

Raynal in the New Kingdom?

The Comunero Revolution in 1781 was the most serious uprising against Spanish authorities in the New Kingdom of Granada prior to the crisis that ended with independence from Spain (1810–1821). In the populous east of the viceroyalty, around 20,000 people in arms took over several districts and came close to marching on the viceregal capital, Santa Fe (present-day Bogotá). The protesters revolted against recent fiscal and political measures. Common men and women opposed new taxes and restrictions on tobacco and alcohol production and sale. Even some elite *criollos* (vassals of Spanish stock, born in the New World) carefully mobilized against their replacement in administrative posts with *peninsulares* (people born in Spain). Indian communities protested a continuing assault on their landholdings. Fearing for their lives, high officials made some concessions, though they later recanted and ordered the execution of the leaders. Besides the protest near the capital, smaller groups of people revolted in other districts, even deposing and killing local magistrates.¹

Although the new policies seemed terribly burdensome, it was the abrasive way they were introduced that most deeply concerned many of the protesters. Traditionally, taxes and policies were implemented after consultation with locals, who had the privilege to petition the king and negotiate over the scope of change. Some bureaucrats warned that a different, unilateral approach might meet with stiff resistance, but Madrid paid little attention, since ministers were by then engaged

in efforts to transform government by compromise into absolute rule. They planned to extract as much revenue as possible from Spain's overseas domains, utilizing those lands as true "colonies" – a concept they borrowed from the vocabulary of French and English policymakers.²

Many of the protesters in 1781 relied on Castilian political concepts and practices. Accustomed to petitioning the authorities for redress, orally and especially via written memorials known as *representaciones*, many free vassals now felt affronted by officers who refused to listen.³ The protesters called themselves *comuneros*, thus signaling that they spoke for the communities or "the people." Even though the label had a latent subversive implication, the *comuneros* emphasized that they complained not about the king but rather about his ministers, in this case an envoy with special powers and his associates. The *comuneros'* rallying cry in 1781, which they did not invent but borrowed from earlier generations of protesters, captured this alleged simultaneous hatred of the ministers and love for the monarch: "Long live the King, death to bad government!" the protesters shouted.⁴

Yet many people, especially viceregal officials and the clergy, believed that rising up against ministers constituted a crime against the king and a terrible blow to the sacred hierarchical order of society. Bureaucrats in the upper echelons of administration believed the protesters had undermined sovereignty itself, committing a crime of *lesa majestad*. Over the following years and decades, officials would continue to insist that vassals in the viceroyalty had lost their "innocence," their sense of unflinching respect toward the monarch and his ministers. In Santa Fe, subsequent archbishops, viceroys, and judges in the *Real Audiencia* (the high justice and administrative tribunal) maintained that the entire body politic remained vulnerable. They reasoned that no one could question the authority of the ministers without questioning the legitimacy of the king. The idea that the natural order of society could come apart to be replaced with a new, unnatural order became a major concern among the viceroyalty's top administrators following the Comunero Revolution – an important yet rarely noted consequence of 1781.⁵

Slaves and former slaves participated in several movements during the Comunero Revolution, often taking crucial actions for the overall development of the situation.⁶ In 1781 and beyond, many slaveholders

and officials feared that slaves, defying hierarchy and authority, would rise up and emancipate themselves by force, further breaking society's organic order. What the slaves' actual goals might have been, however, can be gleaned from extant handwritten evidence at the provincial and local levels. The documents come from several districts across the western half of the viceroyalty, where the majority of slaves were concentrated. Written by bureaucrats who described the unrest as the fruit of criminal conspiracy and a mechanistic reaction to foreign events, this evidence demands careful, critical reading.

Authorities' preoccupation about failing loyalties thus preceded the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution (1789–1804), the events we more commonly associate with challenges to the monarchical form of government and slavery. After 1789, officials would accuse discontent vassals of flirting with French revolutionary ideas and agents, allegedly spreading a set of doctrines that would cause slaves to violently shake off the yoke of servitude. But even before the 1793 decapitation of the French king and the 1794 abolition of slavery throughout the French Empire, authorities in the New Kingdom (as the viceroyalty was called) had begun to articulate the notion that ungodly, anti-monarchical, and egalitarian ideas had contaminated this territory from abroad. In 1781, a slave overseer claimed that ongoing political protest in Peru and Upper Peru would generate slave unrest in the viceroyalty. By June 1789, an officious friar asserted that books by European "libertine philosophers" had stirred up the souls of leaders of the 1781 insurrection. In 1794, even Santa Fe patricians stood accused of conspiracy to end the current form of government and establish French-inspired "equality" and "liberty."

The French abbot Guillaume Thomas François Raynal stood out among the foreign authors listed as alleged sources of revolutionary influence. His works, Spanish officials warned, defied religion and subordination. Alarming, Raynal questioned the legitimacy of Spain's conquest and possession of its overseas territories. He even forecast that the slaves in the Americas would liberate themselves and kill their masters.⁷ But Raynal's influence in the New Kingdom seems exaggerated, epitomizing the problematic perception of increasing political tensions at home as the direct consequence of foreign designs to destroy the Spanish monarchy. In fact, slaves autonomously discussed or advanced the cause of their own freedom. Raynal's work

occupied no special place in the imagination of criollo patricians interested in political theory and modern philosophy. Members of the New Kingdom's intelligentsia were familiar with Raynal, but the towering figures of their political and legal formation were seventeenth-century thinkers such as Samuel von Pufendorf and Hugo Grotius, and eighteenth-century publicists like Gaetano Filangieri.⁸

After 1781, many clergymen and officials told people that any challenge to specific authority figures constituted a broader challenge to the entire political order. Seeking to separate slaves from the authority of their masters, whether individually or collectively, could be easily construed as challenging the system of monarchical government and its corporate, hierarchal nature. By the same token, projects to separate the New Kingdom from the Spanish monarchy also challenged deeply ingrained notions and habits of hierarchy and authority. Anxieties about slaves and their aspirations for emancipation were thus part of a larger set of preoccupations that became visible as early as the year of the Comunero Revolution.

The Year 1781

At the time of the Comunero Revolution, around 800,000 people lived within the borders of today's Colombia. Roughly 52,000 of them were held in slavery. Even though most of the population (around 55 percent) lived in the eastern half of the viceroyalty, most slaves lived west of the Magdalena River. Just over 35,000 (around 68 percent of the total enslaved population) lived on a vast, variegated territory stretching from the southern governorate of Popayán to the northern province of Cartagena. The west also encompassed the provinces of Antioquia and Chocó (with Chocó, in effect, more accurately described as a satellite of Popayán). While many slaves worked in towns and cities, and many more herded cattle and toiled the fields, most of them spent their lives working in gold mines. Therefore they concentrated on the west, a land cursed with robust mineral deposits, many of them exploited since well before the Spanish conquest.⁹ (See Map 1)

The economy of the viceroyalty relied on slavery to carry out this gold mining. Even though they only represented close to 7 percent of the total population, slaves were responsible for this crucial sector of the economy: they extracted gold dust and gold nuggets from rivers,



MAP 1 The lands of Cartagena, Antioquia, and Popayán in the New Kingdom of Granada. Map by Gerry Krieg.

small streams, and slopes. Some of the resulting bullion became ingots and coins in the Royal Mints of Popayán and Santa Fe. And all of it, regardless of shape or form, served as cash in local, provincial and, most importantly, overseas transactions. Between 1784 and 1793, total exports amounted to just over 21 million *pesos*, of which 19.2 million was gold. Gold would continue to be the most salient export long after independence. And because pre-industrial mining techniques would only begin to improve slowly after 1825, slaves remained the

decisive, most expensive investment in the mining business. The idea that riches, including royal revenues, depended on enslaved labor became deeply rooted in the imagination of many slaveholders and bureaucrats. The well-being of the polity, many argued, rested on the continued subordination of slaves.¹⁰

In 1781, as officials introduced new taxes and tried to tighten Spain's political control over the viceroyalty, popular protests took place in the western, gold-producing districts of Antioquia and Popayán. During judicial interrogations, anxious magistrates forced some protesters and alleged conspirators to speak their minds in front of clerks who wrote down their words. Slaves and former slaves who took part in the events thus expressed their grievances and aspirations. Most magistrates, however, distorted or misunderstood their testimonies, insisting that the discontent had been motivated by outside influence, caused by the spread of foreign revolutionary sentiments. Magistrates also claimed that protesters were not motivated by political aspirations but criminal intentions. Antioquia's governor asserted that malicious slaves planned to end their bondage by means of wholesale slaughter and destruction.¹¹ Yet the sources reveal that many slaves sought to turn 1781 into an opportunity to realize their long-held hopes of deliverance from slavery while remaining faithful to the king and living in peace with their neighbors. Despite the distortions, magistrates and their scribes left records that provide glimpses of the legal imagination of the enslaved.¹²

Even the situation unfolding at the epicenter of the comunero movement should not be understood as a direct trigger of what transpired in Antioquia. To be sure, news of the massive movement in the northeast of the New Kingdom reached slaves and free folk in this province. Fleeting reports from the province of Mariquita, Antioquia's neighbor to the east, even suggested that a comunero leader had offered freedom to a group of slaves in exchange for their joining his forces.¹³ But slaves made their political choices keeping in mind their own predicaments and based on local information. In Antioquia, some slaves took advantage of the 1781 crisis to voice their aspirations for freedom, but these aspirations pre-dated the comunero movement.

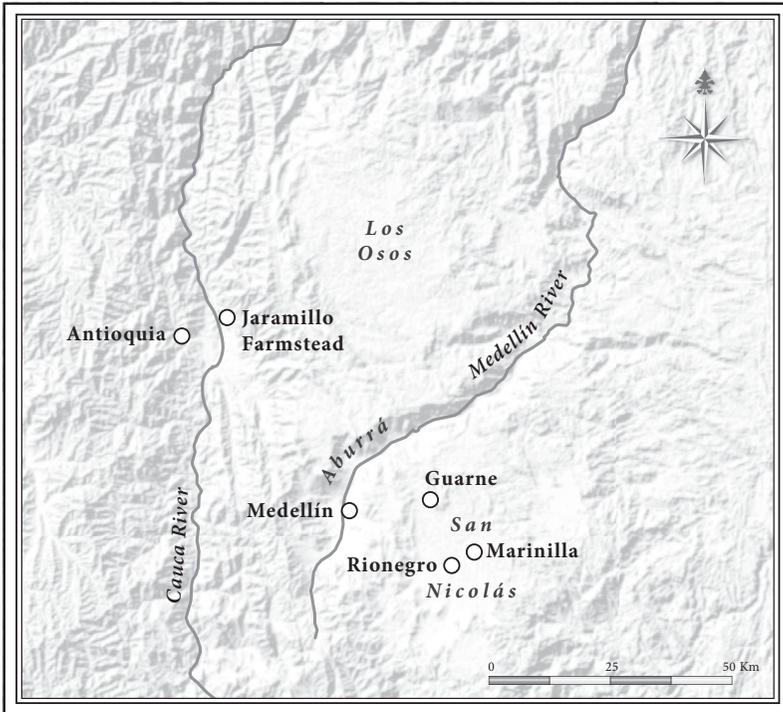
Although obtaining freedom was rare, Antioquia slaves witnessed a few manumissions every year, usually paid for by slaves themselves, and occasionally heard of some masters freeing their captives.

By 1781, slaves who belonged to well-off masters seem to have been particularly hopeful about impending freedom. They were closely watched, poorly fed and clothed, and apparently more harshly treated than slaves owned by less powerful masters. Over the previous fifteen years, people had paid attention to one case of collective emancipation. A rich widow, Javiera Londoño, had manumitted 122 of her slaves, leaving instructions for the emancipation of another thirty-two after her death. Not surprisingly, Londoño's heirs pitched a fierce legal battle to thwart those manumissions, alleging that the widow had lost her mind – an old trick employed to block similar liberations.¹⁴

A few well-off masters who owned dozens of slaves kept some of their captive workers in Antioquia's San Nicolás plateau, where people had mined for gold since the late 1600s (see Map 2). Some of the Londoño slaves lived in the area, where they worked the gold mines alongside people of color and poor criollos. These free folks were known as *mazamorreros*, gold prospectors who ran small operations, rarely owned mine titles or land, and did not have much cash to spare. Some *mazamorreros* owned a few slaves. Through the time-tested panning technique, and with little government intervention, they extracted the prized gold out of rivers and creeks.¹⁵

In 1781, however, the enterprise of gold mining in San Nicolás suddenly stood threatened by new fiscal measures. In June, *mazamorreros* publicly aired their resentment at a new tax on their earnings. They also expressed their opposition to newly established country stores, where they were required to purchase duly taxed supplies from royal agents.¹⁶ When the free miners rose up against these measures in the hamlet of Guarne (see Map 2), slaves found themselves in the midst of political upheaval. And with provincial governor Cayetano Buelta Lorenzana and other officials now pressing for more revenue, some slaves seem to have reasoned that they might be able to accelerate collective emancipation in exchange for offering to pay taxes – in contrast with long-standing patterns of tax evasion. Some slaves aspired to become reliable free vassals of the king, joining the ranks of the humblest *mazamorreros*. The situation proved delicate from the beginning, but some slaves found time to discuss what the crisis might mean for their own aspirations.

The Londoño manumissions and the ensuing legal challenge had become a *cause célèbre* throughout the province, stimulating



MAP 2 The province of Antioquia. Map by Gerry Krieg.

aspirations of collective legal emancipations. This may have been especially true among the slaves of the powerful priest Sancho Londoño Piedrahíta. His aunt, the rich widow Javiera, had appointed him to provide her manumitted slaves with legal advice, for she anticipated other relatives would not let the manumissions stand without a fight. With about 230 slaves to his name, the priest was the largest slaveholder in Antioquia. His aunt's decision had placed him in a paradoxical position: here was a master defending dozens of people seeking to shake off the yoke of slavery while trying to keep his own slaves under subordination. In the eventful year of 1781, the priest seems to have reached his wits' end. He accused slaves of conspiracy to rise up, but he also claimed that slaves had a plan to demand the publication of a royal decree granting them freedom – a fast-spreading rumor among other groups of slaves.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the governor also alleged that slaves throughout the province were planning to rise up on

January 1, 1782. According to governor Buelta Lorenzana, the slaves believed officials had concealed a very important document from them, a decree by the king setting them free.¹⁸

Buelta Lorenzana quickly moved to uncover what he described as an alliance among slaves from different districts within the province, including San Nicolás, the Aburrá valley, and the city of Antioquia – the provincial capital (see Map 2). It was a despicable enterprise, he told other magistrates in a letter, put together by wicked slaves who planned to “kill their masters” and “all the whites,” “proclaim freedom,” and make themselves “owners of everything.” These were quite stereotypical accusations, based on thin and dubious evidence. The governor himself mentioned that, at first, he had only had the slightest clues that such a slave conspiracy even existed. Yet he looked for evidence and, finally, “a fuerza de azote,” by the force of the whip, he got a slave to confess and to name names.¹⁹

Under torture, the witness mentioned the slaves of La Mosca, a mining enclave near Guarne, where the troubles had taken place in June and where the Londoño family had some of their slaves. There, a local magistrate soon obtained confessions that a young man who worked as a muleteer had told slaves in the area to join forces because “the whites” were keeping an important secret from them. José Ignacio, a slave captain and a witness in the case, specifically believed the secret to be a royal decree granting freedom to the slaves. But even under pressure, the witnesses mentioned no plans to kill, destroy, or upend social order. After all, their aspirations for freedom through a royal decree, or from testamentary manumission, pre-supposed that they would challenge the bonds of subordination only through legal means.²⁰

Slaves in the Spanish Indies had a vague legal personhood, but they could file claims against their masters, and even sue for emancipation. Allowed to enjoy legal counsel, slaves on occasion found sympathetic magistrates to plead their cases. When they stood accused of crimes, slaves had advocates appointed by the judges. Held to be “wretched” and “unfortunate” humans, they could aspire to protection by the king and his ministers. In practice, however, legal avenues to redress and emancipation remained difficult to traverse. Typically, such avenues would not easily open unless some pressure was exerted – but slaves exerted pressure in calculated rather than spasmodic fashion.²¹

What fearful masters and bureaucrats saw as an uprising conspiracy may have been the result of a careful dialogue among some slaves on how to capitalize on political unrest in 1781. Slave leaders appeared to be mostly interested in pressing for manumissions legally granted by masters or the king but illegitimately withheld by inheritors and magistrates. In the criminal inquest into the supposed conspiracy, the leading slave Pelayo provided revealing details. He told of a conversation with fellow slaves and their idea that a group of “fifty blacks” could present a *cabildo* (municipal council) with a written petition for collective freedom. Some slaves believed that they should organize as a group and travel to the provincial capital to plead their case before authorities. Slaves who talked about the rumored royal decree in their favor, moreover, believed the document called for freed people to pay taxes “like Indians,” suggesting that slaves could become free vassals with clearly defined privileges and duties, fully enjoying the king’s protection rather than his commiseration alone.²² For some slaves, obtaining freedom meant something close to transitioning into *mazamorreros*, rural denizens fulfilling the duties and enjoying the privileges of the free folk with whom they lived in close proximity and to whom they were related in some cases.

The idea that a group of enslaved people could modify their status by making claims before municipal magistrates resonated with the actual legal roles of *cabildos*. As both administrative and judiciary bodies, *cabildos* functioned as the highest local tribunals, corporations responsible for exercising distributive justice on behalf of the monarch.²³ The would-be petitioners were not entirely misguided in their hopes that perhaps *cabildo* magistrates would finally bring to light that emancipatory decree from the king. Some slaves imagined that a plan existed to do just this on January 1, 1782, the day the governor anticipated the slaves would rise up to become the new masters.²⁴ The first day of each year had an important political meaning for municipal business. Patricians in the Spanish world set New Year’s Day aside to meet and elect new *cabildo* members, the magistrates who would rule their urban centers and rural jurisdictions for the following twelve months.

So maybe there was a plan to kill the patricians as they met to choose new aldermen, as *Buelta Lorenzana* imagined. But Pelayo himself asserted that they would only resort to arms as a last resource.

Moreover, the organized slaves anticipated seeking refuge far away from towns, not to destroy them; they planned to make a living away from the masters and to pay taxes to the king (“like Indians” and *mazamorreros*) if possible. With rare insight, the slaves’ advocate argued that if there had been any plan at all it had probably been to plead before the magistrates on a politically auspicious day.²⁵ This legal counselor’s voice proved to be a lone cry in the desert, however.

The Antioquia case thus suggests a rich, painstakingly and hopeful legal imagination among the enslaved. Pushed to the lowest of social stations and living under the constant threat of violence, while collectively accounting for only a marginal proportion of the population, slaves had to think long and hard before taking arms to speed their freedom. Rather than violent action, many saw individual or collective manumission as the best way to achieve freedom without risking life and limb, even though emancipation remained rare. In Medellín, a day’s travel east of the provincial capital (see Map 2), scribes recorded an annual average of twenty-three slave sales but only formalized three or four manumission acts per year.²⁶ Captivity seemed to have no end. Although the misrepresentation of slaves’ intentions was relentless, some slaves still appear to have trusted that the king would take pity and grant them freedom, thereby bringing about the end of coerced work and offering protection by the magistrates in exchange for loyalty and tribute.

This emerging picture of legal thought and action by slaves relies on a critical approach to the surviving documentation. Accounts of slaves’ deeds and words as criminal conspiracy typically appear in unsympathetic reports and proceedings. Instead of taking such accounts at face value, we must pay careful attention to the polyphony and subtleties of the judicial forum. In the back and forth between accusers and the accused, some expressions were written down that reveal a vibrant convergence of hope and legal awareness among the enslaved, suggesting the existence of communal efforts to effect change. In the governorate of Popayán, even though the surviving evidence is somewhat thin, we can also see how masters typically painted slaves’ mutual help efforts and discrete expressions of discontent as near-apocalyptic threats to the monarchy.²⁷

In Popayán’s districts of Tumaco and Barbacoas (see Map 3), popular protests turned particularly tense, with slaves and other



MAP 3 The governorate of Popayán. Map by Gerry Krieg.

commoners rejecting recent measures affecting tobacco and *aguardiente* (a popular alcoholic beverage distilled from sugar cane). In the Pacific port town of Tumaco, a crowd deposed the lieutenant governor in November 1781, replacing him with Vicente de la Cruz, a former slave. He assumed control of the town for the following ten months but was later arrested and sentenced to forced labor.²⁸ In April 1782, people in the mining town of Barbacoas also took to the streets, demanding to roll back tobacco sale restrictions. The cabildo had to yield. The aldermen, however, sent alarming reports to the viceroy, claiming that the local “nobles” were on the brink of destruction at the hands of criminal “plebs.” Moreover, they suggested that the threat extended to the entire monarchy. Should they become the victims of “insurrection,” cabildo members insisted, the king would lose the

revenue from gold extraction. Local notables worried that coerced workers might escape their control, preventing slaveholders from sending bullion to Popayán's Royal Mint.²⁹

Barbacoas' masters seem to have interpreted the events of 1781 as another symptom of the growing collaboration between free folk and captive workers, which they claimed would lead to the end of slavery. De la Cruz's leadership had been especially alarming precisely because he and his followers could not be easily distinguished as either slave or free.³⁰ Most humble families in the district in fact straddled slavery and freedom. Not only did some slaves abscond permanently or temporarily, but some obtained formal emancipation and then tried to help their captive relatives out of slavery. Hoping to purchase freedom for themselves or their relations, slaves panned for gold on their free days (on Saturdays, and even secretly on Sundays and other Catholic holidays) while free folk poached unclaimed or unguarded streams. The masters claimed that self-emancipation happened alarmingly frequently, and that the acquisition of freedom by any individual slave set a bad example for the rest. Slaveholders saw collaboration between slave and free as collusion to undermine slavery and gold production. During the comunero crisis, the Barbacoas cabildo ordered emancipated slaves to settle down in hamlets instead of illegally prospecting for gold.³¹

Despite the obvious anxieties about slaves' efforts for self-emancipation and the fiscal motivations of the unrest, officials and slaveholders claimed that news about uprisings elsewhere caused the local riots. As early as March 18, 1781, Marcos Cortés, from an infamous clan of masters and slave drivers, predicted that any opposition to the new taxes in Barbacoas would ultimately lead to a slave uprising. It would be "natural," Cortés anticipated, for people in bondage to "shake off the yoke of servitude. . .devouring the lives of every white man." But Cortés also explained that news about the uprising in the northeast of the viceroyalty would lead to unrest. The movement, he even claimed, would be partially caused by the troubles in Peru and Upper Peru, where thousands had joined powerful anti-colonial uprisings in 1780.³²

Even though the situation stabilized quickly after 1782, the planned fiscal and political overhaul of the viceroyalty had been disrupted and a sense of political calamity settled among some. High authorities in

Santa Fe typically thought that the year 1781 had revealed a deep-seated contempt for the current political order in the New Kingdom, a polity they continued to see as being on the brink of upheaval over the following two decades. The dubious moral and spiritual fiber of vassals, Spanish administrators believed, fueled the viceroyalty's unstable political climate. Although quick to blame foreign ideas and agents for political tensions at home, many bureaucrats also believed that wicked locals simply abhorred the peace and virtue of life under the Spanish monarch and the Catholic church. Officials typically painted aspirations for change as challenges against the sacred order of society. The comuneros, people were told, had challenged the holy bonds of vassalage binding together king, ministers, and subjects.³³

Throughout the districts where the 1781 uprisings had been most serious, missionaries preached that the movement had not merely been a protest against taxation but a most egregious crime against the sovereign, the monarchy, and the church. The officious Capuchin friar Joaquín de Finestrada wrote a treatise re-visiting the basic political grammar of the New Kingdom and of the monarchy as a whole – a grammar allegedly defied by the comuneros. The New Kingdom, he reminded his audience, was constituted as a corporatist, inegalitarian, and mystical society. This conception of society rested on three doctrines. First, the sacred organization of the body politic in the form of a monarchy. Rising up against the king's ministers was “the most horrendous sacrilege,” for the monarch's temporal authority emanated from God. Second, the organic constitution of society in the likeness of a human body. The political body had different members, each with specific functions. As the head of the body, the king was the most important member. While the ministers' function was to govern on behalf of the king, the vassals' role was to “venerate and blindly obey his royal commands.” Finally, this “political and Christian order” was eternal: it should not be challenged or altered in any way, for doing so risked the breakup of civility, peace, and virtue. “Without the subordination of the limbs to the head, neither the natural body can survive nor the political [body] preserve itself.”³⁴ The entire system was underpinned by the principle of authority: slaves had to obey masters for the same reasons that all vassals obeyed the king and all students their teachers. In the turbulent 1790s, following the outbreak of revolution in France and its Caribbean

colonies, many would reiterate that these principles and doctrines were under threat from dangerous French agents, godless French ideas, and unruly, easily impressionable slaves.

The French Scare

Some Spanish administrators specifically saw foreign political principles, which they believed had entered the viceroyalty via French books, as a cause of the 1781 troubles. The idea that political contagion had affected the viceroyalty thus predated the outbreak of revolution in France. Before learning about the events at the Bastille, Finestrada already asserted that works by French thinkers had inspired the leading comuneros. He referred to those thinkers as the “new philosopher” or the “libertine philosopher” – French publicists allegedly characterized by their envy of Spain’s glories and their impious character. In Finestrada’s view, those “philosophers,” who dangerously wrote with “little respect” against the church and the principle of authority, had gained secret sympathizers in the New Kingdom. Among these thinkers, Finestrada listed the famous Raynal.³⁵

Raynal epitomized the dreaded French philosopher, co-writing a French-language critical history of European colonization in the East and West Indies that first appeared in 1770 and remained popular in the 1780s. Some people in the viceroyalty illegally owned this prohibited work, which specifically touched on the New Kingdom of Granada, openly discussing the notion that the territories so cruelly conquered and poorly managed by the Spaniards had the potential to become independent.³⁶ Following the increasingly radical French Revolution in the early 1790s, the notion that French ideas and events had direct consequences on the political fate of the viceroyalty became even more entrenched. Authorities, however, looked at events in France in light of the Comunero Revolution.

Because viceregal officials continued to interpret the comunero protest as a crime against the sovereign, in the 1790s they emphasized the French Revolution as a most execrable example of exactly this kind of crime. Following the decapitation of the French monarch (a cousin of the Spanish king) and the outbreak of war between Spain and France in 1793, animosity against people from France and its overseas territories increased dramatically. The year 1793 also saw the liberation of

the slaves in the restive French colony of Saint-Domingue, with increasing participation of freed people in the conflict as soldiers and privateers. The French government declared the abolition of slavery throughout its territories early the following year. Wary about a revolutionary reprise in the New Kingdom, Spanish officials and masters of slaves became suspicious not only of newly arrived French speakers but even of longtime French and other foreign residents.³⁷

In January 1793, on orders from Madrid, the viceroy expelled foreigners from the viceroyalty, except those who would swear allegiance to the king of Spain. About a dozen French people resided in Santa Fe at this time, some of them married to Spanish subjects. The group included Juan Francisco de Rieux. A medical doctor from Montpellier, Rieux had traveled to Saint-Domingue in a scientific expedition in the 1780s. He later traveled to Cartagena de Indias, where he worked in the military hospital before moving to Santa Fe in 1792 (see Map 1). As the owner of a rural estate with ninety slaves, Rieux might not have been interested in promoting revolution, but with his brother still living in Saint-Domingue and he himself traveling regularly between the inland provinces and coastal Cartagena, Rieux received letters, heard news of the events unfolding in the French world, and talked to his relatives and friends about it all.³⁸

Spanish authorities maintained that people like Rieux would transmit French ideas of “liberty,” “equality,” and “disobedience” to Spanish subjects. In Santa Fe, Audiencia judges and other viceregal officials asserted that those notions had spread among notables and college students. The main suspects were members of tertulias, gatherings of men and women of considerable social standing interested in reciprocal learning, the discussion of current events, and what they called modern philosophy. Participants shared printed and handwritten materials, reading aloud and discussing foreign books, gazettes, and correspondence. The French doctor Rieux assiduously participated in Antonio Nariño’s tertulia.³⁹ With the largest personal book collection in the Kingdom (boasting an impressive 1,617 volumes in 1794), Nariño emerged as a leading intellectual and was accused of harboring revolutionary inclinations.⁴⁰

Authorities knew that foreign books were read and circulated among the local intelligentsia, including, though not limited to, French texts. Nariño owned books by Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Raynal.

These authors criticized and mocked the Catholic church, European monarchies, and colonialism with writings that were included in the Inquisition's list of prohibited books. Almost all "French books" were considered "suspicious" at the time.⁴¹ To counteract the potential effect of this literature, Santa Fe's only gazette, the officially sanctioned *Papel periódico de la ciudad de Santafé de Bogotá* (in circulation 1791–1796), denounced what its editor, a fervent monarchist, termed the "political anarchy of France." Defending the natural, wise, and perfect character of monarchies, the editor praised this form of government as the only political system capable of bringing happiness to humankind.⁴²

Such a strong defense of monarchies made sense in reference to events in France as well as in the viceroyalty. Defending kings and condemning regicides worked as warnings against a potential revolution in the New Kingdom, where loyalty to the monarchy, high officials believed, remained vulnerable since the year 1781. Indeed, the *Papel periódico's* coverage of events in France argued that a pathway toward revolution existed, and that the New Kingdom had already taken steps down this very path. The French Revolution, the editor explained in a series of issues, had taken place within a specific chain of events. One chapter in that process, the Flour Wars, appears in the *Papel periódico* as a first "attempt" to throw France into revolutionary turmoil. In the spring of 1775, rioters throughout the French Kingdom demanded a solution to the high price of flour and impending generalized hunger, but in spite of the radical character of the movement, authorities pardoned most of the participants. According to the *Papel periódico*, this misguided policy of compassion toward the "perverse leaders" had allowed the revolutionary spirit to stay alive. The reference to the Flour Wars as an antecedent of the French Revolution resonated among readers of the gazette as a warning that the spirit of the Comunero Revolution still haunted the viceroyalty.⁴³

The message that connections and parallels existed between revolution abroad and the political situation at home was directed at intellectually curious patricians. The editor and his sponsoring officials knew that tertulia habitués read the *Papel periódico*. The coverage of the French Revolution thus identified written works by French thinkers as causes of ungodly social disorder, warning readers against foreign "philosophers." Metropolitan and viceregal authorities

believed that these authors, especially Raynal, embodied a root cause of revolution: disobedience to the principle of authority. They obsessively denounced Raynal, even though his work was infrequently cited among tertulia participants and other readers.⁴⁴ Announcing Raynal's death, the editor of the *Papel periódico* labeled his work "arrogant and boastful," ironically lamenting this great loss for humankind.⁴⁵

Following the 1793 radicalization of the French Revolution, fresh assertions that French egalitarian doctrines directly threatened spiritual and temporal order appeared in the *Papel periódico*. To establish the "system of equality" promoted by French thinkers, the editor insisted, would be absurd. Any and all political transformations were to be prevented. Change, he warned, would amount to sacrilege: just "thinking about the reform of a political establishment" would be an "impious project, tyrannical, and inhuman." For political change could not be achieved without the destruction of "the most sacred objects of Religion, the most sacred bonds of Society, the most useful interests of common good."⁴⁶ To transform society in any way would be to interfere with God's plan for his people. And to transform it by undermining the mystical bonds of vassalage seemed particularly terrible.

The importance of faith and subordination to hierarchical rule in this society can hardly be overstated, as duly explained by the friar Finestrada. If the majesty of the king emanated from God, crimes against the monarch constituted offenses against religion.⁴⁷ Even the very thought of changing the social order, particularly by promoting the idea of "equality," threatened the bonds binding together naturally unequal groups and corporations, all enmeshed in the single spiritual community of the baptized. "We are all vassals of the one same king and members of Jesus Christ," Finestrada wrote. Everybody, he insisted, must fulfill the duties specific to their social stations.⁴⁸

A notion of tremendous negative connotations, equality presupposed an alteration of the reigning political and spiritual order. Finestrada and the *Papel periódico* thus defended hierarchy and inequality, insisting on the proper subordination of the lower to the upper social echelons: the vassals to the king; the vicerealty to the mother country; the provinces to Santa Fe; the hamlets to the cities; the faithful to the clergy; every nun to her abbess; plebeians to patricians; the slaves to the masters. We must keep in mind that, under

Spanish rule, no common rights applied equally to all individuals.⁴⁹ Alarmed authorities claimed that the comuneros first, and now Revolutionary France and the former slaves of Saint-Domingue were bent on turning this status quo on its head, making everybody “equal.”

The Rights of Man and Citizen?

The remarks on the French Flour Wars and the “system of equality” published by the *Papel periódico* appeared in a moment rife with political tensions. Before dawn on August 19, 1794, someone attached pasquinades to the front walls of several buildings in Santa Fe. These pamphlets, which threatened the lives of the viceroy and viceregal officials, mentioned, both specifically and obliquely, not only the 1781 comunero movement but also an ongoing plan to establish the “liberty...enjoyed by the French.” The pasquinades also suggested that, due to the government’s bad policies, “our Sovereign” would “lose the Indies.” The anonymous writings thus linked the events of 1781 with the current situation, forecasting the possibility of radical political transformations in the very near future. The writings even announced that Santa Fe “will be finished” in a conflagration.⁵⁰

Despite the seriousness of the pasquinades, the idea that a full-blown French-inspired movement to upend society was afoot only fully crystallized two weeks later. When someone denounced Nariño for secretly translating and printing the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (originally drafted in 1789), the viceroy and Audiencia judges hastened to assert a connection between the translation and the pasquinades. Nariño, they reasoned, had participated in a conspiracy to upend the Kingdom and adopt the French form of government.⁵¹ Nariño was arrested, sent to the infamous dungeons of Cartagena, and later shipped to Spain. The viceroy and judges further thought that the Frenchman Rieux, also detained and sent to Spain, had undermined Nariño’s respect for authority and loyalty to the monarchy. Officials displayed, once again, the idea of revolutionary contagion from abroad.⁵²

But we must not lose sight of the home circumstances behind the judges’ repressive approach. To begin with, tertulia goers and other patricians in Santa Fe had lived under close watch from authorities well before 1794. As part of the same measures opposed by the

comuneros, authorities had eroded Santa Fe elites' influence on the viceregal administration by excluding criollos from high office, appointing people born in Spain instead. Nariño himself was a member of the Álvarez clan, a local family whose impressive grip on the viceregal court bureaucracy had been dissolved by 1780. Born in 1765, he was old enough to remember the affront.⁵³ Patricians in similar situations had collaborated with the comuneros, whose leaders demanded that "the nationals of this America" be preferred for office. After 1781, the struggle over royal posts would facilitate a more clear-cut articulation of differences between criollos and peninsulares, even though elites from both sides of the Atlantic were intricately linked by blood, marriage, patronage, and customs.⁵⁴

Nariño's 1794 arrest and the imprisonment of many others, including young students, caused outrage among many criollos. They resented yet another blow to their ranks, one executed with a harshness unfitting to their high social station. The Santa Fe cabildo (controlled by criollos) requested to take part in the investigation on the pasquinades and the translation. The judges and viceroy, however, argued that the matter was outside of the cabildo's jurisdiction. Members of the cabildo were thus unable to help the detainees. In a report to Madrid, the viceroy suggested that Santa Fe's cabildo had to be re-shaped, forcing Americans to share municipal posts with Europeans. Rieux would later claim that the 1794 conspiracy never existed, that it was all false accusations brought forward by people seeking to garner favor at court by manipulating existing tensions.⁵⁵

Increasing tensions in the late 1700s led some observers to believe that a separation between the New World viceroyalty and the Spanish monarchy was possible.⁵⁶ Even in the absence of organized movements for independence or clearly articulated plans for a republic, open calls for the rejection of the monarchical form of government and separation from Spain – as opposed to the traditional "long live the king, death to bad government" – began to spring up. An anonymous handwritten letter to the viceroy in Santa Fe, for instance, announced the coming of independence, stating that "the great men" currently imprisoned would soon get out of jail, for the "spirit of the hatred of Monarchism" now possessed "all the souls of those who are not traitors to the Fatherland."⁵⁷ Presumed "seditious" papers also appeared in the city of Quito on October 21 and November 21, 1794,

and March 21, 1795. One of the documents explicitly called for armed struggle against the “tyrant King.” Considering the French 1793 regicide of a Bourbon sovereign, the expression raised serious concerns among authorities. The doctrine of tyrannicide, developed by Spanish theologians in the 1500s, was now removed from the curriculum in the Kingdom’s educational institutions.⁵⁸

The doomsday scenario anticipated by pasquinades, accusations, and judicial proceedings failed to materialize. The viceroy ordered all provincial governors to keep him informed of any disturbances of “public tranquility”⁵⁹; however, things remained relatively calm. Moreover, authorities never fully substantiated the accusations against the alleged 1794 conspirators. The judges found no copies of Nariño’s translation of the Rights of Man and Citizen. In Madrid, Rieux was cleared of any wrongdoing and even received authorization to return to Santa Fe.⁶⁰ After escaping from prison in Spain and fleeing to France, Nariño allegedly slipped back into the vicerealty. According to the Count of Torre Velarde, an Audiencia judge in Santa Fe, Nariño came back to spark a general uprising and to establish a “republic.”⁶¹

Torre Velarde and other officials rejected the French doctrines of equality and republic. They continued to believe that social bonds could break, including the bonds between slaves and masters. Their fears only grew after Spain’s rapprochement with the French Republic in 1797. For despite all the rhetoric and heightened apprehension about foreigners, authorities had no choice but to occasionally welcome people from the French world – including liberated slaves from the French islands. Much to the chagrin of viceregal, provincial, and local authorities, Spain alternately rejected and welcomed French royalists and French republicans, depending on shifting international alliances and wartime developments in Europe and the Caribbean.⁶² Though officials hated the abstract “libertine” French “philosopher,” they could not easily keep people from France and French territories at bay.

Most people who came to the New Kingdom from French colonies like Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe were liberated slaves. In these French territories, some masters had been killed, many plantations and some cities burnt, and slavery abolished. Ex-slaves from those places thus embodied an explicit case of the dissolution of the traditional chains of subordination. Their presence in places where slavery still existed, authorities believed, could fuel hopes of freedom among local

slaves. Some even reasoned that the former slaves could help others still in chains in the killing of their masters, thus turning the world upside down. But those coming to South American shores may not have been all that much interested in promoting revolution. They were mostly people down on their luck or traveling for work: prisoners of war, privateersmen, soldiers, stranded sailors, re-enslaved people, refugees, and assistants to French agents.⁶³

In the eyes of bureaucrats, however, all people from the French Caribbean were potential agents of revolution, regardless of the complexities of their particular circumstances. In February 1803, a ship from Guadeloupe arrived near Chimare, on the north coast of the Guajira Peninsula (see Map 1). The ship brought over 200 refugees, mostly people of color described as “French blacks.” They apparently sought refuge among the Guajiro people, who inhabited the area. The viceroy was alarmed by the news: so many people of African descent from an island where slaves had been emancipated and allowed to work as soldiers and sailors, he believed, could set a terrible example for local slaves. From the viceroy’s perspective, the refugees constituted “a class of people infected with the ideas of liberty, equality and others that have been so pernicious and have caused many ravages and horrors on the unhappy French Islands.” Fearful that they might make their way into the inland provinces, the viceroy requested they be thrown in jail, sent to public works, or interrogated and deported to their place of origin.⁶⁴

These people had left their homes unwillingly and had likewise not chosen their place of destination, and though the provincial governor was able to arrest some of these refugees, he did not deport them to Guadeloupe. The official believed that the French had orders to throw those people “alive into the sea.” With the conflicts in Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe now turned into a war over French colonial presence and against the re-establishment of slavery, drowning had become yet another weapon in the bitter fighting.⁶⁵ Aware of this drama, a Spanish bureaucrat would occasionally take pity on refugees of color, setting aside fears that they might be dangerous revolutionaries. Usually, however, slaves and former slaves were subjected to odious and repressive treatment.

Following the 1781 Comunero Revolution, masters of slaves and Spanish authorities in the New Kingdom developed the idea that a terrible infection had taken root in the body politic of the viceroyalty. This disease, which they claimed had been introduced from abroad via vectors of revolution such as books by “libertine” philosophers and conspiracies led by foreign agents and local traitors, allegedly ate away at the foundations of the monarchy: faith, authority, and hierarchy. The suspects included increasingly dissatisfied criollos such as Nariño, suspicious tertulia goers such as Rieux, and slaves and former slaves seeking redress. According to the authorities, it was Raynal’s godless doctrines that had contaminated their spirits. After all, Raynal’s book had prophesied that the slaves would rise up to avenge the New World. Finestrada even claimed that his work partially accounted for the comunero movement, an idea that gained further adherents after the execution of the French monarch.

After 1793, people from the troubled French Caribbean, most of them traveling in search of work or safe heaven, also came to be judged as vectors of revolution. Most had been recently liberated from slavery, and odious labels bestowed upon them such as “negros franceses,” and even “negros franceses esclavos revolucionarios” were not neutral references to place of origin, African ancestry, or linguistic backgrounds. Such monikers were meant to represent a heterogeneous group of people as an infectious collective, contaminated by a political disease that might be transmitted to local, presumably impressionable, slaves.⁶⁶ Most officials thus tended to gloss over the complexities of the situation in which those held as slaves found themselves. Enslaved families and individuals in the New Kingdom neither mechanically replicated foreign examples of revolution nor idly stood by as increasing political uncertainty offered new chances to further their aspirations.

Throughout the Americas, a “culture of expectation” already existed among many slaves, keeping alive hopes that redress, individual freedom, and even general emancipation would materialize, giving respite to those in bondage.⁶⁷ Some took steps to advance the realization of those hopes, pressing masters and inheritors to deliver on their promises of manumission, requesting clarification from authorities about the rumor that the king had ended bondage, and attempting to file petitions with local magistrates to further clarify these issues. What Antioquia officials denounced as a cabal for the destruction of the

social order was actually an early manifestation of the cross-district collaborations among slaves seeking to enter the judicial forum on a more tolerable basis to make claims about their status.

Slaves' culture of expectation was neither predicated on boundless violence against "white," free people, nor guided by news from abroad. As we shall now explore in more detail, slaves' hopes were underpinned by their own leitmotifs: they were bound up in local conditions, and they often crystallized in plans for legal endeavors – a fact that authorities at the time usually brushed aside and that present-day historians also tend to bypass. In spite of efforts by officials and masters to simplify slaves' efforts as criminal conspiracy and their ideas as mere byproducts of French agitation, some of these complexities are still discernible in the judicial sources.