

INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTIES  
NATIVE MONARCHIES, PRINCIPALITIES, AND EMPIRES IN THE ATLANTIC WORLDS  
(AMERICA AND AFRICA, 15TH-19TH CENTURIES)

For the historian, can the interest in indigenous sovereignty ever be anything other than desire for “the beauty of death,” to borrow Michel de Certeau’s phrase from 1970, referring to studies by nineteenth-century men and de Certeau’s contemporaries on popular culture and folklore? According to de Certeau, “*popular culture* presupposes a mechanism that cannot be admitted. It had to be censored in order to be studied. Thus, it can only become an object of interest because the danger [it represented] had been eliminated.”

Indeed, indigenous sovereignty was perceived as a *danger* because, ultimately, it was an obstacle to the Atlantic European States’ policy of Conquest (the United Provinces and Sweden included). These policies lasted over five centuries, from the great opening scene on 12 October 1492 when with banners flying, Christopher Columbus and the Spaniards who had crossed the Ocean Sea landed dramatically on the island of Guanahani, the first island of the American continent. They took possession of the island in the name of Spain’s sovereigns, who had appointed them the previous March. The officers present forgot the frustrations involved with the crossing and swore allegiance to the Admiral of the Ocean Sea, who represented the Catholic Monarchs. The meeting with indigenous peoples took place as part of Columbus’ will to impose Spanish sovereignty, considering that it superseded any sovereignty that may have existed in these islands. From that moment on, the European States sought to justify their sovereignty over these lands by discovery or appropriation, which was done gradually over the centuries following the first contacts in America.

Indigenous sovereignty was also a *threat* whose *elimination* (or “usurpation” in the words of jurist Michel Morin in 1997) was to happen through combat using both arms and quills—such was the irresistible desire was to make these foreign lands into virgin territories, naked and empty. These *terra nullius* were presented as so deserted that even the beautifully lucid Michel de Montaigne fell into the trap when, in his essay “Of Cannibals” (*Essays*, I, 31), he took up the topoi of the time on nudity in the Americas – a topoi widely disseminated by the publication of *Décades* by Pierre Martyr d’Anghiera. A few years later, the iconology of Cesare Ripa depicted the four continents as variations around a Sovereign (Europe), admired in its triumphant aspect, then broken down into its progressive euphemizations – Asia then Africa – until its obvious completion with the Americas. In the famous allegory *America*, engraved in the 1580s by Theodor Galle based on a drawing by Jan van der Straet, Amerigo Vespucci is shown as waking sleeping *America*, whose poverty, nakedness, and passivity were dramatically staged in contrast to *Europe*, standing and characterized by movement only interrupted for take a breath or a moment of surprise.

However, indigenous sovereignty was not limited to its fortuitous ‘absence,’ and most European explorers continued to encounter ‘kings’ as they followed the traces of the Indian kingdoms of Saguenay and Norembègue, trying to reach the Seven Cities of Gold, or walked in the opposite direction of the Magi to find the mythical Ophir, or to rediscover Sheba. For a time, they would run up against strong empires in Mexico and Peru. There, it was more difficult to simply negate the sovereignty that they had hoped to submit to the true Spanish and Christian kings, or more modestly, to follow the example of the Algonquins of French America who signed an alliance with Samuel de Champlain. Sometimes, explorers would

admire powerful Amerindian kings worthy of the Greats of Antiquity, such as contemporary heroes Satouriona, Chief of Florida, and the giant Quoniambec, depicted in Thevet's *Vrais portraits et Vies des hommes illustres*. They re-made these American kings into biblical Magi, as in a famous Adoration of the Magi from 1505 attributed to the Master of Viseu, or on the contrary, into the grimacing faces of the Ruler of the Underworld. These are striking images of indigenous sovereignty, jostled across a wide spectrum ranging from destruction in various ways, through ambiguous reconstruction, ignorance, or simple neglect of the realities of indigenous sovereignty, even up to preserving it.

In the case of Africa, another kind of relationship was established. This immense continent had existed in the European imaginary since Antiquity. Yet, the Portuguese explorations of the fifteenth century recreated a new object and sketched out a different approach, in which the place of 'sovereignty' as it was understood in Europe played an essential role. In Africa, this gave rise to a particular configuration, combining traditional rights over an area and people with rights over commerce, as demonstrated by John II of Portugal's titlature in 1486. First, sovereignty was not recognized, which enabled the first West African slave roundups as recounted by Gomes Eanes de Zurara in his "Chronicle of Guinea" (1453). Gradually, as the people encountered were identified in the imaginary of the time and as distinctions were established along traditional medieval lines between 'infidels,' 'Moors,' and 'Black Moors,' the emergence of an indigenous sovereignty became possible and the King of Saloum could be called the 'Father of the Whites.' This recognition then served as a barrier, preventing Europeans' access to the interior of Africa as is shown by the example, somewhat late, of a ruler of Galam who refused to grant the French permanent settlement on the lands in question. The comparison with the Portuguese context, in terms of sovereignty in the Americas and Africa, also demonstrates the need to understand the variations in indigenous sovereignty within the same colonial space.

Conquest, justified by evangelists' missions, seems to have erased all forms of indigenous sovereignty from the Americas in the areas that were claimed by the Iberian Empires in the Americas. Although the kings of Spain required conversion from their new subjects, politically they situated themselves more within a continuity with the former Amerindian polities. With the colonial construction of two republics within the Catholic Monarchy, that of the Spaniards and of the Indians (with the recognition of indigenous nobility by monarchical institutions starting in the sixteenth century), and the recognition of Indian self-government headed by caciques and leaders, it was relative, subaltern sovereignty that was acknowledged for the Indians as a separate element within a polycentric monarchy. In fact, the Conquest was far from having eliminated all forms of indigenous sovereignty, even within the European empires, if we understand sovereignty as relative and imperfect contrary to its Bodinian sense.

Several examples attest to these forms of Indian self-government within Christian empires, such as the Republic of Tlaxcala, whose autonomy within New Spain was justified by the aid Cortez received during the Conquest, Patzcuaro, and the alliance with Indian nations and villages in 'French' North America. Continuous diplomatic relations at the margins of Empires attest to the *de facto* recognition of native polities. This is further evidenced by the institution of the *Parlamento* between the Captain General of Chile and the Araucanian Indians (Mapuche) throughout the colonial period, and the commercial and military alliances between the Iroquois Six Nations and the British. Moreover, it was only in the nineteenth century that the last independent Amerindian polities were conquered by arms: the Comanches, Apaches, the Plains Sioux, the Chiriguano of East Bolivia, and the Mapuches and Indians of Patagonia in what would become southern Chile and Argentina at the end of

the century. The European Empires, and the independent States that succeeded them and often perpetuated them, were thus constructed on a complex spectrum of relations with indigenous forms of governments that they authorized, recognized, or fought. Empires were co-constructed, theoretically under a European sovereignty that claimed to be absolute, but in practice, was adapted. In New France, this adaptation meant a framework of alliance and protection; for Spain, a transformation and incorporation of Amerindian polities and fighting against the Indians on the margins; as war, diplomatic and trade relations for Great Britain; incorporation by citizenship for the young Spanish-American Republics; and as alliances, conflicts, and, ultimately, deportation and ethnocide among the Republican Empires expanding in both the north and south of the Americas.

In terms of law, political imaginary, cultural representations, and scientific knowledge, there was continuous discussion about the definition, limits, and value of these indigenous sovereignties, whether they were relative or absolute. This *longue durée* reflection on the nature of indigenous polities, the greatness or barbarism of pre-Columbian empires, on Indians as degenerate or naturally good, gave rise to the construction of epistemologies and of knowledge from the sixteenth century. While the debate on the just and unjust rights of the Conquest was one of the fundamental elements in forming the modern law of nations, a nascent form of historical anthropology was also born with works that evoked the dead empires of the Aztecs or the Incas (Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, Sahagún, Motolinía, etc.). The importance of the controversy of the Americas in the eighteenth century, following Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, must be emphasized as contributing to the epistemology, or one of the epistemologies, of the Enlightenment: should the New World be known through natural history or just simply history? In the latter case, the rediscovery of American Antiquities, and the grandeur of pre-Columbian empires, became the basis for anthropological and historical reflection on the relations between Europe and the rest of the world. For Europeans from both the Old and the New Worlds, the ‘Discovery’ and the Conquest have long served as a basis for thinking about the relationship to anthropological and political alterity. Indigenous sovereignties may be understood, therefore, as a symbolic space for research, in which new knowledge arises in law, history, political science, and anthropology about the process of Westernization. In this narrative, the Indians and their conquered sovereignties represent the specter of a conquered, unforgettable, other that haunts Western consciousness.

This conference, therefore, seeks to draw up the current state of research on this subject, and to bring together researchers in the humanities and social sciences, and law in particular, on the subject of indigenous sovereignty. The goal is to understand the parallel and related constructions of sovereignty on both sides of the Atlantic, from the end of the Middle Ages and its regimes of governance during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, up to the aftermath of the political experiences of the ‘Atlantic Revolutions’ that ushered in new relationships to authority in the first half of the nineteenth century. The perspective adopted here should be seen less as static and focusing on a single, immunizing description of an exotic externality, and more as fundamentally involved in the particular construction of modern European sovereignty. The creation of that sovereignty was profoundly associated with issues that were raised or reopened by the world’s new geographic, religious, and political horizons.

For this purpose, the conference focuses on three main themes: (1) the study of indigenous sovereignties, both perfect and imperfect according to Bodinian standards; (2) the place of these sovereignties in the controversy over the New World and American Antiquities; and finally, (3) the mirror that indigenous sovereignties held up to European sovereign practices. European Empires thought they had banished these indigenous forms of sovereignty to their

margins. Yet in the mirror of their dialectical relationships, the Empires did not see the systems and imaginaries of an Absolute Ideal reflected back at them, but rather their own imperfections.

- We must step back from a Bodinian or philosophical conception that sees sovereignty as absolute unity, and instead think of sovereignty as both relative and not necessarily determined by the signs that usually define sovereignty in States. It then becomes possible to conceive of the various forms of right to government that Empires recognized, implicitly or explicitly, to Amerindian groups or those that included Native Americans, throughout the colonial era to the end of the nineteenth century. The (re)construction or recognition of indigenous polities within Empires and the diplomatic relations with Indian polities cover a spectrum of sovereignties. This perspective means we need to reflect on the nature of these Indian polities, taking Indians' ability to form well-ordered governments seriously, even if most often these were not fully 'States.' This perspective also means avoiding the inaccurate bias of ethnicization or racialization in describing both the plurality of types of indigenous governments, the often motley nature of their composition, and various forms of their relationships with the Empires. From the multiethnic villages of Algonquian refugees described in *Middle Ground* by Richard White, to the *Indios de comunidad* of the Spanish Andes, or from the Iroquois Six Nations to the Autonomous Republic of Tlaxcala, from the Mexican *Apachería* to the Comanche Empire of the Great Plains (Pekka Hamalainen 2009)—whether these polities had perfect sovereignty or not, and whether or not they were recognized by empires or republics, they should be identified as fundamental actors in the making of Empires, then Republics, and in transforming American space into politically constituted territories. Indian wars and rebellions and the negotiations that accompanied them, whether diplomatic or not, are one of the most interesting observation points for understanding these Indian sovereignties, *from the point of view of both parties involved*. As for the nineteenth century, which seemed to replay the tragic scenes of the Conquest, two processes also deserve closer analysis: first, the association of Indians with popular sovereigns in Latin America under some form of citizenship, with the mixed results that are all too familiar; and second, absorbing the last, perfect indigenous sovereignties into the American Republics, in the United States, Argentina, and Chile, whether taking forms of a Jacksonian removal or wars that left no survivors.
- The second theme deals with the reconstruction of indigenous history in the eighteenth century, which sought to support the pro-American position in the context of the New World controversy (Gerbi, Cañizares-Esguerra), and thus praised Indian sovereignties and laws of the past. The debate on the political capacities of indigenous people – whether "natural men," "noble savages," or stupid and lazy people who had been "degenerate" since the Conquest – was in the background of this controversy and was directly related to the integration of indigenous peoples through citizenship.
- The third theme addresses the fact that European sovereignties, and the forms of Statehood that put those sovereignties into practice, were not disconnected from their American and African experiences due to long-distance overseas colonization and imperial governance. Sovereignty was constructed within a complex social, religious, philosophical, and political environment, in which the imperial and/or colonial dimension was an active part of the debates. While we must not reduce indigenous sovereignty to an essentialism without history, that same warning applies equally to

European sovereignty, which did not arrive in Africa and America with Sovereignty as a neatly packed bag in the hold of their vessels. It is certain that European sovereignties came into being against indigenous sovereignty, entirely against them to be precise, and thus *with* indigenous sovereignties as well.

The conference will take place from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2016. Paper proposals should be sent as a summary of 2 000 characters to the address [colloquesouverainetes2016@gmail.com](mailto:colloquesouverainetes2016@gmail.com). These abstracts should specify which primary sources will be used for the case study, and must include a short author bio and bibliography. The deadline for proposals is May 1, 2015. Applicants will be notified of the Scientific Committee's decision at the end of June 2015. Proposals may be submitted in English, French or Spanish, which will be the languages of the conference. For accepted papers, lodging (four nights), and meals in Nantes will be paid for by the conference organizing committee for one author per paper.

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