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Buenos Aires's Contribution to 1776

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While the colonies declared independence, liberty also found a foothold in the South Atlantic.

THE YEAR 1776 IS USUALLY REMEMBERED FOR TWO EVENTS: American independence and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. It should also be remembered for a third: the creation of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata.

These events were not connected. The American Revolution did not produce Smith's book, and neither event caused the creation of the new Spanish viceroyalty. Each emerged from a different political context and answered a different historical problem. But their coincidence in time is worth taking seriously, because in 1776 three parts of the Atlantic world began transformations that would later converge. Philadelphia transformed the foundations of political legitimacy. Edinburgh

transformed the language through which economic prosperity could be understood. Buenos Aires turned into the center of a new imperial organization that would eventually reshape the political geography of South America. The history of 1776 has traditionally been told through Philadelphia and Edinburgh. It should also include Buenos Aires.

Philadelphia and the Transformation of Political Legitimacy

The [Declaration of Independence](#) did more than announce the separation of thirteen colonies from Great Britain. It offered a new justification for government: political authority existed to protect individual rights, and legitimate power derived from the consent of the governed. When government systematically violated those purposes, the people possessed the right to alter or abolish it.

For centuries, political authority had rested primarily on dynastic succession, tradition, religion, and inherited privilege. The American Revolution did not eliminate these overnight, nor did the new republic immediately live up to the universal principles announced in its founding documents—as [Bernard Bailyn](#) and other historians of the revolutionary generation have shown in detail. But it established a new possibility: a government deliberately constructed on constitutional foundations, deriving its legitimacy from the people rather than from a monarch. [The Constitution of 1787](#) gave that possibility institutional form. Federalism, representation, the separation of powers, and constitutional limits on government became part of a new political discourse, and the American experience demonstrated that a republic could be a durable form of modern government.

Edinburgh and the Transformation of Economic Thought

In the same year, Adam Smith published [The Wealth of Nations](#), offering a new way of understanding economic life. Wealth did not consist in the accumulation of precious metals by governments or in the possession of colonial territories. It was connected to the productive powers of labor, the division of labor, specialization, exchange, and the institutional

conditions under which individuals could pursue their own economic interests.

The world did not suddenly become economically liberal in 1776. The eighteenth century remained an age of empire, regulation, and commercial rivalry, and Smith himself wrote within a world structured by imperial power. But the intellectual framework was shifting in large part due to Smith's ideas. The idea that prosperity depended on the productive activity of ordinary people, rather than on the policies of rulers, represented a fundamental change—and so did the recognition that restrictions on exchange impoverish societies. Smith changed the questions political societies asked about wealth: What made a nation prosperous? Did governments create wealth, or could they obstruct the processes through which wealth was created? These questions would become increasingly important throughout the Atlantic world—and, in time, in the Spanish Empire as well.

Buenos Aires and the Transformation of Imperial Space

The creation of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata is often treated as a minor episode in the administrative history of the Spanish Empire. In reality, it represented a major geopolitical response to changing conditions in the South Atlantic. Portuguese expansion challenged Spain's southern frontier, while the growing commercial and naval power of Great Britain strengthened the strategic importance of the region. As the gateway to the Río de la Plata and the principal route to Upper Peru, Buenos Aires became indispensable to the defense and administration of Spain's southern dominions. The new viceroyalty formed part of the wider Bourbon reform program—well documented by historians such as [John Lynch](#) and [Tulio Halperín Donghi](#)—aimed at strengthening and rationalizing the empire.



The Argentine constitutional experiment would prove more fragile than its North American counterpart, and its later reversals have become a recurring theme.

As so often happens, reforms designed to strengthen imperial authority produced consequences their architects neither anticipated nor desired. The new political organization increased the importance of Río de la Plata, which evolved into the administrative center of a vast territory and acquired a more prominent position within the Atlantic economy. Subsequent commercial reforms reinforced this: the port grew more connected to international commerce, and the region became more closely tied to Atlantic trade. Commercial groups grew in influence, and the relationship between the port, the interior, and Upper Peru came to be more significant.

The Crown had intended to reorganize and tighten imperial control. Instead, it helped foster a more dynamic regional society—one of the central paradoxes of the Bourbon reforms, which strengthened local institutions and economic opportunities even as they sought to centralize power, and which contributed to the emergence of elites whose interests would not always coincide with those of the imperial government. The creation of the viceroyalty was not itself a liberal revolution, nor an independence movement. It was an imperial reform. But it created a new political and economic space that would become increasingly difficult to govern by the old rules. By the time the Spanish monarchy collapsed into crisis after the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1808, the political world of the Río de la Plata was fundamentally different from the one that had existed in 1776. The transformation had taken three decades.

From 1776 to a Constitutional Argentina

On May 25, 1810, a local governing junta was established in Buenos Aires, and in 1816, together with the rest of the provinces, it declared independence. But the most revealing part of the story, for readers interested in constitutional freedom, comes later. After going through

external and civil wars, the country would manage to establish lasting institutions.

That effort drew directly on the two other transformations of 1776. When Juan Bautista Alberdi wrote his *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina* in 1852—the text that influenced the Constitution of 1853—he drew explicitly on the American constitutional model and on the economic liberalism descended from Smith. Alberdi wanted a federal republic with limited, divided powers, and he wanted an economy open to European capital, immigration, and trade. His famous formula, “gobernar es poblar” (“to govern is to populate”), was an economic argument as much as a demographic one: prosperity would come from productive activity and open exchange, not from state control of resources. The *Constitution of 1853* that resulted was, in a real sense, an attempt to graft Philadelphia’s political principles and Smithian political economy onto the political space that the Bourbon reforms had unintentionally carved out of the Spanish Empire seventy-seven years earlier.

The Argentine constitutional experiment would prove more fragile than its North American counterpart, and its later reversals have become a recurring theme in the literature on Latin American development. But its origins revealed that the Atlantic world of 1776 was already assembling the pieces—republican legitimacy, economic liberalism, and a newly significant Atlantic port—out of which a later generation would try to build a liberal constitutional order.

From this perspective, 1776 was not merely the year of three remarkable events. It marked the beginning of three historical trajectories whose convergence would ultimately contribute to Argentina’s liberal constitutional order of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet Argentina’s subsequent history also cautions against viewing that constitutional settlement as either inevitable or permanent. Liberal constitutional institutions could establish important protections for liberty, but they could not, by themselves, guarantee their preservation against the political forces that would later challenge them.

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