

María Soledad HERNÁNDEZ BENCID

Andrés Bello Catholic University

VENEZUELAN POLITICAL THINKING AS SEEN IN THE 19TH-CENTURY NEWSPAPERS

ABSTRACT The beginnings of Venezuelan press were inevitably linked to national political events. This medium of expression and information has become the most expeditious vehicle to convey the modernist thought. The ideas of the Enlightenment and the Encyclopedia have had positive impact positive on the Spanish American Colonies generating numerous independence movements that will shape a new political, economic, social and cultural order, thus becoming independent republics. Ideas of liberty, fraternity, equality, sovereignty, citizenship, liberalism, constitutional order, federalism, confederation, positivism, and nationalism have shaped during the Venezuelan nineteenth century a complex political-ideological network that gives birth to a peculiar way of thinking. Through the creation and operation of a considerable number of newspapers and magazines, these ideas were gradually consolidated and entrenched into the society and they served as a support for the changes taking place within it. The infallible work of thinkers, writers, men of letters, amateurs and politicians was worth, and since the beginning of republicanism, the country was flooded with newspapers, papers, periodicals and magazines that give life to a country and preserve intact its cultural heritage that shapes the Venezuelan political thinking of 19th century.

KEY WORDS Press, ideas, politics, thinkers, newspapers, magazines, modernity.

*Among the provinces that form the wide empire of America,
one of the best of them was called Venezuela*

Jose de Oviedo y Banos

Beginning from the second half of 19th century, the Spanish American colonies faced a deep process of change as a result of the arrival of new ideas and thinking from the Metropolis (Spain) and from other European colonial powers. This new mentality, which derived from the Enlightenment Movement and Encyclopedia, a decisive influence on the political processes that were happening both in America, such as the Independence of the United States, and in Europe, with the French Revolution, and it spread, like wildfire, a deeply antimonarchist, anti-slavery, and religious non-tolerance thinking, and shook up the ruling colonial order which, to the contrary, was deeply monarchist, slavish, and religious.

These first papers were brought by merchants, travelers, royal officers and citizens loyal to the Spanish Crown. In spite of the huge efforts made by the Monarchy to stop the advance of the so called “deceiving ideas”, they leaked everywhere and they appeared attractive to the inhabitants of the colonies who carefully followed the political events that occur in their Metropolis.

The Church, on the other hand, stood as a defender of the colonial order and it prescribed the renowned “profane sciences” through the University and reinforced the studies of Latin and Rhetoric as well as the teaching of Aristotle’s Physics and Scholastic Philosophy.

THE PRESS AND THE FIRST NEWSPAPERS

In 1808 both the colonial society and the Metropolis were shaken by momentous events. The Napoleonic invasion in Spain generated the political circumstances in the colonies which they took advantage of to exert pressure upon their royal representatives to satisfy some of their demands. Such was the specific case in Venezuela, where General Captain Juan de Casas subsided under the pressure of the Creole elite¹ to acquire a printing press.

The expected press arrived at Puerto La Guaira in September 1808 and two of the foreign press workers, Matheo Gallagher and James Lamb, printed the first issue of *Gazeta de Caracas* on October 24, the official newspaper that determined the beginning of newspaper production in the General Captain Office of Venezuela.

There were many reviews which assured that, much before this date, there existed some “path publications”. However, the research in the field shows a late beginning of newspaper activities in Venezuela, compared with other Spanish American colonies.

¹ Known as Creole whites, descendants of Spanish conquerors, land-owners with numerous economic privileges. They were politically prominent in Municipalities or Town halls.

Perhaps that specific delay² was strongly influenced by scarce development of these lands, together with the fright imposed by the King's Audience³ where they threatened to kill those who would negotiate with papers and spread ideas that were considered rebellious.

Between 1808 and 1821 *Gazeta de Caracas* became the first transmitter of modern ideas, not in a direct form, but in a concealed and gradual manner. During its 13 years of publication, both in the hands of the Monarchy and of the Republic, its pages expressed a move in the ideas, very specific of that time.

Until April 19, 1810⁴ it was the *Courier of the Spanish Crown*; therefore, its pages were full of information about Napoleonic wars, mostly taken from Spanish newspapers, where the atrocities done by the French on Spanish territories were described from the point of view of the invaded party, hiding the factson purpose, and putting in the second place the situation in the provinces, including in the General Captain Office of Venezuela. From April 27th 1810 to July 1812, the newspaper was in the hands of Creole aristocracy, who declared July 5th 1811 as the date of definitive independence from Spain. As far as the political ideas are concerned, they were changing in a gradual but steady way. The fidelist or autonomist standpoint changed into a more open and free political standpoint, since the loyalty was due to King Fernando and not to Regency Council installed in Spain. The newspaper was being oriented towards the political-ideological education, proclaiming modern political ideas related to Independence, Equality, Sovereignty, Republic, Citizenship and Religious Tolerance. In mid-1812 it returns to the Monarchy followers as a consequence of the attacks by the royal forces lead by Domingo Monteverde, which put an end to the First Republic. Between 1813 and 1814, the republicans took it back for a short time, specifically until the end of the second Republic, and from 1815 to 1821 the followers of the King administered the newspaper again, and they transformed the *Gazeta* into a virulent medium against Bolivar and the patriotic cause. Its pages widely proclaimed the goodness of the colonial order, defending the absolutism, and blaming the republican order, its claims and its instigators. The disdain for Bolivar took a fundamental position in the newspaper.

Between the April 1810 and through 1812, alongside official appeared the independent press, which was characterized by supporting and spreading modern ideas that were being introduced in Venezuela. Such was the case with *Seminario de Caracas*, a publication led by the lawyer Miguel Jose Sanz, Mercurio Venezolano and *El Publicista de Venezuela*, both directed by Francisco Isnardi, *El Patriota de Venezuela*, edited and directed by Antonio Munoz Tebar and Vicente Salias.

² The press was addressed to the elite. At that time, 80% of the population was illiterate. However, newspapers were read on public plazas all over the country.

³ Corporate body that was in charge of administering justice in the colonies. In some cases it was in charge of government functions.

⁴ Date when the process of emancipation of Venezuelans began, when royal officers were destitute and the Supreme Hunta, composed by creoles, took over political control, until the declaration of Independence on July 5, 1811.

With the exception of *El Publicista de Venezuela*, the official newspaper of the First Congress of Venezuela, which created the 1811 Constitution, the rest of the newspapers developed a wide political and social theory on their pages, based on the thinking of the Enlightenment. The ideas of Rousseau about Social Agreement, those of Montesquieu about the different political models, the idea of John Locke expressed in his opus *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, circulated openly in the writings of these newspapers, putting aside purely informative matters in some cases, and dealing with the ideas of modernity. The Freedom of Creed, the idea of Happiness, Property, the benefits of total Independence in Spain, love for the laws, love for the Homeland, Civil Values, Citizens' Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, Federalism, the Alterability of the governors, the justification of the Independence, the blooming of Arts, industry and agriculture, they all represent a small sample of the discussions and analyses that were shown through the press. The war strongly intensifies from 1812 and modern and independent press disappears.

Around June 1818 to 1822 a new official newspaper was circulating in addition to the *Gazeta*. It was founded by Simon Bolivar in the city of Angostura, nowadays Ciudad Bolivar, located in the south of the country on the Orinoco river coast. Its content was not very different from the previous newspapers and its fundamental objective was to serve as a means of diffusion of republican ideas. Its main assertions were related to the process of Independence of the United States of America and the ideas of Enlightenment mentioned before. It criticized directly the horrors that, according to them, had been committed by the conquerors of the American territories, the crimes of Spanish Inquisition, the accusations against Spanish Kings, the tyranny of absolutism. But not all was criticism and disdain in the *Correo*. There was also room for the development of the Republican Project which was to be implemented once the definitive independence from Spain was achieved.⁵

THE REPUBLICAN PROJECT AND ITS REPRESENTATIVES

The separation of Venezuela from Gran Colombia as of 1830 and the birth of the Third Republic implemented a new national state with its corresponding political project. The most pronounced expression of this project was the 1830 Constitution which contained important changes that introduced the arising of a liberal state, respectful of the freedoms and of individual property. A very special freedom within this group of freedoms was: the free expression of thinking.

From this moment on, newspapers and presses multiplied. Their development was so vertiginous, that it included not only capital city press, but also press from provinces. Their main characteristics were framed in the political, party and electoral circles. More than 114 newspapers circulated in this period, and they did not deal only with

⁵ From 1821 Venezuela, Nueva Granada, Quito and Panama constituted a type of Confederation known as Gran Colombia. The existence of Gran Colombia continued until 1830, when Venezuela and the rest of the territories decided to separate and exist independently.

politics and parties. Within this big diversity, some space was reserved for magazines addressed to females, which cultivated poetry, arts, good manners, fashion, music, and innumerable topics required by the women of our country.

The life of the country was dominated by two political trends, not clearly defined nor differentiated, one conservative and the other one liberal. Both were constituted under a cover of a political party, producing hot polemics that were expressed in the different newspapers that circulated all over the national territory.

In the ideological scenario the discussion was done around European economic and political doctrines that were in fashion, which were dealt with and backed by one group or the other, represented by an elite known as “the notables”⁶, men who had returned to the country from Europe and the United States once the war was over, and who joined with enthusiasm to form and to start a project for the country.

The so called “conservatives” were very liberal from economic point of view, and their ideas were oriented towards the creation of credit institutions, such as banks, that would generate credits and concessions for agriculturists, industrialists, and artisans. They applied liberal economic laws and free exchange principles, where the State behaved as a kind of judge who respected the wishes of the parties. On the other hand, those called “liberals” opposed the creation of banks and instruments of free exchange and they considered them perverse. They also openly underestimated industrial activity. Their ideas were oriented towards the abolition of slavery which exists in Venezuela, even though it was minimized, towards opposition to the Church as an institution, they stimulated unique tax, strengthening of agriculture and agriculturists and farmers and they stimulated people’s demands for lands, freedom, and equality.

During this period, so rich in discussion about the country, new transcendental periodicals appeared such as *El Liberal*, *El Venezolano*, *Gaceta Constitucional de Caracas*, *El Constitucional*, *El Republicano*, *La Bandera Nacional*, *Diario de Avisos*, *El Relampago*, *El Relampago de Marzo*, *Diario de la Tarde*, *Ciceron a Catilina*, *El Promotor*, among many others. People responsible for those periodicals were men very capable of writing, and many of them were distinguished for their excellent political writing, violence, and pugnacity. They were Jose Maria de Rojas, Antonio Leocadio Guzman, Tomas Lander, Juan Vicente Gonzalez, Rafael Arvelo, Blas Bruzual. Their political orientation depended on the political project they supported. Some of them backed the actions of the conservatives, such as *El Liberal*, *Ciceron a Catilina*, *Diario de la Tarde*, *El Promotor*, and the others backed the liberals, such as *El Venezolano*, *El Relampago*, *El Relampago de Marzo*.

In addition to the birth of the opposition press, the appearance of cartoons as a powerful weapon in the world of politics, both to criticize and to praise, the press advocating religious opinion began to circulate in Venezuela for the first time. Liberal attitudes of the government, even though it was identified as conservative, was seen as a big danger that did not only warn, but that also put into practice a number of laws that limited

⁶ They were the owners of lands, slaves and businesses; they were the academics and university graduates, those who owned libraries and presses. In E. Pino Iturrieta, *Las Ideas de los Primeros Venezolanos*, Caracas 2003, p. 22.

church activity in the country. This obliged some priests to use the press as a medium to express their criticism and points of view about some measures and decisions made by the new government and to defend themselves from persecution and subestimation by some sectors, for example, from the liberals. These newspapers had a high political bias, and even though they defended the Church and the Catholic religion, they protested the Church Property Law, the elimination of royal taxes, freedom of creed, dependence of the church on the State, among other matters.

Political and economic discussion in the country from 1839 through 1847 was one of the most prolific of the whole of the 19th century. Thus, Elias Pino states the following: *The deliberation was an answer to motivations that were not hidden, and the theories about society show a tedious reading, which produces one of the most fruitful chapters of our intellectual and civic life.*⁷

CENTRALIST CONSERVATIVES VERSUS FEDERALIST LIBERALS?

The fight among the groups that shared political power in Venezuela arrived at its maximum, and from 1859 it generated a new and useless war of 5 long years, the Federal War. As a consequence, the time that followed the government of the “notables” was characterized by its political and ideological obscurity and poverty. The press was strongly controlled and the country entered a clear process of anarchy and violence.

In times that followed, there were two trends: the Centralist and the Federalist. They shaped the central axis of political debate. The previous conservatives defended the centralist trend due to the political line they represented in the conflict. On the other hand, the liberals sided with federalism. They were the agitators of the conflict, which was given a high social content. Its motto was *people's elections and death to the oligarchs*.

Different positions were expressed through the press, and from *El Federalista* and *El Republicano*, they asked for a Federal Constitution, a full regional autonomy, the restoration of the democratic system, political-territorial division, electoral system and increase of political participation. In 1863 the peace agreement⁸ was signed between the two factions, celebrating the victory of federalist liberals.

Political and ideological platform of the new government was centered on the formation of a new principalist framework, the 1864 Constitution, in which the socio-individual demands of the masses were theoretically satisfied. This liberal Constitution guaranteed public and individual freedom: personal freedom, abolition of forced recruitment, abolition of slavery, freedom of thought and of press, freedom of industry, of meetings and association, religious and educational freedom, private property, inviolability of life; political rights were guaranteed by eligibility, direct elections, abolition

⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

⁸ Federal War ended with the signing of a political agreement, *Tratado de Coche* (Coche Treaty), in which the two parties stated the minimum conditions of the agreement.

of death penalty, freedom of elections. Moreover, it included the political-territorial division into states, and all the states were given autonomy. They formed the new federal system of government.

The new political project was led by the liberals; it claimed that federalism was the only ideological and conceptual way that allowed the regeneration and restructure of the society. In this project, the oligarchy guaranteed its permanence in power through the use of the press and also through education, commercials and civil religion or worship of the heroes of the nation.

POSITIVISM AND MODERNISM

From 1870, the country began a clear and open process of modernization, with the arrival of Antonio Guzmán Blanco to power,⁹ one of the strong men of Federal War. His first moves were oriented towards the insertion of Venezuela into the world capitalist system, through the implementation of a “Civilizing Autocracy”, as it was named in the Historiography of his government. This implied to equip the country with a number of jurisdictional-political structures, and developing an infrastructure which could initiate the internal integration and the economic development through the creation of a new national market which would allow the transfer of goods and products towards the consumption centers and towards the main ports of the country for export.

The idea was to equip the country with all possible attractive items that would allow to capture foreign investment and the incorporation of European businesses into the different productive regions of the country, by means of creating homogeneous structures such as national codes, census and statistics, national currency, a weighing and measuring system, and also traffic viability and the use of resources and technology like telegraph, telephone, electricity, trains, and cable.

The entire Guzmán’s modernizing project was framed in the positivist ideas of “Order and Progress”, “Civilization and Progress” and “Progress, Prosperity and Homeland” and it was expressed through the public opinion in the press, education, and civil religion, all these being the fundamental instruments to set in motion and consolidate his project for the country.

The use of the steam press offered a greater reach of the press, thanks to considerable increase of printed papers. Numerous newspapers expressed their unconditional support for the government of the “Famous American”. Many of them represented the official press, but simultaneously the opposition press increases, very harsh and direct,

⁹ The victory of the Federation was feeble. The first federal government led by Juan Crisostomo Falcon faced serious problems such as the after-war fiscal situation, the sharing of power among his followers who participated in war and the obeying of the federal Constitution and the application of its theoretical principles. His government failed and was overthrown by armed movement called the “Blue Revolution” in 1868. Two years later, on April 27, 1870, Antonio Guzmán Blanco took over power with an armed movement known as the “April Revolution”. A long period of government followed, under the name of Yellow Liberalism.

which used the cartoon as an excellent visual resource. Guzman did not escape from the hot pen of cartoonists and humorists, nor from university students' writings, tired of continuity and attacking the government.

One of the most distinguished official newspapers of the Guzman era was *La Opinion Nacional*, headed by Fausto Teodoro de Aldrey, which became the flattering, adulatory, and subjective newspaper about Guzman as a person, who was free to display his megalomania openly and who ended up building a statue of himself in the city of Caracas.

But not all was flattery in the official press; it also represented an expression of positivist ideas carried out into the field of politics, economics, arts, science, history, literature and culture. Its pages expressed the achievements obtained through the measures taken by the government, especially in the field of education¹⁰, the exalting of the heroes of the nation during the War of Independence, veneration of Bolivar, celebration of patriotic holidays, construction of National Pantheon to place the remains of the heroes, nourishing thereby the Homeland History, allowing ideological manipulation by means of commercials and the stimulus of civil religion.

The idea of "Progress" was present in this doctrine and it was used as an expression of revival, stimulus, development and advance. Thus the science occupied an honor position in the press. The advances in medicine, sciences, empirism, observation, experimentation, the cure of illnesses, discovery of medicines that could cure many different ailments, from rachitis, anaemia, neuralgias, migraine and even sexual impotence. They were published on big pages of the press and sold in beautiful and curious "pharmacies" served by pharmacists.

The Society of Physical and Natural Sciences, the Venezuelan Institute of Social Sciences and the Society of Friends of Knowledge were founded with the objective to disseminate the positive ideas in fashion.

Guzman Blanco was introduced in the field of politics as a type of predestinated being who possessed all the conditions and requirements to carry on such a huge project. The relation with Darwin thesis on the survival of the most capable, justified or tried to justify the existence of governments of autocratic and despotic style. Despite the development of the positivist current in Venezuela and the use given by the government of Guzman Blanco, the genuine positivist intellectuals such as Adolfo Ernst, Rafael Villavicencio, Lisandro Alvarado, Jose Gil Fortoul and Julio Cesar Salas among others, demonstrated open distance towards the Guzman regime, and according to Francisco Javier Perez: *They will produce the doctrine body of intellectual opposition to a political regime that we have never seen in Venezuela before, and perhaps never again.*¹¹

Novel ideas about civil rights and citizens, democracy, nationalistic political parties, constitutional rights and guarantees, public freedoms, the universal vote, education and society were introduced through the press that opposes Guzman Blanco. All these

¹⁰ On June 27, 1870 Antonio Guzman Blanco announces the decree that Primary Instruction was free and compulsory, stimulating the educational development in the country.

¹¹ F.J. Perez, 'Las Expresiones Culturales en el Tiempo de Guzman Blanco. Reconocimientos y Reclamos' in E. Pino Iturrieta, M.T. Boulton (coords.), *Los Tiempos envoltentes del Guzmancismo*, Caracas 2011, p. 103.

novelties were introduced in the newspapers edited and produced mainly by university youth who represented the harshest opposition to the famous American.

Different generational groups appeared, contrary to Guzman continuity in government, who faced the abusive and personalized practice of power without any fear, and who openly criticized his administration and challenged him every day through their publications. A specific example was the “Los Yunqueros” movement and their newspaper *El Yunque*, who raised their voice of protest and attacked Guzman’s regime during his last period in 1887.

The cruelest opposition was spread from their pages and, according to well informed people, they might have precipitated Guzman’s exit from the government. They openly expressed their opinions about the regime and about the President himself, clearly pointing at him.

The popularity of the movement and of the newspaper increased in such a way that the newspaper was sold before it left the press. Guzman became aware of this as he passed in front of their facilities in a private car. All government measures were futile to stop the strength and the decision of some young people who, with sarcasm, exposed the moral and political decay of the regime.

In 1892, there appeared one of the most beautiful Venezuelan newspaper productions. It was the cultural periodical *El Cono Ilustrado*. As a symbol of the modernistic current, its authors made an effort to develop an advanced movement which went beyond a simple literary school.

Composed of the followers of Modernism and Positivism, their covers and pages were full of images, illustrations, photographs and engravings, which represented an extraordinary resource to enrich texts and different writings.

An example of the strong positivist influence on the magazine were the many commercial announcements about different and varied medicines that cured all types of ailments. Next to the medicines there were hygiene and beauty products for women. Equally, a lot of space was dedicated to research and the advances in medical science.

The topics were very diverse. There were sections devoted to literature and poetry, famous novels, theater reviews, music, arts, history, recreation, and light science.

The magazine was discontinued by the end of modernist movement. However, during those 23 years of its publication, Venezuela had an information resource that combined modernism, positivism, progress, order, civility, and nationalism as a traditional form of looking at history and of building the present with reference to a glorious past.

BETWEEN CESARS AND THE ANDEANS

We are close to the end of a century that illustrates life in a territory which, in a short period of time, will stop being a Spanish colony and declare its independence, a territory that faces a long war until it definitely breaks its subordination status that links it with Spain and finally consolidates as an Independent Republic.

Towards 1899, a new regionalism was present in the country and it indicated the arrival of the people from Los Andes¹² to the power. Strong people, mountaineers, accustomed to cold weather and the inconveniences typical for their environment, entered Caracas under a movement named “The 60s Invasion” or “Liberal Restoration Revolution”. Its leaders were Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gomez, originally from Tachira, one of the three states that composed the Venezuelan Andes.

Their governments represented tyranny and despotism which immersed the country in an extremely evident backwardness. Public liberties were curbed, presses were confiscated, and they scarcely dared show their mild light. Moreover, the country was invaded by illiteracy, ailments, and hunger. Due to this situation, the information, opinion and truth were controlled.

Official press was flourishing: it flattered and adulated Cipriano Castro. The most important government newspaper was *El Constitucional*, and an independent newspaper *El Pregonero* could not oppose the government. Its pages highlighted in a special manner the strong discussion between Imperialism and Nationalism.

An opinion matrix was generated in favor of Castro, as a result of innumerable conflicts with foreign capital that took place during Castro government. Castro was offended by these conflicts and he exploits nationalistic values and accused foreign capital of all types of fraud. This reached its culmination in 1902, with an embargo on Venezuelan coasts by countries like Germany, England, France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy, as the President refused to pay his commitments to these countries.

Venezuelan people were urged, by means of cartoons and very extensive press articles, to take up arms to defend their country’s territory, while the imperialist current advanced fast and surely over Latin America. But through the same medium and with courage that is characteristic of student movements, university youth published *La Linterna Magica*, using cartoons to satirize the image of Castro and expose his illegal actions. This offence was not neglected and the newspaper disappeared from circulation, the students were arrested and the University was closed.

By the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, positivist ideas ripened in the field of politics. Through Cesar ideology and the thesis of “a Necessary Gendarme”, political theory flourished, justifying strong governments as a necessary condition to cross from Barbarism to Civilization. This possibility was embodied by the figure of Juan Vicente Gomez, the Godfather of Cipriano Castro, who slowly removed him from power in 1908. But that is another story.

¹² Venezuelan Andes are located in the West of the country and are part of a wide Andean Chain that begins at the south of the continent and ends in Venezuela. Their inhabitants were known as the Andeans and remained isolated from the rest of national territory during the whole of the 19th century. That was why they were named the Andeans by those in power.

BALANCE

Finally, it was necessary to emphasize the value of the print and of the press as an almost exclusive communication medium in the construction of a complex political and ideological network that gave birth to a peculiar way of thinking which was changing and evolving during the 19th century in Venezuela. The press, at its core, entailed politics and it stood as a platform for the discussion of different projects of the nation that were maturing in the 19th century. The work of thinkers, writers, politicians, men of letters, and amateurs had shaped the path of Venezuelan thinking and feeling, which was not always the most adequate, but which, in one way or another, left a piece of that heritage for posterity – and to this day it gives us shape as a nation.

REFERENCES

- Perez F.J., 'Las Expresiones Culturales en el Tiempo de Guzman Blanco. Reconocimientos y Reclamos' in E. Pino Iturrieta, M.T. Boulton (coords.), *Los Tiempos envolventes del Guzmancismo. Simposio*, Caracas 2011.
- Pino Iturrieta E., *Las Ideas de los Primeros Venezolanos*, Caracas 2003.

María Soledad HERNÁNDEZ BENCID, Ph.D. in History, Magister Scientiarum in History of the Americas. Historian; researcher at the Center of Research in Communication of the Catholic University Andres Bello; Associate Professor at the Schools of Philosophy and Social Communication at the C.U.A.B. She has published individually and collectively in books and refereed journals. Line of research: Venezuelan press in the 19th century.