in all times have been employed to increase the population of white [colonists]', identifying the roads which had been constructed, and the discipline and 'division of labour' imposed on the slaves as the two chief policies to be emulated.⁹⁷ Neither tax structures nor land use practices evaded his observation. In Britain, he reported, a land tax was imposed and collected without causing disruption, still at a considerable benefit to the Treasury. In its Caribbean colonies, however, Britain did not collect this tax, and this dual policy, suited to the peculiar circumstances of each location, formed the basis for Arango's favourable comparison of British with Spanish colonial governance. 'We continue to do the inverse', he lamented, for 'we want to test out in the colonies a type of tax which our wise government has not even been able to collect successfully in [peninsular] Spain'.⁹⁸ Arango's glowing appraisal of British practices was shared by Havana's Economic Society, whose members admired the 'progress of [England's] agriculture by indefatigable constancy' and 'continued relish for the perfection of rural practices' which had brought 'abundance to that kingdom'. The Economic Society also lauded England's 'foreign commerce, which had increased prodigiously and [enabled England to] amass wealth and population'.⁹⁹ The *consulados* and other enlightened creoles, then, sought to obtain and disseminate 'useful' knowledge, developed locally and abroad, to encourage agricultural improvement as well as commercial expansion.

Ultramarine Economic Societies, intellectual exchange, and colonial development

The backwardness denounced by the *consulados* was the impetus behind the *Sociedad Económica*, or Economic Society, an institution that flourished

⁹⁷ AGI Estado 5B, no. 4, 'Puntos que ha tratado en la Junta de Gobierno del Real Consulado de la Isla de Cuba ... Arango en la Relación que de su viaje ha hecho' (1796 ?), fos. 1-5 passim. ⁹⁸ AGI Estado 3, no. 7/6, Arango y Parreño, 22 April 1796, fo. 2.

⁹⁹ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. I, p. 35; on Anglophilia and Anglophobia, see Gabriel B. Paquette, 'Enlightened Narratives and Imperial Rivalry in Bourbon Spain: The Case of Almodóvar's *Historia Política de los Establecimientos Ultramarinos de las Naciones Europeas* (1784-1790)', *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* vol. 48 (2007), forthcoming.

throughout the Spanish empire in the late eighteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Seventy societies were created on the peninsula and 14 were founded overseas between 1770 and 1820. The Economic Societies encouraged what might be anachronistically termed ‘best practices’, sponsoring essay prizes to stimulate innovation, particularly new agricultural techniques.¹⁰¹ Composed mainly of wealthy creoles, these societies also compiled libraries of Spanish and foreign books, often dominated by technical subjects, and sponsored schools and institutes for instruction in agriculture, the natural sciences and various manual arts. Applied knowledge, which would lead to economic improvement, was their decided emphasis. In New Granada, one prominent intellectual summarised this pervasive instrumental orientation toward knowledge when he declared that the study of astronomy proved a ‘fruitless activity’ unless it ‘improves our geography, our roads and our commerce’.¹⁰²

The antecedents of the Economic Societies were the agricultural improvement organisations which flourished throughout Europe at mid-century.¹⁰³ Modelling itself on Basque precedent, the first Cuban *Sociedad Patriótica*, founded in 1787 in Santiago, met sporadically in 1790, but ceased to function altogether by 1792, the same year in which its counterpart in Havana began to swell in size, prestige and political clout. From its inception, Havana’s *Sociedad Patriótica* claimed its mission was to eradicate the impediments to the ‘free circulation of the sciences and the arts’, thereby facilitating ‘*el comercio de las luces*’, and contributing ‘efficaciously to the

¹⁰⁰ Also called the *Sociedad Patriótica* in America and, of course, *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* in peninsular Spain.

¹⁰¹ Shafer, *Economic Societies of the Spanish World*, pp. 48–9. These essay prizes usually related to a specific aspect of agriculture. For example, AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 92, doc. 3926, ‘Expediente Relativo a los Premios Ofrecidos por la Real Sociedad Patriótica a los Mejores Escritos Sobre Ciertos Ramos de Agricultura, especialmente Café, Añil y Algodón’, 15 Jan. 1796; AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 99, doc. 3841, ‘Expediente Relativo al Premio ... al que componga el Mejor Tratado para el Gobierno Económico de los Ingenios de Fabricar Azúcar en esta Isla’, 17 Jan. 1799.

¹⁰² Francisco José Caldas (1811), quoted in Antonio LaFuente, ‘Enlightenment in an Imperial Context: Local Science in the late Eighteenth-Century Hispanic World’, *Osiris* vol. 15 (2000), p. 170.

¹⁰³ Rocío Sánchez Lissén, ‘Aportaciones de las Reales Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País al pensamiento económico español’, in María Consolación España, ed., *Las Reales Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País y el Espíritu Ilustrado: Análisis de sus Realizaciones* (Seville, 2001), pp. 125, 127. Foreign visitors to Spain offered little praise for the *Amigos del País* societies. Henry Swinburne noted that they had ‘gone on but slowly in their improvements in literature and agriculture. I doubt that they have yet got into a proper method; for they undertake many things and finish none’. See his *Travels through Spain in the Years 1775 and 1776* (London, 1787), vol. II, p. 203. On British views of the Bourbon reforms, see Gabriel Paquette ‘The Image of Imperial Spain in British Political Thought, 1750–1800’, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* vol. 81 (2004), pp. 187–214.

abandonment of the vain knowledge of the schools'.¹⁰⁴ In Guatemala, petitioners seeking royal permission to found an Economic Society argued that its projects would be practical, not theoretical. The collapse of houses during earthquakes, they suggested, was attributable to 'having known neither the rudiments of geometry nor architecture' and pledged to 'prefer those branches of learning which open new roads, construct cities, defend ports, and infinitely facilitate' the colony's economy. By 1810, Economic Societies had been established in VeraCruz, Havana, Lima, Quito, Buenos Aires, Caracas and Guatemala.¹⁰⁵

Commercial education was a chief concern of merchants on both sides of the Atlantic. The statutes for proposed mercantile academies varied, but all stressed that the same essential skills: arithmetic; language acquisition (particularly French, English and Dutch); and double-entry book-keeping. Endowed with this training, it was hoped, the young apprentices would develop into 'perfect merchants, good consuls, wise judges, and, ultimately, vassals capable of undertaking important projects'.¹⁰⁶

In the late 1790s, Havana's *Consulado* and *Sociedad Patriótica* jointly sought to found an institute for *Ciencias Exactas y Naturales para la Educación de la Juventud* to 'diffuse in all minds a love of the sciences, an inclination that produces the happiest effects', claiming that such an institution could be 'the instrument of happiness of the people'. It could 'banish inaction', they asserted, in idle young men. Furthermore, the natural sciences would help Cuba achieve its greatest 'prosperity, robustness and greatness'. Although the governor thought it 'commendable' to 'enlighten the nation by the progress of letters', the petition was rejected, without explanation, by the Crown.¹⁰⁷ The *Sociedad Patriótica*, undeterred, reiterated its conviction in the immediate benefit to be derived from such schools, proposing a training programme in botany and chemistry so that agriculture might 'attain closer communication with those sciences'.¹⁰⁸ Although the principal expressed aim of these schools would be to 'promote public enlightenment', it is apparent that their primary virtue lay in their anticipated benefit to the island's

¹⁰⁴ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. I, p. 2; on this subject, see Izaskun Alvarez Cuartero, 'Las Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País en Cuba (1787-1832): una aportación al pensamiento Ilustrado' in Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Tomás Mallo Gutiérrez (eds.), *Cuba: Perla de las Antillas* (Madrid, 1994), esp. pp. 37-8.

¹⁰⁵ AGI Estado, no. 7/3, 'Discurso Sobre las Utilidades que Puede Producir Una *Sociedad Económica* de Guatemala' (1795), fo. 6; Shafer, *Economic Societies*, p. 259.

¹⁰⁶ Archivo Histórico Nacional [hereafter AHN] (Madrid) Estado 2927, no. 301, 'Ordenanzas para el Reglamento de una Academia de Jovenes Comerciantes [en Barcelona]' (1787); AHN Estado 3188, no. 377, Eugenio de Santiago Palomares, 'Establecimientos de una Escuela de Comercio en Madrid o Valencia' (July 1786).

¹⁰⁷ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 179, doc. 8213, Sociedad Patriótica to Godoy, 21 March 1797; AGI Estado 1, no. 32/1, Count of Santa Clara to Godoy, 22 March 1797, fo. 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. I, pp. 18-19.

sugar industry.¹⁰⁹ Similar proposals proliferated elsewhere, often tailored to local exigencies. Modelling themselves on the Santander *Consulado's* successful petition for an *Escuela de Náutica y Dibujo* in 1792, both the Havana and Buenos Aires *Consulados* aspired to establish similar academies, whose mission would be to 'train good sailors'. To the absence of such an academy, it was said, 'a series of losses may be attributed', for its existence would make 'many youths useful to the state'.¹¹⁰

In spite of Havana's status as the most vibrant city in the Spanish Caribbean, its inhabitants remained cognizant of their distance from the epicentres of European intellectual activities, as their efforts to replicate Old World institutions, such as the nautical and drawing school, suggest. Aware of the paucity of individuals qualified to teach chemistry, for example, a member of the *Sociedad Patriótica* bemoaned:

the distance which separates us from the Old World and the cruel necessity of acquiring everything from there, our communication having been disrupted by a prolonged war, the scarcity of native professors, and the difficulties entailed in recruiting a foreign one, obliges us to solicit the most remote regions in order to begin the study of a science shamefully unknown in our country.¹¹¹

Not all projects met similar frustration, however, particularly when pertinent to the lucrative sectors of the economy. The most commonly pursued objective concerned the improvement of sugar cultivation. *Habaneros* sought to familiarise themselves with foreign practices and to diffuse them widely. The *consulado* and *Sociedad Patriótica* subsidised translations of prominent technical manuals which had 'enabled the cultivation of sugar to achieve the highest grade of perfection'.¹¹² There was a creative thrust galvanising these efforts which would 'awaken not only an investigative spirit, but also lead to the discovery of new laws from which the progress of unknown or forgotten branches will arise'. For this reason, a proposed translation of French sugar manuals would be accompanied by a 'succinct exposition of the method which we currently employ, with the aim that we will be able to compare one with the other and thus deduce which system works better'.¹¹³ The ultimate

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ AGI Buenos Aires 587, Consulado to Secretary of State, 24 April 1802; AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 179, doc. 8213, 'Expediente Sobre Establecer en Esta Ciudad un Instituto de Ciencias Naturales y Proyecto de una Escuela de Náutica', 2 Dec. 1796.

¹¹¹ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. III, p. 19.

¹¹² María Dolores González-Ripoll Navarro, *Cuba, la isla de los ensayos: cultura y sociedad (1790-1815)* (Madrid, 1999), pp. 198-200; AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 92, doc. 3925, 'Expediente Traducir al Castellano las Obras Francesas de Du Trône de la Couture y de Corbeaux, acerca del Cultivo de la Caña', 15 January 1796. These works were *Précis Sur la Canne et Sur les Moyens d'en Extraire le Sel Essentiel &c* and *Essai sur l'Arte de Cultiver la Canne et d'en Extraire le Sucre: Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. I, p. 13.

¹¹³ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. I, pp. 14-5; on the sugar planters' embrace of new technology, see María M. Portuondo, 'Plantation Factories: Science and

goal of these endeavours was the achievement of a 'perfect system of agriculture that will facilitate the greatest harvest at the least possible cost. France and England have not lost sight of this maxim, following it in all their colonies in America'.¹¹⁴

Not all of the Havana intelligentsia's efforts should be dismissed as merely instrumental to economic aims, as anecdotal evidence for less immediately remunerative cultural pursuits may be gleaned from lists of foreign books purchased by the *consulado* for its library. One such shipment in 1811 revealed, among others, John Marshall's *Life of George Washington*, Alexander Hamilton's complete works, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and Alexander von Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*.¹¹⁵ Other *consulados* also sought to introduce their members to European texts. In 1801, the leadership in VeraCruz requested that its agent in Madrid procure 'the best works on political economy, in all the branches most pertinent to the prosperity of the monarchy in general and to the institution of the *consulado* in particular'. In response, the agent suggested eight sixteenth-century political writers, including Castillo de Bobadilla, Gutiérrez de los Ríos, López Madera and Pérez de Herrera; seventeenth-century mercantilists also feature prominently, including Moncada and Zevallos. Uztariz, Bernardo de Ulloa, Ward and Campomanes are among the eighteenth-century writers cited. Among contemporary foreign writers, the agent passed over available translations of Hume, Quesnay and Galiani; instead, the works of Steuart, Forbonnais and Necker were included. The few extant catalogues of other colonial libraries reflect a similar range of titles.¹¹⁶

The drive for useful knowledge from foreign sources was not an indiscriminate obsession with the exotic. On the contrary, a member of Havana's Economic Society clarified: 'It never will be advantageous for one to copy another. In each country there are a number of unique factors determined by its circumstances, its temperament, government, the state of its industry and agriculture, whose effects greatly influence which establishments may be organised'.¹¹⁷ Such a spirit led not to xenophobia and cultural stagnation, but rather impelled new intellectual projects. Havana's *Sociedad*

Technology in late Eighteenth-Century Cuba', *Technology and Culture* vol. 44 (2003), pp. 231–57.

¹¹⁴ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 101, doc. 4990, José Ignacio Echegoyen, 20 Feb. 1798.

¹¹⁵ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 22, doc. 1295, 'List of books in a box shipped by the American Brig *Boston* for Havana, to the care of Antonio de Frias for, and on the account of, the President of the *Consulado*', 11 Nov. 1811.

¹¹⁶ Irving A. Leonard and Robert Sidney Smith, 'Documents: A Proposed Library for the Merchant Guild of VeraCruz, 1801', *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 24 (1944), pp. 84–102; Harry Bernstein, 'Documents: A Provincial Library in Colonial Mexico, 1802', *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 26 (1946), pp. 162–83.

¹¹⁷ *Memorias de la Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana*, vol. II, p. 16.

Patriótica complained, for example, of the failure of creoles to write their own histories and eschewed continued reliance on European accounts. One attempt to redress this absence was a project to compile a 'Provincial Dictionary' of Cuba. 'What a gift we shall give to the literary world', José María Peñalaver marvelled, 'and those who seek to write the history of this island ... will not be able to replace our creole voices with peninsular ones'.¹¹⁸

An eminent Cuban scholar argued that, due to the activities of the Economic Societies, the Spanish American "kingdoms" turned into "countries" which were converted into "*patrias*", each with its own consciousness apart from that of Spain.¹¹⁹ This conclusion, however, is not incontrovertible. It is unnecessary to concur that the Economic Societies spawned national consciousness in order to grasp that they, in conjunction with the *consulados*, galvanised colonial intellectual life during the late Bourbon period. Until the late 1790s at least, the majority of colonial intellectuals pursued licensed privilege within the contours of Old Regime instead of outright sovereignty.¹²⁰ This attitude gradually changed in the late 1790s, but did not disappear, as external shocks to Spain's transatlantic trading system produced economic grievances which corroded the legitimacy of Spain's claim to be the linchpin of public happiness in America.¹²¹

The consulados, war and the dilemma of neutral commerce

The rapid development and maturation of colonial political-economic thought is best demonstrated in the reactions of the *consulados* and Economic Societies to the commercial regulations issued by Madrid between 1790 and 1810. Major naval defeats to Britain, at Cape St Vincent (1797) and at Trafalgar (1805), made Spain's communication with America decreasingly frequent and its commerce scarce. The British blockade of Cádiz further

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. III, pp. 107–8.

¹¹⁹ Fernando Ortíz, 'La hija cubana del Iluminismo' in *Recopilación Para la Historia de la Sociedad Económica Habanera: Tomo V* (Havana, 1943), p. 14.

¹²⁰ As McFarlane pointed out, 'Creole ideas about cultural identity and political rights were still expressed in the political language of the *ancién regime*, and, if creoles accorded themselves distinct identities within the Spanish monarchy, they did not imagine themselves outside of it': 'Identity, Enlightenment and Political Dissent', p. 322.

¹²¹ In pursuing this argument, this article does not disagree with Fisher, 'Commerce and Imperial Decline', who argued that the 'quest for free trade cannot be seen as a dominant factor in determining the political attitudes of Spanish Americans toward the crisis of the Spanish monarchy in 1808–1810'. Rather, the present essay has sought to suggest how traditionally cooperative elites, employing certain political and economic ideas, justified their incremental divergence from official policy *within* the boundaries of the empire's territorial integrity and political unity.

disrupted Spain's transatlantic trade networks, prevented Madrid from supplying the Spanish American market, and triggered a precipitous decline in imperial commerce. The commercial crisis in the fast-growing imperial periphery was particularly debilitating due to its perishable export commodities and its reliance on imported manufactures.¹²² In Buenos Aires, for example, exports in 1797 plummeted to a mere sixteenth of their 1796 level while the prices of foreign goods doubled.¹²³ These events and their consequences, replicated throughout the empire, compelled Madrid to modify existing trade regulations.

In the agrarian colonies many commentators contended that colonial monopoly required greater flexibility well before the outbreak of war crippled oceanic commerce. Steady economic growth, Havana's *Consulado* maintained, had accompanied the removal of most of the restrictions on Cuba's economy during and in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War. Though the amplification of the market attracted supporters, no advocate of freer trade would have lobbied for the legal admission of foreign merchants into the Spanish Atlantic economy. Colonial merchants pursued outlets for burgeoning colonial commodities within the existing architecture of Spanish American trade. The neutral trade decrees of 1797 and 1801 were a last-gasp measure when deprivation wrought by war necessitated alternative trading outlets.¹²⁴ Neutral trade is a vital topic, not solely because it reveals the fissures of the Spanish empire that appeared in the years preceding the wars of independence, but also because it demonstrates how elites sought to reconcile their ambitions with the Crown's priorities, even during the most severe crises. *Comercio neutral*, first sanctioned by Charles IV in November 1797, ostensibly responded to the 'stagnation' which threatened Spanish America with scarcity, permitting merchants of nations not at war with Spain to supply Spanish American markets with products which the peninsula could not.

The merchants of Santiago and Buenos Aires initially were vehemently opposed to opening channels of trade to non-Spanish merchants, even during periods of extreme, war-produced scarcity. As the Intendant of Caracas had predicted in the 1780s, most *consulados* proved vigorous champions of colonial monopoly. Adelman has noted recently that 'abandoning

¹²² Fisher, 'Commerce and Imperial Decline', p. 462; for a nuanced view of Anglo-Spanish commercial relations in this period, see Adrian Pearce, 'Rescates and Anglo-Spanish Trade during the French Revolutionary Wars, ca. 1797-1804', *JLAS* vol. 38 (2006), pp. 607-24.

¹²³ Jerry Cooney, 'Oceanic Commerce and Platine Merchants, 1796-1806: The Challenges of War', *The Americas* vol. 45 (1989), pp. 509-10.

¹²⁴ For another perspective on *comercio neutral*, see Jacques Barbier, 'Peninsular Finance and Colonial Trade: The Dilemma of Charles IV's Spain', *JLAS* vol. 12 (1980), pp. 21-37.

the securities and safeguards of sheltered trade would have exposed guild merchants to greater competition', and thus provided the *consulado* members with 'an interest in shoring up the archaic structures of market life in the colonies'.¹²⁵ When trade with neutral nations was legalised, some *consulados* continued to contest the wisdom of this expedient. The merchants of Buenos Aires justified their opposition because it was 'impossible to execute [the decrees] without causing great harm to the state, the treasury and commerce ... This [new regulation] is insufferable and scandalous and the *consulado* finds it abominable.'¹²⁶ Less regulated trade within the empire, then, was desirable whereas the penetration by foreign merchants of colonial markets, regardless of exigencies, was deemed deleterious.

The Crown soon came to share this judgment. In April 1799 a royal order suspended *comercio neutral* because 'far from achieving these favourable effects, it resulted in great harm to the state and increased the industry and commerce of [Spain's] enemies, putting at their disposal the most powerful force to continue the war'. In revoking *comercio neutral*, Madrid instructed administrators in Spanish America to 'repair the damage that had been caused' and to enforce the order immediately, 'accepting neither excuses nor pretexts' for non-compliance.¹²⁷

By this point, however, the frailty of Spanish America's self-enclosed commercial system had become apparent, even to those merchants who had objected at first to the neutral trade decrees. Colonial merchants protested that, given the 'grave necessity and urgency beyond comparison', neutral ships should be allowed to 'rescue' the colonists from their plight.¹²⁸ The Crown and colonial merchants realised that their interests were irreparably adrift, but they still sought to evade open confrontation. In response to a further royal order in 1803, which demanded a vigilant stance against contraband, Havana's *Consulado* confessed that the 'deplorable situation in which the war has left us' necessitated non-compliance with traditional imperial commercial regulations. While paying obligatory lip-service to its 'impatience to re-establish the natural links' between Cuba and Spain, the *consulado* did not disguise the 'total decadence of commerce', which made unsanctioned trade with neutral nations a 'necessity'.¹²⁹ 'The obstruction of commerce between this island and Spain', remarked an anonymous letter to the

¹²⁵ Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton, 2007), p. 140.

¹²⁶ AN (Argentina) IX 4-6-3, *Consulado* to Madrid (1798), fo. 134.

¹²⁷ AGI Indiferente General 2467.

¹²⁸ AN (Argentina) IX 4-7-9, Vicente Antonio del Murriela, 29 Oct. 1798; Socolow, *The Merchants of Buenos Aires*, pp. 125-9.

¹²⁹ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 112, doc. 4702, Letter 'Sobre Cumplimiento de la Real Orden de 26 de Agosto de 1802, Relativa a la Situación de la Agricultura y Comercio de esta Colonia y especialmente del Contrabando', 25 May 1803.

intendant, 'permits, in moments of necessity, an abrogation of the old laws which restrict the entry of foreign goods'.¹³⁰ The *consulado* clamoured for renewed licence to trade with neutral nations in the 'unfortunate and all-too-probable case of war' because of the 'misfortunes which threaten the sugar islands' when war prevented regular communication with Europe.¹³¹

Neutral commerce proved critical for agrarian and livestock exporting colonies like Cuba, the Río de la Plata, and Venezuela.¹³² Bullion still accounted for the majority of the overall cargo value of imports into Spain from Spanish America, mainly from Peru, New Spain and New Granada.¹³³ Trade of the imperial periphery, by contrast, was composed overwhelmingly of agricultural produce. In Caracas, for example, cacao and indigo accounted for 95 per cent of all exports in 1795.¹³⁴ In these colonies, whose livelihood depended on perishable commodities, the disruption of trade portended disaster. 'The state of commerce is deplorable here', the Buenos Aires *Consulado* announced, the 'war has interrupted the circulation [of goods] without which none of the three branches of public happiness can flourish'.¹³⁵ This condition led *porteño* merchants to seek markets in neighbouring Brazil, and even in Mauritius, for their commodities.¹³⁶

The *Consulado* of Cartagena reached a similar conclusion. Given 'the current circumstance of being entirely cut off from the Metropolis, in order to avoid damage to industry, agriculture and commerce which may result from lack of commerce', the export of commodities to neutral nations was exigent.¹³⁷ Scarcity provoked fears for survival, which then drove the mercantile and agricultural elites of the periphery to deviate from the regulations which had long structured Spanish America's commerce. They sought to justify this deviation by resorting to the pliable rhetoric of public happiness. The Caracas *Consulado*, for example, claimed that, according to the 'principles of political economy', *comercio neutral* was the only way to rescue its agriculture, ruefully remarking, 'if only these were not true principles!'¹³⁸ The synergy which had previously characterised the state's relations with civil society began to lose its force. The Bourbon state, in previous decades hailed as a beacon

¹³⁰ AN (Cuba) Intendencia, leg. 876, doc. 22, Anon., Oct. 1798.

¹³¹ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 112, doc. 4702.

¹³² McFarlane, *Colombia*, p. 307; Fisher, 'Commerce and Imperial Decline', p. 459.

¹³³ Brading, 'Bourbon Spain and its American Empire', pp. 961–9.

¹³⁴ P. Michael McKinley, *Pre-Revolutionary Caracas: Politics, Economy and Society 1777–1811* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 37.

¹³⁵ AGI Buenos Aires 586, *Consulado* to Secretary of State, 23 Aug. 1798. The benefits of neutral trade did not counterbalance the negative effects of disrupted commerce: J. C. Brown, *A Socioeconomic History of Argentina, 1776–1860* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 47.

¹³⁶ Cooney, 'Oceanic Commerce and Platine Merchants', p. 516.

¹³⁷ AGI Indiferente General 2467, *Consulado* of Cartagena to Secretary of State, 31 Jan. 1799.

¹³⁸ AGI Indiferente General 2467, Juan Bautista Echezuria [of the *Consulado* of Caracas] to Madrid, 18 April 1801.

of economic and moral improvement, lost its lustre and came to be viewed, increasingly, as an arbitrary power by the local colonial intelligentsias.

American merchants and planters were not alone in their efforts. Colonial administrators also claimed that compliance with the ban on neutral trade was both impractical and undesirable. In 1799, the Viceroy of New Granada, who, just two years earlier, had refused to authorise neutral trade in spite of a royal order legalising it, reversed his judgment. He remarked that such a prohibition would merely encourage contraband, the 'inevitable' result of a 'complete absence' of communication with the peninsula. 'The gain compensates for whatever risk is involved and interest makes illusory all precautions', he claimed. 'The law of necessity is superior to all other laws.' Indeed, only eight ships from Spain reached Cartagena between 1796 and 1801, making recourse to contraband inevitable.¹³⁹

Provincial officials concurred with their superiors, contending that contraband would flourish were the order to abolish neutral trade enforced. Anti-smuggling policy would entail a massive coastguard operation, certain to be both outnumbered and overmatched by superior British vessels. Imperfect as it was, the Superintendent of Cumaná argued, *comercio neutral* at least guaranteed that the royal treasury collected some taxes and that trade was conducted primarily with neutral nations, instead of with Britain. In addition to these considerations, he argued, there existed a graver danger: the 'poverty, suffering, discontent and desperation' he foresaw from the suspension of *comercio neutral* could incite an uprising which would irreparably harm the war effort and trigger political chaos.¹⁴⁰

Colonial merchants sought to replace disrupted commerce with the peninsula not only with neutral trade, but also to offset it by strengthening links among the various colonial economies of Spanish America. They stood ready to operate within, and profit from, the regional specialisation that prevailed. Creoles formed pan-American networks of trade, particularly during the wars of 1796–1802 and 1804–1814. The chronic shortages wrought by incessant war, the slowly expanding networks of communication, and the emergence of the export commodity industries converted provincial merchants to embrace inter-colonial trade. Whereas in 1790 only four ships departed Montevideo for Havana, fourteen followed the same route in 1796.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ AGI Indiferente General 2467, Pedro Mendiñeta [Viceroy of New Granada] to Madrid, 19 Sept. 1799; McFarlane, *Colombia*, p. 300.

¹⁴⁰ AGI Indiferente General 2467, Vicente Emparam [Superintendente General of Cumaná], 21 August 1799; on Venezuelan debates concerning *comercio neutral*, see Antonio García-Baquero González, 'El comercio de neutrales en Venezuela (1796–1802)' in his *El Comercio Colonial en la Época del Absolutismo Ilustrado: Problemas y Debates* (Granada, 2003).

¹⁴¹ Hernán Asdrúbal Silva, 'La estructuración del comercio y la navegación desde el Río de la Plata a Cuba', *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* vol. 51, no. 2 (1989), pp. 61–7.

Contemporaries reported that the majority of the 159 vessels arriving at Cartagena in 1799 set sail from other Spanish colonies, confirming the assertion that inter-colonial trade boomed.¹⁴²

Intra-imperial trade, then, offered the prospect of respite from the war-induced disruption of transoceanic trade with peninsular Spain. Montevideo's *Consulado*, for example, contacted its Havana counterpart, bewailing its 'isolation caused by political convulsions' and the attempts of 'foreigners to oppose the progress of [our] industry, commerce and shipping, the declared enemies of our prosperity'. Havana's *Consulado*, in turn, was enamoured of the 'great reciprocal advantages of commerce' with the Southern Cone, noting the benefits of exchanging 'our tropical fruit' for the 'meat which we lack'. Similar arrangements were sought with Buenos Aires merchants, whose commerce was likewise considered 'reciprocally advantageous'.¹⁴³

Consulados, however, more often pursued trade with foreigners than intra-imperial trade, leading to acrimonious exchanges. The policies pursued by one colony's merchants sometimes clashed with the interests of another. Reliance on neutral trade intensified friction between various regions of Spanish America.¹⁴⁴ Havana's merchants, for example, were infuriated by rumours that, during a period marked by 'our reduced agriculture', Luso-Brazilian traders 'continue to introduce liquor into the Kingdom of La Plata to the great detriment of our own'.¹⁴⁵ The deleterious effect of such illicit commerce was to undermine 'natural connections' among creoles on both sides of the equator, who 'find themselves abused by this competition with foreign goods'.¹⁴⁶ The Havana *Consulado*, in turn, was censured by VeraCruz for its booming wartime trade with the neutral United States. Havana's aim, it claimed, was 'individual interest and the growth of that colony, without consulting the general wellbeing of the nation'.¹⁴⁷ According to one disgruntled British observer, this neutral trade gave Cuba 'not only protection, but advantages before unknown. The infancy of agriculture in Cuba, far from being checked, is greatly aided in its portentous growth during the war'.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² McFarlane, *Colombia*, pp. 302, 374.

¹⁴³ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 74, doc. 2845, 'Expediente Sobre Comercio Reciprico de esta Plaza con la de Montevideo', 18 Aug. 1812; reply 12 December 1812; AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 73, doc. 2804, 'Expediente (...) para Cimentar el Comercio Reciprico de Frutos, entre Buenos Aires y esta Colonia', 23 Aug. 1803.

¹⁴⁴ Liss, *Atlantic Empires*, p. 174.

¹⁴⁵ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 72, doc. 2788, 12 Feb. 1799.

¹⁴⁶ AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 73, doc. 2804, 'Expediente (...) para Cimentar el Comercio Reciprico de Frutos, entre Buenos Aires y esta Colonia', 23 Aug. 1803.

¹⁴⁷ Letter found in AN (Cuba) Real Consulado, leg. 72.

¹⁴⁸ [Anon.], *War in Disguise; or, the Frauds of the Neutral Flags* (London, 1805), p. 72. North American commerce with Cuba exploded in this period: see J. H. Coatsworth, 'American

Whereas *comercio neutral* and expanded inter-provincial trade were stop-gap measures to stave off the collapse of the old colonial system, the *comercio libre* decrees and new institution of the *consulado* were aimed to satiate the rising demands of mercantile and agrarian elites of the imperial periphery. For the most part, these measures failed to meet the expectations which they fostered. But their relative failure did not impel colonial merchants and planters to seek independence from Spain. Instead, colonial elites sought to portray divergence from official policy as a temporary expedient to attain the goals which they shared with the peninsula: flourishing commerce, enhanced public works, agricultural improvement, and efficacious governance. The *consulados* were considered to be loyal, patriotic institutions by the Crown. This confidence is reflected, for example, in the 1805 royal order which entrusted them with the collection of a *subvención de guerra* duty to subsidise the war effort.¹⁴⁹ The calls for less regulated trade, therefore, were neither a harbinger of independence nor an embrace of free trade ideology, but rather an attempt to harmonise, modernise and recalibrate a system of benefits for both the Crown and largely collaborative colonial elites.

Conclusions

There are two main conclusions to be drawn from this essay: the first concerns the nature of the late Bourbon reform period (c. 1785–1805); the second involves the connection between late colonial civil society institutions, notably the *consulados* and Economic Societies, and the upheavals which gripped America after 1808.

This article has sought to emphasise the turbulent coexistence of often competing ideas that formed the milieu in which Bourbon officials, on both shores of the Atlantic, and colonial actors operated. Emulation of foreign models was always tempered by patriotic priorities and the dictates of local circumstances, necessarily resulting in intellectual hybridity. Far from an absence of ‘sentiments more liberal and enlarged’, the idiosyncratic and uneven nature of policy resulted from the diversity, not paucity, of competing ideas which the Crown sought to implement simultaneously in various colonies, confronting a kaleidoscopic range of circumstances.¹⁵⁰

The failure to appreciate sufficiently this eclecticism led previous commentators to conclude that the Bourbons were ‘simply pragmatic nationalists administering a fragile state and a porous empire’, who ‘merely proliferated traditional structures’ in order to shore up the ‘gothic edifice’ of the imperial

Trade with European Colonies in the Caribbean and South America, 1790–1812’, *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. 24 (1967), p. 248.

¹⁴⁹ Lampros, ‘Merchant-Planter Cooperation and Conflict’, p. 189.

¹⁵⁰ The quotation is from William Robertson, *History of America* (London, 1777), Vol. III, book 8, p. 337.

system.¹⁵¹ Instead, this essay has argued, it is more accurate to view this ‘pragmatism’, the range of policies without an apparent ‘master plan’, as a manifestation of two phenomena: first, the widely divergent ideological underpinnings of the reformers themselves, which pulled policy in multiple, often mutually exclusive, directions; and second, the modifications in policy which necessarily occurred in response to local exigencies, specifically the maintenance of relatively harmonious relations with local elites. This perspective serves to re-frame the relationship between the Bourbon state and American elites on the eve of independence.

The intellectual vibrancy of late colonial Spanish America is beyond dispute. Creole intellectuals modified the ideas they obtained from Europe, contributed original concepts, and creatively adapted ideas to the peculiar circumstances of the New World. Though Spanish Americans certainly drew heavily on Europe, they succeeded in ‘creating an intellectual tradition that was original, idiosyncratic, complex, and distinct from any European model’.¹⁵² Colonial intellectuals drew on an ‘eclectic range of sources to create a “mobile rhetoric” of reform’.¹⁵³

But the spirit of reform was not necessarily a precursor to political schism. The Enlightenment in Spanish America, as in Europe, was often not a subversive movement, but rather ‘developed within and in support of the established order, not outside and against it’.¹⁵⁴ Though conflict occurred and tensions sometimes ran high, the relations between the Spanish Crown and the ultramarine *consulados* and Economic Societies were, in fact, amicable and mutually supportive.¹⁵⁵ The rhetoric invoked by American intellectuals was largely one of licensed privilege, not indignant demand, operating within the framework of empire.¹⁵⁶ An array of clashing political ideas was utilised, but most of them tended to repair, not further tear, the bonds uniting the peninsula with the colonies. Subversive ideologies often remained subordinate to colonial elites’ long-standing commitment to incremental reform and collaboration with metropolitan reformers. In their joint pursuit of expanded commerce, improved public works, new-fangled agricultural techniques,

¹⁵¹ Stein and Stein, *Apogee of Empire*, p. 23; Stein and Stein, *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America: Essays on Economic Dependence in Historical Perspective* (Oxford and New York, 1970), pp. 92–3, 103–4.

¹⁵² Brading, *The First America*, p. 5.

¹⁵³ Adelman, *Republic of Capital*, p. 68.

¹⁵⁴ Adapted from T. C. W. Blanning, *Reform and Revolution in Mainz, 1743–1803* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 34–7.

¹⁵⁵ This analysis draws on the insights from Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford and New York, 2001), p. 13.

¹⁵⁶ It is necessary to acknowledge, however, Anthony Pagden’s keen observation that less regulated trade ‘meant creating a polity which was potentially open to foreign political influence’. See Pagden, ‘Heeding Heraclides: Empire and its Discontents, 1619–1812’, in Richard L. Kagan and Geoffrey Parker (eds.), *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic World: Essays in Honour of John H. Elliott* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 328.

and good governance, civil society and state actors had greater incentives to co-operate than to enter into conflict. It was the absence, rather than the exercise, of royal authority, triggered by Ferdinand VII's abdication, that instigated the crisis which led the different provinces of the Spanish empire to confront the now-looming problem of sovereignty.¹⁵⁷

If political independence proved to be the ultimate solution to the power vacuum in the Spanish Atlantic world after 1808, it is clear that the republican ideas normally associated with the struggle for sovereignty did not enjoy hegemony before that fateful year. The political languages which dominated the colonial *consulados* and Economic Societies did not advocate, initially at least, a full release from the bonds of empire. It must be acknowledged, of course, that exposure to the Bourbon discourse of reform provided a source of opposition to the Old Regime after 1808: the political language of public happiness could metamorphose into an idiom of opposition to Spanish rule. The *consulados* and Economic Societies thus incubated the political writers and actors who eventually laid the intellectual groundwork for emancipation from Spain. Nevertheless, it is instructive to observe how these same writers, operating within the institutions chartered by the Crown, nourished on and clung to, rather than rejected, the ideals and policies promulgated by Bourbon reformers. These now half-forgotten origins of independence political thought are, perhaps, discomfiting to traditional, nationalist historiography, and suggest the crucial need to reconsider the links between Bourbon reform and Spanish American independence.

¹⁵⁷ Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, p. 374; McFarlane, *Colombia Before Independence*, p. 307; Adelman cogently argues that 'American secession was a reaction to the metropolitan effects of Atlantic warfare, and not the expression of accumulated colonial grievances that spawned a separate political identity': *Sovereignty and Revolution*, p. 219