

# **Peasants and the revolution of 1781 in the viceroyalty of New Granada (Colombia)**

*Héctor J. Martínez Covaleda*

## **ABSTRACT**

Recent historiography on the revolution of 1781 in New Granada (Colombia) argues that it was a "traditionalist" revolution that did not seek a break with the colonial past or to achieve independence from Spain. After a new review of the documentary sources, recent economic and social historiography and economic theory, it is concluded that the revolution of 1781 was essentially peasant and plebeian, and shows important traits of a modern revolution. The revolution arose in a context of broad economic and social changes in New Granada and the policies of the Spanish Crown. The plebeians had the ability to galvanize all sectors of society in New Granada even the bureaucratic elite of the colonial State for a common political project. In the process, very diverse interests and aspirations of the social groups emerged, but the elite factions that had a greater degree of political and military organization were finally able to impose their political project.

## **KEYWORDS**

Viceroyalty of New Granada (Colombia), Peasants, Revolution of 1781

**I**n late May 1781, 20 thousand armed men gathered in the town of Zipaquirá to invade the capital of New Granada, Santa Fe de Bogotá, located half a day's ride away. They came from Villa del Socorro and other regions throughout the eastern part of New Granada. But behind them and in other war fronts, the ruling Viceroyalty had also taken up arms. The plebian rebels called themselves the *Comuneros*

(the Commoners). A couple of weeks later, on June 8, the Governing Board of the Viceroyalty accepted 35 “capitulations” written by the Comuneros’ elites and the plebeian forces reluctantly returned home. While further uprisings and an attempted reorganization to reinvade the capital took place, the Revolution had received a mortal wound after this demobilization. The capitulations were quickly nullified by the King, Charles III of Spain, and the most prominent popular leaders such as the peasant José Antonio Galán and the weaver Isidro Molina were executed or forced into exile. Who were the men that gathered in Zipaquirá and what were they looking for?

### **A historiographical balance**

The historiography of the Revolution of 1781, better known as the Revolution of the Comuneros, is vast.<sup>1</sup> However, the book entitled *The People and the King: The Comunero Revolution in Colombia* by the American historian John Leddy Phelan, published in Castilian for the first time in 1980, has become the highest authority on the subject.<sup>2</sup> For Phelan, the Revolution of 1781 was neither a precedent for the war of independence of Colombia from the Spanish crown (1810-1824) nor a social Revolution, as other historians have contended. It was a "protest" of the elites of New Granada who sought to restore the traditional form of government shared between them and the King of Spain, based on an "unwritten constitutional" government. According to the author, after the Revolution, things returned, with some variations, to normal. For Phelan, the Revolution of 1781 did not exist; it was a kind of aristocratic plot that forced the monarchy to go back to the traditional form of government and processing of taxes. It was nothing but a parenthesis in the realm of a long-lasting regularity. By contrast, we argue in this article that the Revolution of 1781 was essentially a peasant and plebeian revolt, and represented important features of a modern Revolution that sought to break with traditional ways of doing politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> The following authors claim that it was a pro-independence movement: BRICEÑO, Manuel. *Los Comuneros. Historia de la insurrección de 1781*. Bogotá: Imprenta de Silvestre y Compañía, 1880; RODRÍGUEZ PLATA, Horacio. *Los comuneros*. Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1950; ACOSTA CARDENAS, Pablo E. *Los Comuneros*. Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1945; POSADA, Francisco. *El movimiento revolucionario de los comuneros*. Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores, 1971; FRIEDA, Juan. “El levantamiento comunero como etapa hacia la independencia”. In: *Rebelión comunera de 1781, Documentos*. 2 Tomos. Bogotá: Instituto colombiano de Cultura, 1981; ISRAEL, Jonathan I. *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750-1790*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. The authors below argue that it was anti-tax movement: BAFIOS, Angel Camacho. *Sublevación de los comuneros en el virreinato de Nueva Granada*. Seville: Tip. Giménez y Vacas, 1925); SALMORAL, Manuel Lucena (ed.) *Tres historias testimoniales sobre la revolución comunera*. Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1982; LYNCH, John. *Las revoluciones hispanoamericanas 1808-1826*. Barcelona: Ariel Historia, 2001. Finally, these authors believe it was a social revolution that was betrayed: LIÉVANO AGUIRRE, Indalecio. *Los grandes conflictos sociales y económicos de nuestra historia*. Vol.1 y 2. Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1972; ARCINIEGAS, Germán. *Los comuneros*. Bogotá: Ed. Bedout, 1980 [1938]; ARCINIEGAS, Germán. “20,000 comuneros hacia Santa Fe”. Presentación. Complemento a la Historia Extensa de Colombia Vol. XIV. Bogotá: Plaza y Janes, 1988; GARCÍA, Antonio. *Los comuneros. 1781-1981*. Bogotá: Plaza e Janes, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> PHELAN, John Leddy. *El pueblo y el Rey. La revolución comunera en Colombia, 1781*. Bogotá:, ed. Universidad del Rosario, Colombia, 2009.

We share the view of Frank Safford and Marco Palacios who argue that Phelan "presents the Comuneros rebellion like a minuet between *Criollos* elites and officials of the Crown".<sup>3</sup> Notably absent in the historiography of the Revolution are the peasants, the bulk of the inhabitants of New Granada, although several studies have revealed their importance during the eighteenth century in all regions of the Viceroyalty.<sup>4</sup> Expressions such as "massive displacement of peasants" or "peasant Revolution" are the few references to this social group coined in the historiography.<sup>5</sup> Posada, a Marxist historian, does not mention them when referring to "the people"; he refers only to the "*Común*" that sought national independence.<sup>6</sup> Phelan only views the peasants, such as the Comunero Captain José Antonio Galán, as subordinates of the elites.<sup>7</sup> In his analysis, the peasants and other plebians did not exist as stakeholders in the revolt. The absence of peasants in the historiography of the Comuneros is an incomprehensible omission. Yet it may be explained by two reasons: first, the attitude towards history that privileges only elites as forming the "national" consciousness and, second, by the difficulty of finding the fingerprints of the peasants in the documents. Their absence in the analysis of the Revolution has led to misunderstandings and errors of periodization, highlighting only the political project of the elites and voiding the importance of subaltern groups.

References in the historiography emphasize the urban character of the Revolution of 1781, but they barely explore the social composition of the city and do not inquire about the presence of peasants in it or what their characteristics were. It is often forgotten that the cities and towns, which was the site of the "republic of whites", had a huge rural hinterland where most of the population gradually moved and worked. The lack of attention to peasants in Latin American historiography marks a clean break from the historiography on Revolutions. For example, historians have highlighted the role of indigenous-peasant uprisings in Peru and Upper Peru in 1780 and the independence movement and the 1910 Revolution in Mexico.<sup>8</sup> Yet the role of peasants could be

---

<sup>3</sup> PALACIOS, Marco y SAFFORD, Frank. *Colombia: País fragmentado, sociedad dividida*. Bogotá: ed. Norma, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> FALS BORDA, Orlando. *El hombre y la tierra en Boyacá; bases sociológicas e históricas para una reforma agraria*. Bogotá: Ediciones Documentos Colombianos, 1957; TOVAR PINZÓN, Hermes. *Grandes empresas agrícolas y ganaderas. Su desarrollo en el siglo XVIII*. Bogotá: CIEC, 1980; KALMANOVITZ, Salomón. *Economía y Nación. Una breve historia de Colombia*. BOGOTÁ: Ed. Siglo XXI, 1985; BEJERANO, Jesús Antonio. *Ensayos de historia agraria colombiana*. Bogotá: Fondo Ed. Cerec, 1987; MEISEL ROCA, Adolfo (1998), "Esclavitud, mestizaje y hacienda en la Provincia de Cartagena 1533-1851". In: BELL LEMUS, Gustavo (ed.). *El Caribe colombiano*. Barranquilla: Ediciones Uninorte, Barranquilla, 1998, pp. 69-137; COLMENARES, Germán. "El tránsito a sociedades campesinas de dos sociedades esclavistas en la Nueva Granada: Cartagena y Popayán, 1780-1850". *Revista Huellas*, Universidad del Norte, No. 29, 1990; CLAVIJO OCAMPO, Hernán. *Formación histórica de las elites locales en el Tolima, Tomo I, 1600-1813*. Colombia: Biblioteca Banco Popular, Colombia, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> ARCINIEGAS, Germán. "20,000 comuneros hacia Santa Fe..." *Op.Cit.*

<sup>6</sup> POSADA, Francisco. *El movimiento revolucionario de los comuneros*. *Op.Cit.*

<sup>7</sup> PHELAN, John Leddy. *El pueblo y el Rey*. *Op.Cit.*

<sup>8</sup> GOLTE, Jürgen. *Repartos y rebeliones. Túpac-Amaru y las contradicciones de la economía colonial*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1980; TUTINO, John. *De la insurrección a la revolución en México: las bases sociales de la violencia agraria, 1750-1940*. México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1990; FLORESCANO, Enrique. *El nuevo pasado mexicano*. México, D. F.: Cal y Arena, 1995; VAN YOUNG, Eric. *La "otra" rebelión. La lucha por la independencia de México, 1810-1821*. México: FCE, 2006.

understood better if, following Thompson and Rude,<sup>9</sup> they were observed in the dual capacity of producers and consumers, giving them space for "horizontal" action with the other subaltern sectors of the cities.

Phelan's contributions on the involvement of the *Criolla* (Creole) elites in the Revolution are important, but do not account for the contribution of the "people" by itself and do not value the participation of plebeians, except in their response to the charisma of the patricians and as followers of the ideology of the elites. The "people" only exist as a mass of support, sharing the same views and the "traditional" ideology of elites. To the extent that the author ignores the independence of subordinate sectors in any act or thought, he is forced to explain the Revolution as a conspiratorial and manipulative act of Creole elites, despite the deeply popular and inclusive character of the movement. To Phelan, the only social groups relevant are the high segments of society.

This perspective is unilateral since it ignores one of the magnetic poles of culture and politics in the Old Regime where, in the words of E.P. Thompson, a "bipolar force field" existed and where the patricians/plebeians model was "an ideological force in its own right."<sup>10</sup> Phelan's position, to use the expression of Ranahit Guha,<sup>11</sup> is part of an "elitist historiography" which shares with conservative historiography the presumption that the formation of the nation and its consciousness was exclusively a task for the elites, embodied in their personalities or ideas. A separate analysis of the behavior of one of these two segments in the Revolution provides little explanation of the motivations and actions of the totality of those who participated in the mass movement of 1781.

Phelan's work is focused on the protest of the elites against the breaking of the "unwritten constitution" between them and the King. In our opinion, however, this break in relation to the "new" sales tax that initially provoked popular revolt did not exist, among other reasons because it had the acceptance of the councils and the *Real Audiencia*, controlled by resident elites. Reducing the reason for the Revolution to a customs problem ignores the deep socio-economic changes that had occurred during the eighteenth century that transformed the traditional transactions between elites, the monarchy and the plebeians. Based on the works of Liévano, Aguilera, Rausch and Garcia,<sup>12</sup> we argue that by widening the study of the Revolution geographically and socially, we may observe that latent conflicts between elites and commoners were brought out into the open, especially

---

<sup>9</sup> THOMPSON, Edward Palmer. "Lucha de clases sin clases?", Tradición, revuelta y consciencia de clase: estudios sobre la crisis de la sociedad preindustrial. Prólogo de Josep Fontana. Barcelona: Ed. Crítica, 1975; RUDÉ, George. *El rostro de la multitud*. Con Introducción de Harvey J. Kaye. Valencia, España: Biblioteca Historia Social, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> THOMPSON, Edward Palmer. "Patricios y plebeyos". In: THOMPSON, E.P. *Costumbres en común*. Barcelona: Ed. Crítica, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> GUHA, Ranahit. *Las voces de la historia y otros estudios subalternos*. Barcelona: Ed. Crítica, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> LIÉVANO AGUIRRE, Indalecio. *Los grandes conflictos sociales y económicos de nuestra historia*. Op.Cit.; AGUILERA PEÑA, Mario. Los comuneros: guerra social y lucha anticolonial. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1985; RAUSCH, Jane M. "Los comuneros olvidados: la insurrección de 1781 en los llanos del Casanare". *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico*. vol. XXXIII, n.41, Banco de la República, Colombia, 1996; GARCÍA, Antonio. *Los comuneros. Antecedentes de la revolución de Independencia*. Bogotá: Ed. Desde Abajo, 2010.

when slaves and Indians were incorporated into the alliance. The participation of peasants in the Revolution of 1781 is still begging for investigation.

### **Taxation does matter**

The historiographical perspective that fixes its attention exclusively on the ideological aspects of the Revolution of 1781 loses focus on the basic aspects of economic relations such as the disposable income of consumers to acquire material goods. In particular, little attention has been given to taxation as a determining factor in consumption and how it influenced the minds of producers and consumers who participated in collective actions. A fact which illustrates the importance of the material aspects of the Revolution in 1781 is the predominance of plebeian demands in the 35 capitulations referring to strictly economic issues, ranging from pricing and the number of lines per folio in the marriage records for the "poor" to the elimination of state monopolies.

The impacts of taxation are assumed as given and are accepted as a reason for dissatisfaction, but they have nevertheless been little explored. The motives for the Spanish state to impose such taxes and the perceptions of the taxpayers are ignored. The analysis is reduced solely to a problem of processing and legitimacy, that is, only about who should impose taxation. As the English historian Anthony McFarlane argues, the 1781 conflict went beyond an "abstract constitutional issue" and covered various local economic and political motivations.<sup>13</sup> Most of the historiography about the Comuneros omits the study of the content and impact of taxation reform, and in particular, what peasants thought and felt since they were precisely those who mobilized during the Revolution and, in practice, imposed the settlement in Zipaquirá. The problem was not so much the *legitimacy* as the *impact* of taxes on consumption and production.

Stanley and Barbara Stein, for example, explain how Charles III looked to the American colonies in search of new resources because it was impossible to increase the tax burden on the population in the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, Spaniards had reacted to attempts to increase taxes in 1766 through an armed popular movement, the Esquilache riots.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the question of taxation condenses the policy, the purposes of states and the power relations between the various existing social groups. Tax revenues were the life source of the royalty, the bureaucracy, the army and the church. As the purpose of Charles III was to strengthen his state to finance dynastic wars, he was forced to tighten taxation in the colonies. Strong government and high taxes were synonymous in this imperial project.

It was in the context of the inter-imperial conflict between Spain, France and England in the eighteenth century when Charles III ordered a series of fiscal and administrative reforms for Spain's colonies in order to reconquer and establish the so-

---

<sup>13</sup> McFARLANE, Anthony. *Colombia antes de la independencia*. Bogotá: Banco de la República-Ancora Editores, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> STEIN, Stanley y Barbara. *El apogeo del imperio. España y la Nueva España en la era de Carlos III, 1759-1789*. Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2005.

called "Second Empire".<sup>15</sup> These reforms affected all the Spanish colonies in the Americas and, in the case of New Granada, were synthesized in the provisions of the *New Plant* which included an increase in the tax burden and the replacement of former officials in the agencies of colonial power by "new men", loyal to the king's project. To enable these reforms, the Minister of the Council of the Indies, José de Gálvez, sent three "visitors" to Spanish America: José Arreche to Peru, Garcia Pizarro to Quito and Gutiérrez de Piñeres to New Granada. Gálvez himself had been the Intendant of New Spain (México) between 1765 and 1772.

The first tax provision applied by the visitor-regent Piñeres in New Granada was a higher sales tax, known as the Barlovento tax. But he never imagined that this tax would spark one of the deepest and most significant popular revolts in the history of Spanish America in the eighteenth century. In early March 1781, the tax was promulgated. On March 16, in Villa del Socorro, in the region of Guantán, located in the northeast of New Granada, more than 300 kilometers from the capital, a mutiny against the tax began, headed by poor women and accompanied by peasants, weavers and butchers, which would effectively begin the Revolution of 1781.

The role of this tax as source of the Revolution has been sorely underestimated and those who have understood it that way have been identified as *fiscalistas*.<sup>16</sup> Those responsible for coining this term are the same authors who have highlighted the importance of tax issues in the Revolution, yet they concluded too easily that the objectives of the collective mobilization were merely of a reformist nature. Despite these studies, little or nothing has been researched about the explicit impact that this tax had on farmers and consumers. The old sales tax amounted to 2% and another 2% was added with the Barlovento tax. This undoubtedly generated dissatisfaction but did not cause, by itself, the Revolution. Phelan argues that if there had been the traditional mediation of the Creole oligarchies that tax and others would have gone through some adjustments. An argument that may have strengthened this opinion is that this percentage was the lowest in all the American colonies, which ranged from 6% in Peru and Cuba to 8% in Mexico. But we must consider that the greatest impact was not generated by the level of the tax, which was comparatively modest, but the impact of the instruments and regulations accompanying it on which nothing has been investigated.

In fact, the rate that was published was a fixed monetary amount that would be charged on each product. This feature made the *ad valorem* value actually applied to oscillate depending on market prices. In the case of cotton, the main peasant crop from Guantán and Socorro, the rate was three quarts per "arroba" of cotton "branch" which theoretically should have increased the tax from 2% to 4%. For cotton derivatives, however, the tax was also applied to all inputs in the value chain. Thus, another 4% was charged on the sewing threads, 4% on fabrics and 4% on the "clothing of the earth." In

---

<sup>15</sup> DELGADO, Josep María. *Dinámicas imperiales (1650-1796). España, América y Europa en el cambio institucional del sistema colonial español*. Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra, 2007; FONTANA, Josep. *Ponencia Carmona*. España, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> See Note 2.

theory, the final consumers to purchase a shirt, for example, would have to pay the 4% tax and therefore the price would be increased only by that percentage. However, this tax would accumulate on input prices at each stage of production. We estimate that the price of a shirt actually increased by 8.9%<sup>17</sup> and not 4%. This is what is known in economic theory as "pyramiding" or "cumulative translation of taxes." In addition, the sales tax was charged as many times as the product was traded.<sup>18</sup>

A parallel anti-evasion tool, the *tornaguía*, which was in addition to the existing safeguard known as the "guide" was designed that made it impossible to avoid paying the tax. The Council of El Socorro understood this when they told the Viceroy Manuel A. Flórez, brazenly, that one of the biggest problems of the tax reform was "the increase on regulation that left them [the poor] no relief or discretion to escape the contribution".<sup>19</sup> The sales tax was thus quite onerous and threatened the continuity of production chains and consumption of the poor. This was enough for the peasants, artisans and consumers throughout New Granada to protest. But this only happened in El Socorro.

Prior to the escalation of the new tax policy, policies for state monopolies were modified, specifically for tobacco. In addition to passing the lease system monopoly, traditionally monopolized by municipal elites and the "noble" families of Santa Fe, to a system of direct administration, operated by employees of the Crown, they wanted to monopolize not only all marketing areas, but the production of tobacco leaves. From 1776, at the behest of the Santa Fe elites, the tobacco growing area was limited to four areas of New Granada, with their corresponding areas of consumption. This involved a significant reduction in the area and number of farmers. The *cosecheros* (planters) were small peasants who before the reforms had benefited from the freedom to engage in this economic activity. To enforce the measure, a network of "mounted police" (*guardas*), usually Spaniards, fulfilling the task of burning leaves and imposing penalties and fines, was created. These guards did not report to the authorities of the town council, but directly to the state monopoly. The presence of this mounted police was considered an attack on municipal authorities and on peasants and women who suffered the bulk of repression. This was enough for peasants to protest throughout New Granada. However, only peasants from the area of influence of El Socorro did.

## The causes of the Revolution

What were the causes of the Revolution? Opinions are divided and often historians confuse the causes, objectives and consequences. Some argue that it was the increase in the tax burden and therefore the objectives of the revolt were reformist; others argue that "the people" gathered with their elites to seek national independence and, therefore, suggest that this movement was a necessary step in the process of building the Colombian

---

<sup>17</sup> This calculation is made on the value added at each stage of production.

<sup>18</sup> Juan Diaz de Herrera. Consultation on tax collection. Visitor Piñeres. In: FRIEDE, Juan ed., *Rebelión comunera de 1781. Documentos*. 2 Tomos. Bogotá: Colcultura, 1981, p.881. See also AGUILERA PEÑA, Mario. *Los comuneros: guerra social y lucha anticolonial*. *Op.Cit.*, p.84.

<sup>19</sup> Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Santa Fe, 663A, *Cabildo* to Viceroy Flórez, Socorro, May 18, 1781, 9s.

Republic or, as in the case of some Marxists, it was an inevitable and necessary stage to national independence and towards a future socialist Revolution; others argue it was a movement of the Creole elites to restore the "co-government" with royal authorities.

While recognizing the valuable contributions of the historiography on this subject, however, some historians confuse causes with results and therefore omit the intermediate stages of the analysis, i.e., the dynamics of the Revolution. There is a tendency to characterize the Revolution in terms of one specific time, disregarding the whole revolutionary process. To understand this process, it is necessary to analyze the actors, alliances and counter-alliances, the reaction and counter-reaction of the participating forces, changes in the political and military situations, and the geographic and social expansion of the Revolution at different time points. Almost without exception, most authors generally analyze the period from the first riots until the completion of the Revolution (though some suggest that the origins lie in the beginning of elite involvement) yet they privilege a particular time period in the process to back their conclusions.

There are those who emphasize the first riots, which lead them to characterize the Comuneros as a movement that merely sought to overthrow unjust taxation measures. Others have emphasized the pact between elites and the government, and joint participation in the demobilization and repression of popular sectors, which thus represent the seeds of "treason" of the elite to the social Revolution and war. Others, like Phelan, turned their attention to the time of the issuance of the capitulations on June 5, where, supposedly, the royal authorities and the leaders of the Comuneros reached an agreement. This author also makes a particular reading of the capitulations that leads him to see a constitutional arrangement to restore the old semi-autonomous form of government and, thus, concludes that the Revolution was "conservative."

Yet the causes do not necessarily determine the outcome and vice versa. Teleological perspectives, such as Phelan's, explain the origins from the results, going back in time to explain the outcome. While each stage is determined by the preceding one, each also has its own characteristics, scope and independence. The causes, whether they are economic or ideological, for example, do not explain the dynamics of war and the results of it. The result is therefore not a logical consequence of the causes. In the same way that the outcomes of the confrontation were not predictable for its actors, the causes cannot be simply derived from the outcomes. Francesco Benigno, for instance, who studies the European Revolutions of the seventeenth century, suggests that historians often emulate what happens in certain crime novels: the detective is focused only on the information that leads directly to the criminal, discarding indirect information and causalities.<sup>20</sup> Yet the criminal did not always intend to kill the victim and sometimes he was not the only perpetrator. It is thus necessary to investigate the revolutionary process and dynamics in more depth and not simply derive them from the results.

---

<sup>20</sup> BENIGNO, Francesco. *Espejos de la revolución: conflicto e identidad política en la Europa moderna*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2000.



Given the context of the Bourbon reforms, it is not very difficult to explain why the Revolution of 1781 spread to most of the Viceroyalty of New Granada. The tricky part, paraphrasing Jürgen Golte,<sup>21</sup> is to explain the reasons why the revolt began in a specific region instead of starting in all the places where the reforms were applied. This is an attempt to give some plausible explanations of why the Revolution began in the Guanentá region, specifically in Villa del Socorro and Villa San Gil. Economic activity in El Socorro and northeastern New Granada (Guanentá) was characterized by several interconnected elements: first, the region recorded a high population growth, high population density and profound changes in social composition during the eighteenth century. Second, it was an important and dynamic agricultural region, mainly exploited by peasants (small and medium landowners or lease holders in a precarious sharecropping system). Third, the industrial region of New Granada was also located in Guanentá, operated by artisan-peasants and where a substantial part of the population was engaged in the manufacture of weaving threads and fabrics from cotton and other goods made with other natural fibers, allowing a wide division and specialization of labour not possessed by other regions. Tax reform and policy for state monopolies fractured productive and commercial chains and called into question the precarious balance that ensured colonial institutions.

The population of Villa del Socorro was 95% white and *mestizo* ("free of all colors") which contrasts with the rest of New Granada which registered only 73% in this respect.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Peru and Mexico, there was a relatively small indigenous presence. The prevalence of whites and mestizos involved a substantial change in economic and social relations from other areas: since they did not belong to the segments of "caste" Indians or black slaves, they could not be compelled to perform forced labor or to pay tribute, which means that they had a relatively high degree of personal freedom, especially the landowning peasants. Non-owners entered in agreement with the landowners that involved a frequent process of negotiation between the parties regarding the quantity and type of ground rent to pay. Additionally, the population of the region was also composed of workers (day labourers or peons) and artisans who originally came from the class of landless peasants. As Ospina Vásquez argues, the presence of a large group of mestizos in the region, not culturally far from the white population, allowed an early, though not definitive, balance to be obtained between these socio-racial segments (or estates). In fact, the participation of poor whites and mestizos in local politics was more active.<sup>23</sup>

The economic base of El Socorro and Guanentá was agriculture, which recorded an accelerated growth in the eighteenth century demonstrated in the evolution of the collected tithes.<sup>24</sup> The main crops in the region were corn (the staple food of the region), tobacco, cotton and sugar cane, among others; the first three crops were anchored in peasant economies. There was also cattle raising developed in some large farms

---

<sup>21</sup> GOLTE, Jürgen. *Repartos y rebeliones. Op.Cit.*

<sup>22</sup> McFARLANE, Anthony. *Colombia antes de la independencia. Op.Cit.* Appendix A.

<sup>23</sup> As OSPINA VÁSQUEZ, Luis has argued in *Industria y protección en Colombia, 1810-1930*. Medellín: FAES, Medellín, 1976, p.45.

<sup>24</sup> BRUNGARDT, Maurice F. "Tithe production and pattern of economic change in central Colombia, 1764-1833". PhD.Thesis. University of Texas at Austin, 1974.

(*haciendas*), but landed units were neither comparatively large nor continuous and the livestock obtained was not abundant. Neither were there large plantation estates. However, between 1776 and 1778, the cultivation of tobacco was banned in most of the region of Guanentá, including in El Socorro, Mogotes and San Gil, which decreased the level of cultivated leaves, but it continued being planted "illegally" throughout the region. The decline of tobacco was offset by the growth of the cotton crop to meet the growing activity of spinners and weavers; peasants found an alternative means of livelihood through these activities. The economic and social dynamics, and the livelihood of El Socorro, became dependent on textile production with multiple social, production and trade linkages both "forwards and backwards".<sup>25</sup>

According to research by Alvarez, Raymond, Brungardt and Ospina Vásquez, among others, there were two forms of the organization of textile work units in the region of Guanentá that developed in the middle of the eighteenth century: "home work" (the *putting out system*) and independent "domestic work". In the first, the trader was the coordinating center of the process; he provided the raw material (cotton or yarn) and marketed the final items obtained from the workshops through long distance trading.<sup>26</sup> In "domestic work", the producer acquired raw materials from the market and traded the result of their work directly.<sup>27</sup> Those units were operated by the "poor people" of the region, who actually owned their tools, but whose income was perceived either as a type of self-paid "salary" (a term used by Chayanov<sup>28</sup>) or as piecework by merchants. Income earned was quite low. Yet it was a new type of rural economic activity that contributed to the emergence of an incipient working class in the second half of the eighteenth century. Not by chance, one of these workers in El Socorro was the weaver Isidro Molina, one of the leaders of the Revolution.

---

<sup>25</sup> This concept was taken up by the German economist Albert Hirschman who developed a theory of linkages as a sequence of investment decisions. See HIRSCHMAN, Albert. *La estrategia del desarrollo económico*. México: FCE, 1982.

<sup>26</sup> ÁLVAREZ OROZCO, René. "Producción manufacturera colonial en la Provincia del Socorro, Colombia: centros de producción y mercados". *Diálogos Revista Electrónica de Historia*, vol. 4, núm. 2, noviembre-marzo, 2004, Universidad de Costa Rica, Costa Rica; ÁLVAREZ OROZCO, René. "Artesanos y producción manufacturera en la Nueva Granada: la industria textil en la Provincia del Socorro, siglos XVIII y XIX". *Procesos Históricos. Revista Semestral de Historia, Arte y Ciencias Sociales*. Mérida-Venezuela, N. 10, Julio 2006; RAYMOND, Pierre; BAYONA, Beatriz Bayona y TORRES, Humberto. *Historia del algodón en Santander*. Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1982; RAYMOND, Pierre; BAYONA, Beatriz. *Vida y muerte del algodón y los tejidos santandereanos: historia económica y tecnológica de la desaparición del cultivo y de la industria casera del algodón*. Bogotá: Ecoe, 1987; BRUNGARDT, Maurice F. *The production and pattern of economic change in central Colombia*. Op.Cit., BRUNGARDT, Maurice F. "The economy of Colombia in the late colonial and early national periods". In: FISHER, John R., KUETHE, Allan J. and McFARLANE, Antony. eds., *Reform and Insurrection in Bourbon New Granada and Peru*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University; OSPINA VÁSQUEZ, Luis. *Industria y protección en Colombia, 1810-1930*. Medellín: FAES, Medellín, 1976.

<sup>27</sup> For theoretical reflections and how these systems operated in Peru and Mexico consult MIÑO GRIJALVA, Manuel. *Obrajes y tejedores de Nueva España, 1700-1810*. Madrid: ICI-IEF, 1990; ESCANDELL TUR, Neus. *Producción y comercio de tejidos coloniales: los obrajes y chorrillos del Cusco, 1570-1820*. Cusco-Perú: Centro de Estudios Regionales Andinos, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> CHAYANOV, Alexander. *The Theory of the Peasant Economy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986[1925].

While there were also medium-sized workshops with significant levels of production, accumulation and specialization, it would be incorrect to say that there were manufacturing companies or factories in Guantán. However, it is clear that there was the deployment of an industrialization process that energized production, created new social actors and altered relations between different social groups. The presence of “industry before industrialization” as De Vries conceptualizes for the European case,<sup>29</sup> led to poor rural families intensifying industrial labor to produce for the market. This concept disputes the idea of the long existence of a strong separation between the countryside and the city. There were various routes of industrial progress that did not necessarily involve the development of factories<sup>30</sup> and one of them was evident in Villa del Socorro.

The basic objective of this activity was to supplement the income of the peasant family unit, involving work done mainly by women and children. As the development of spinning and weaving was essentially a labor of subsistence and low cost, “poor people” in all conditions, that is, mestizos, poor whites, free mulattoes and others were involved. It was, in fact, an activity of social integration, which explains why it was possible to quickly construct a “horizontal” alliance of the crowd, to use the terminology of E.P. Thompson, in the Revolution of 1781. The peasants, the vast majority of the population in the region, maintained strong links with the cottage industry in terms of production units supported by family labor. This was the case of the father of the future plebeian “Captain-Commander,” José Antonio Galán, who was white, Spanish by birth, the owner of a small plot of land dedicated to growing snuff tobacco while the women and children of his family were occupied in spinning cotton. During his childhood, J.A. Galán was probably a cotton spinner and an assistant to his father in snuff tobacco production. At the time of the Revolution, however, José Antonio was a peasant (*labrador*).<sup>31</sup>

This constellation of economic and social dynamics was articulated with the economic policy of the Empire. The Guantán region was one of the most affected by the policy that eradicated the cultivation of tobacco areas. First, sowing was banned in Villa del Socorro and then in San Gil. Between 1778 and 1780, the citizens from Mogotes, Charalá and Simacota, located a few miles from El Socorro, engaged in violent protests against the guards of the state monopoly.<sup>32</sup> These parishes were inhabited by a small number of people, mostly peasants and artisans, who had close family ties with the inhabitants of the neighbouring parishes. Family networks were thus the organizational basis of the revolt of the plebeians. The peasant and plebeian mobilization began in rural

---

<sup>29</sup> DE VRIES, J. *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Demand and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> For a balance of this discussion and its basic literature, consult FONTANA, Josep. *La historia dels homes*. Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2000; MENDELS, Franklin F. “Agricultura e industria rural en el Flandes del siglo XVIII”. In: KRIEDTE, Peter; MEDICK, Hans; SCHLUMBOHM, Jürgen eds. *Industrialización antes de la industrialización*. Barcelona: Ed. Crítica, 1986.

<sup>31</sup> Statement of José A. Galán, Socorro, October 18, 1781. In: FRIEDE, Juan ed., *Rebelión comunera de 1781*. *Op.Cit.*, p.579. See also LIÉVANO AGUIRRE, Indalecio. *Los grandes conflictos sociales y económicos de nuestra historia*. *Op.Cit.*, p.458 and ÁLVAREZ OROZCO, René. “Producción manufacturera colonial en la Provincia del Socorro, Colombia...” *Op.Cit.*, p 14.

<sup>32</sup> ACOSTA CARDENAS, Pablo E. *Los Comuneros*. *Op.Cit.*, p.91; AGUILERA PEÑA, Mario. *Los comuneros: guerra social y lucha anticolonial*. *Op.Cit.*

Guanentá and gradually moved to the urban centers of the same region (El Socorro and San Gil), then the capital of the Province (Tunja) and finally to the capital of the Viceroyalty, Santa Fe. It was therefore a clear move from the countryside to the city.<sup>33</sup>

The trigger for the Revolution was the convergence of imperial policy towards tobacco (crop eradication) and the tax policy on cotton (Barlovento tax) in the same space and time, which affected the livelihoods of the workers, peasants and artisans. As the cotton harvest was for plebeians the "last livelihood and discretion they had to go through life," the imposition of the Barlovento tax meant misery for growers and spinners. However, the complaint was articulated together with the prior prohibition on planting tobacco.<sup>34</sup> While it is plausible to highlight poverty and its deepening as one of the causes of the revolt of the *commoners*, a term frequently mentioned in the documents of the time, this problem is not enough to explain a collective action of large magnitude. It is necessary to consider other factors that explain why the plebians opted for revolt rather than petitioning the authorities or accepting this condition, as they had for centuries.

Theda Skocpol developed the idea that there is a latent or potential subversive in every poor person and that certain organizational conditions and the existence of "political cadres" from the elites can lead to their collective explosion.<sup>35</sup> Yet this argument is difficult to sustain. Moral economists, such as E. P. Thompson and James Scott, have more convincingly argued that peasants and other popular sectors were jealous of their livelihood and security, which became a moral imperative. Those who attempted to curtail it became victims of their anger even if it was perceived that a part of the community did not comply with the implied covenant established with the elites (and the King) to protect them. In New Granada, unlike the hunger riots of the eighteenth century in Europe,<sup>36</sup> popular revolt was not directed towards the control of food prices, but the maintenance of tax rates. The same peasant leader José Antonio Galán, stated in October 1781, during his interrogation that ended with his execution, that they agreed that they had to pay the sales tax, but only "two percent, which was as natural a right as to die".<sup>37</sup> This was an affirmation of the traditional rebellious culture of plebeians.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, this phrase precedes the expression of American Benjamin Franklin who in 1789 said: "In this world, you cannot be sure of anything, except death and taxes."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> GARCÍA, Antonio. *Los comuneros. Op.Cit.*

<sup>34</sup> AGI, Santa Fe, 663A, "Testimony of the first book ...", Villas de Santa Cruz and San Gil, March 24, 1781.

<sup>35</sup> TUTINO, John. *De la insurrección a la revolución en México. Op.Cit.*

<sup>36</sup> THOMPSON, Edward Palmer. "La economía «moral» de la multitud en la Inglaterra del siglo XVIII". In: THOMPSON, E.P. *Tradición, revuelta y conciencia de clase...Op.Cit.*, RUDÉ, George. *El rostro de la multitud* Rude, 2000; VILAR, Pierre. *Hidalgos, amotinados y guerrilleros. Pueblo y poderes en la historia de España*. Barcelona: Ed. Crítica, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> Statement Galán, Socorro, October 18, 1781. In: ARCINIEGAS, Germán, ed. *CHEC-Documentos: Complemento a la Historia Extensa de Colombia* Vol. XIV. Bogotá, 1988, p.253. See also BRICEÑO, Manuel. *Los Comuneros. Op.Cit.*, Documentary Appendix, No. XXV.

<sup>38</sup> On traditional rebel culture, see THOMPSON, E. P. "Introducción: costumbre e cultura." In: THOMPSON, E.P. *Costumbres en común. Op.Cit.*, pp.18-24.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in MANKIW, Geoffrey. *Macroeconomics*. New York: Worth, 2012.

The deepening of poverty was not sufficient grounds for a widespread revolt to arise. The right to "subsistence" was a necessary, but not sufficient reason for the uprising. According to Barrington Moore, a "politically effective moral indignation," is required for the emergence of a vast rebellion, that is, that people see that their misery is the result of "human injustice", of "identifiable acts of superiors" and the assessment of need and the perception that they should not have to endure such a situation.<sup>40</sup> When their poverty is product of the action of certain men, not the whim of nature or other causes, it is possible to overcome the "illusion of inevitability" and take the future in their own hands.<sup>41</sup>

Guanentá plebeians repeatedly expressed feeling "aggrieved", that is, abused and systematically deceived. They said that first "they were commanded to make tobacco sowings", as part of the Bourbon policy of encouraging cultivation for tax purposes, but then were told that they should "remove" them when they were in the middle of production, thereby losing their investments and livelihood for their families.<sup>42</sup> The governing powers then encouraged the planting of cotton to supply fibers for the industrialization of Catalonia (Spain) and increase revenue, but then they suppressed the activity by implementing a "new" tax. Due to these "grievances", according to the town hall of San Gil, commoners were convinced that the new Barlovento tax against cotton and yarn would be their "last extermination" and thus proclaimed that they were "unable to walk under the yoke of obedience".<sup>43</sup> The effects of the various imperial measurements had come together in the same geographic space with different economic, employment and social characteristics from the rest of New Granada in a region where the people already felt aggrieved. The result was the loss of obedience to the king.

The loss of fidelity of the plebeians to the king was evident in actions such as the breaking of the Edict of the Barlovento tax, the massive attacks on the offices of liquor and tobacco monopolies, persecution to death of the "guards" and the expulsion of the royal authorities of municipalities, among many other acts. As an artisan screamed as he destroyed the Barlovento edict: "Does anyone defend the arms of the king?" and the crowd shouted "No". The slogan for the revolt of the plebeians was not in general as widely believed, "Long live the king and death to bad government." This became more general, but only when the local elites joined the Revolution. The later slogans included "Long live the king, but do not pay the Barlovento tax", "Long live the king and death to his evil mandates" and "Long live the king and death to his commands and to the thieves who are here".<sup>44</sup> It was a direct call to the king, and not his intermediaries, to solve their problems.

The obedience "due" to the king by the plebeians was subsequently deepened by incorporating the Creole elites of the capital into the revolt on April 16. They were

---

<sup>40</sup> MOORE Jr., Barrington. *La injusticia, bases sociales de la obediencia y la rebelión*. México D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1996.

<sup>41</sup> Moore cited in TUTINO, John. *De la insurrección a la revolución en México*. Op.Cit.p.29.

<sup>42</sup> AGI, Santa Fe, 663A, "Testimony of the first book...", San Gil, March 24, 1781.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> AGI, Santa Fe, 662, Principal, 6r.

incorporated in a document known as the Card of the People (*Cédula del Pueblo*). This document explicitly proclaimed the seizure of state power by the Creoles with the support of the plebeians and the expulsion of the Europeans. Its content was fanatically adopted by the popular classes. "Long live El Socorro and death to bad government," they said. The king was replaced by the sovereignty of El Socorro to eliminate "bad government". The government of the Viceroyalty would fall on May 12, after the expulsion of the regent and the prosecutor of the *Audiencia*, and the rise of a governing board of the pro-commoner elites in the capital.

Subsequently, with the geographical and social spread of the Revolution, and the incorporation of indigenous people, Túpac Amaru II, the leader of the popular revolt in the Viceroyalty of Peru that occurred in the same year, became an inspiration. People screamed, "Long live the Inca King and death to the King of Spain and everyone who defends him"<sup>45</sup>. A tabloid proclaimed, "Long live the Inca King and death to the *chapelones* [the elites who wore pants], that if the King has pants; I also have them". The mestizo Captain José A. Galán proclaimed Túpac Amaru II the king of New Granada in Alto Magdalena. On May 19, 1781 neighbors in the plains region of New Granada directed by the Creole Javier Mendoza also deposed the governor and swore fealty to Túpac Amaru II.<sup>46</sup> On May 23, the common people of the sierra village of Cocuy proclaimed there was a new king who was "the Inca Túpac Amaru, powerful king". Both elites and plebeians thus sought to replace the sovereignty of the King of Spain in New Granada.

Unknown to the Comuneros in New Granada, the revolt of Tupac Amaru II had already been defeated in Peru by the concerted action by the elites, yet the popular benchmark was still the uprising in the neighbouring Viceroyalty of Peru. The Peruvian uprising was "peasant" and indigenous,<sup>47</sup> but failed to achieve a sustainable partnership with the mestizo and Creole elites, as in New Granada. But the differences between the revolts in Peru and New Granada were important. In Peru, the indigenous population was the majority and the reaction to the reforms of the Minister of the Indies, José de Gálvez, revolved around different questions, including opposition to the "forced merchandise trade" practiced by the magistrates of Peru. This mechanism was not practiced in New Granada, since unlike in Peru and Mexico, the magistrates in New Granada were not allowed to force the Indians to buy their goods.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the trade with Indians in Guanentá directly resulted in more "free" forms as simple business transactions. Moreover, in the region of Guanentá, and generally in New Granada, Indians did not

---

<sup>45</sup> FRIEDE, Juan ed., *Rebelión comunera de 1781. Documentos...* Op.Cit., p.687.

<sup>46</sup> CÁRDENAS, Pablo. ed., *Documentos de Cárdenas Acosta*. Tomo 1. Bogotá: Editorial Kelly, 1960, pp.61-62; AGUILERA PEÑA, Mario. *Los comuneros*. Op.Cit., pp. 118,139, 143, 159; RAUSCH, Jane M. "Los comuneros olvidados..."Op.Cit.

<sup>47</sup> O'PHELAN GODOY, Scarlett. *Un siglo de rebeliones anticoloniales. Perú y Bolivia 1700-1783*. Cusco, Perú: Centro de Estudios Rurales Andinos Bartolomé de las Casas, 1988; GOLTE, Jürgen. *Repartos y rebeliones*. Op.Cit.

<sup>48</sup>MELO, Jorge Orlando. "Introducción. Francisco Antonio Moreno y Escandón: retrato de un burócrata colonial". In: *Indios y Mestizos a finales del siglo XVIII*. Bogotá: Biblioteca Banco Popular, 1985, Section V.

exceed more than one thousand inhabitants.<sup>49</sup> Despite the initial sympathy of Peruvian elites to the peasant and indigenous uprising, they quickly supported the king as the revolt radicalized and polarized society.

### **From opportunities to redress**

The historiography of world revolutions has focused excessively on the political "opportunities" opened up in crisis situations for social actors rather than the grievances or perceptions of the poor in regard to injustices, which are ultimately the key factors in mobilizing and mounting insurrectionary armies.<sup>50</sup> International wars and power vacuums fill whole pages as prerequisites for revolts involving elites, for example, but little space is dedicated to analyze the perceptions of the bulk of the population in popular uprisings. Perceptions of political opportunities are important, but are not generated or explained by revolutions themselves. The political opportunities that the Guantá commoners had to confront, including situations in which they risked their lives, was the division, paralysis or support of elites to their uprising.<sup>51</sup> But the reason for the revolt was not the participation of elites, as a part of the historiography of the Comuneros contends. In fact, for a month (March 16-April 17) plebeians acted almost alone without the participation of elites in Guantá nor the Santa Fe aristocracy. This is why we have called the Comuneros Revolution, a veritable revolt of the plebeians.

Local elites would begin to participate on April 18, when the revolt of the plebeians had spread throughout Guantá and progressed within the province of Tunja. However, their entry was determined by the worsening of the clash between the two basic components of communities: the elites and commoners. Plebes attacked the elites when they did not adhere to the revolt or if they remained neutral in relation to the elimination of taxes and monopolies. In fact, the authority of the community was directly questioned. Would it be plebeians or the elites, who traditionally ruled, who would exert this power? Once the elites joined the revolt, plebeians delivered the management of their revolt to local patricians. It was what they expected in the context of their *moral economy*, as the elite had to meet their "duties" to direct and protect the poor. This alliance was made by signing a written, explicit and conscious *social contract*, a breach of which could be paid with death.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, the plebeians did not stop taking initiatives, to advance the Revolution in the course of the war. While General Francisco Berbeo insisted on finding

---

<sup>49</sup> In Socorro there were 440 Indians, in San Gil 225 and in Girón 120. This contrasts with Tunja City and its hinterland where there were 29,882 Indians. See McFARLANE, Anthony. *Colombia antes de la independencia*. *Op.Cit.*, Appendix A, Table 6.

<sup>50</sup> TUTINO, John. *De la insurrección a la revolución en México*. *Op.Cit.* p.33.

<sup>51</sup> On April 16, a document was read in Socorro entitled "Health, Regent Lord", better known by the crowd as the "Real Gaceta" or "Cédula del Pueblo". Written by the *Santafereña* aristocracy it invited the people to invade the capital and gave them a roadmap and a fairly advanced political program for the period. See ARCINIEGAS, Germán. Ed., *CHEC-Documents*. *Op.Cit.*, pp.143-152.

<sup>52</sup> This was signed and sealed before the notary and deputy mayor of El Socorro and issued on April 18. The the rights and duties of masters and commoners were stipulated in the document. See CÁRDENAS, Pablo. ed., *Documentos de Cárdenas Acosta*. *Op.Cit.*, Tomo 1, pp.137-138.

a quick agreement with the government that led to demobilization, despite the defeat inflicted by the commoners in the battle of Vélez on May, 1781, the plebeians and the captains of the more rural communities had set a goal of making it to Bogotá and conquer the capital for the Revolution. The 35 capitulations were actually signed in Zipaquirá against the will of the majority of the plebeians and the Indians who had recently joined *en masse* to the Revolution and even against the wishes of a significant part of the elite of Santa Fe (and other regions) and plebeians of the capital who felt they did not go far enough. The negotiated agreement represented by the capitulations was the result of an act of force carried out by the elites of the most important cities of the East, who managed to divide the revolt, forming an army entirely at their disposal. While the armed threat of plebeians to the commissioners remained, there were minimum requirements and compensation offered to the masses for not invading Santa Fe. The negotiations conducted by elites and government commissioners even removed several of the major popular aspirations, such as the return of land confiscated from indigenous peoples, among others.

### **The markings of a modern revolution**

The Revolution of 1781 showed several characteristic features of modern revolutions. The Comuneros sought a radical change in the way politics was conducted and how the creation of institutions that facilitated economic growth were defined. Steve Pincus typifies modern revolutions as being popular, violent and causing dissension.<sup>53</sup> The peasant and popular participation in 1781 reached magnitudes that would never be achieved in the future, even during the Colombian War of Independence. It covered most of the Viceroyalty of New Granada, including some of the jurisdictions of the Captaincy of Venezuela and the Audience of Quito. The royal authorities even feared that the Revolution in New Granada, connected with the revolt of high and low Peru, would receive support from northern European powers.

As we mentioned, the first stage of the Revolution (16 March-17 April) was almost exclusively the work of the plebeians who imposed their designs in practice. In the second stage (March 18-June 8th), the El Socorro elites assumed the political direction of the commoners by setting up a hierarchical military structure reserved for the so-called "good and honest men" of each municipality. They were or had been members of the municipal authorities, collectors of taxes and managers of the monopolies of tobacco and liquor. The vast majority were landowners and/or merchants.<sup>54</sup> In the first stage, they were threatened with death and sometimes attacked by the crowd. They had much to gain if they joined to the revolt of the plebeians. After all, they were also affected adversely by the reforms. In addition, they benefitted from the regulation of revolt and from eliminating the danger of the call by the anti-revolt elites of the capital to its "vassals", as the Captain General

---

<sup>53</sup> PINCUS, Steven C. A. *1688: la primera revolución moderna*. Barcelona: Acantillado, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> AGUILERA PEÑA, Mario. *Los comuneros*. *Op.Cit.*.



explicitly called his “soldiers”. The elites who joined the revolt were thus well placed to serve as the direct intermediaries between the people and the king.

Nevertheless, the plebeians kept their own leaders, remained active and made their own decisions. In the Alto Magdalena, Galán freed slaves, deposed local authorities, physically punished members of the Creole elite, and appointed captains from people of humble origin. On several occasions, the crowd confronted the captains of the elites, including General Berbeo, when their decisions did not match popular aspirations. For example, when Berbeo was in the process of consultation with the members of the governing board, which included Archbishop Caballero y Gongora, and had been given the popular mandate of 11 May to invade Santa Fe, one of the most known plebeian leaders, Juan Agustín Serrano, said: "Everything is resolved with two bullets, one to the Archbishop and the other to General". While Serrano was taken to jail by the order of General Berbeo, the crowd released him after few hours. It is no surprise that the royalist authorities told King Charles III that this was a “fact that permits to Your Majesty to know what the subordination of these people to their bosses was”.<sup>55</sup>

The aspirations of the plebeians were imposed by force without waiting for an agreement with the royalist authority or the acceptance of the captains general from the elite. Despite the actions of Generalísimo Berbeo and his lieutenants, the initiative of the armed crowd was tolerated since there was little that could be done to stop it. The plebeian sectors in the first stage of the Revolution organized the elimination of taxes (such as Barlovento and Alcabala), refused to pay the ecclesiastical tithe in some places, declared freedom to plant whatever crops they desired and conduct commerce, and reduced prices for tobacco consumption and liquor, among other actions. Subsequently, transaction costs (reduced rates for using bridges, notaries, etc.) were reduced. The plebeians demanded a free market in all its aspects. This latter feature characterized the Revolution as entirely modern.

There was a notable difference with the "hunger riots" of the Western Europe in the eighteenth century. The commoners of Guanentá did not claim the abolition of the policy of "free trade" as the poor of Europe demanded. On the contrary, the peasants and artisans from Guanentá demanded a real free market for production and consumption. This attitude was not guided by any theory of economic liberalism or Enlightenment ideas. This occurred because the economic policy of Charles III for the colonial market was essentially an interventionist and radical action, promoting the extraction of economic surplus by way of capturing monopoly rents and taxes. However, a strong "underground economy"<sup>56</sup> had developed where goods were traded for less than the price set by monopolies. Fair pricing, free markets and economic development were key aspirations of the popular revolt in the Revolution of 1781. Peasants and artisans from

---

<sup>55</sup> CÁRDENAS, Pablo. ed., *Documentos de Cárdenas Acosta. Op.Cit.* Tomo I, p.277.

<sup>56</sup> On the various concepts of underground economy, see MARTINEZ COVALEDA, Héctor. *La economía subterránea e ilegal en Colombia. Elementos para el estado del arte sobre conflicto y economía.* Colombia: CDPAZ-Proyecto Planeta Paz, 2010. [www.planetapaz.org/.../186-la-economia-subterranee-ileg](http://www.planetapaz.org/.../186-la-economia-subterranee-ileg).

Guanentá were, unknowingly, closer to Turgot, Quesnay and Smith than the European popular sectors.

The political practice of plebeians did not necessarily coincide with the aspirations of the Creoles. The desire of the elites of New Granada, before the Revolution, was to maintain state monopolies of tobacco and liquor, among others, but under the conditions and direction of their family networks. Before the arrival of the Visitor Piñeres, they aimed to assemble an infrastructure financed by the private sector, which would perpetually manage the monopolies for monetary compensation. This proposal was vetoed by the Visitor, thus accumulating an additional reason for the hatred of the monarchy among some elites. As it was not possible to implement this management scheme, the elites were reduced to maintaining monopolies under the traditional renting scheme. In addition, it was the elites, not Piñeres, who asked to reduce the growing area of tobacco and agreed to implement the Barlovento tax.

The peasants and plebeians of New Granada expressed opposing ideas. They demanded the complete abolition of the monopoly of tobacco and freedom of trade and prices. Consequently, this demand was referred to in several of the 35 capitulations of Zipaquirá. By contrast, the monopoly of liquor was not a major concern for the peasants, except for the increase in consumer prices, because raw material for processing (the cane molasses) was provided by the great owners, who typically relied on black slaves. The liquor monopoly continued in the form of renting, as adopted in the capitulations. Dissent and lack of consensus between patricians and plebeians was a defining feature of the Revolution of 1781. Moreover, there was no unity of purpose between local elites and Santa Fe elites about the type of government that was desired and the purpose of the invasion of the capital Santa Fe. Indeed, there was the real prospect of a civil war.

Finally, one of the highlights of the Revolution was the participation of new political actors, in particular the plebeians, who explicitly expressed their wishes verbally or in practice, which is a key feature of modernity. This historical rupture reflects the shift that the plebeian revolt represented. It went from a simple anti-riot tax to demands for the creation of a new space for political participation and a *locus* of sovereignty. The plebeians allied with local elites and those in the capital to participate in the Revolution, although the price was that they lost the leadership of the movement. They created a space to participate in the design of economic policy and conceive the capitulations. The Revolution was able to fill the power vacuum created when the authorities faithful to the king were expelled or fled from the municipalities. They created new bodies of political leadership, including the appointment of local governing captains, decisions in which plebeians were involved, even interceding to prevent patronage appointments and warlordism. It is particularly noteworthy that humble and brave warriors such as the peasant José Antonio Galán and the weaver Isidro Molina continue to be idolized in the Columbian collective imagination while General Berbeo is largely forgotten.

The Revolution propelled by peasants and other plebeians in New Granada resulted in the constitutional charter of the capitulations of June 5. Although the delegates of the provincial elites and the aristocracy of Santa Fe officially wrote the capitulations

through a type of Constituent Assembly, they collected and filtered general popular aspirations that would become law. But not only that, for a new state organization resulted from the Revolution, including the creation of a standing Creole army, the monopoly of all political and administrative offices of the colonial state for the native-born, an alternative taxation system and a new relationship with the King. Limits were imposed on the powers of the monarch such as the requirement to justify new taxes to the new political organization that emerged from Zipaquirá. The Revolution of 1781 was radical, violent and displayed modern signs due to the wide participation of popular sectors. It was not the *Fronde* or, as Phelan imagines, a feudal reaction.

The capitulations were soon abolished by elites who failed to defend them and demobilized the *Comunero* army and the communities who supported the Revolution. Yet the desires expressed by the popular movement predicted a substantial change in the relationship between society and the state, and the establishment of an institutional framework to promote economic development. To paraphrase John Womack, but giving another meaning to his statement, peasants and other plebeians of El Socorro wanted to keep things as they were, but this nevertheless sparked a Revolution.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

The Revolution of 1781 in *New Granada* was eminently popular and peasant. It formulated a break with the traditional form of relationship between society and the state. One simple anti-tax riot became, through the dynamics of the revolutionary process, a Revolution with important modern overtones. In the process, a rupture with the king of Spain was explicitly raised, an independent state entity with a centralized and more inclusive framework was established, and a taxation system and an institutional framework more favourable to employment creation and economic growth was achieved. Our conclusion was reached by an approach that focused on the dynamics of the Revolution and the interaction of subaltern groups with other social classes. In particular, we investigated how the traditional perceptions of plebians regarding the economic and social dynamics of the eighteenth century in New Granada were altered. This is quite distinct from the dominant paradigm represented by John Phelan on the "conservative" nature of the Revolution of 1781.

---

<sup>57</sup> WOMACK, John. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Knopf, 1969.