

What is the Problem with Santander?

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For those who have made their scholarly reputation at least in part by the study of Francisco de Paula Santander, the current vogue of an ultra-bolivarianismo in the ranks of the revolutionary and populist left and of many who would identify themselves simply as progressive thinkers is more than a little disturbing. It is not that an admiration for the Liberator cannot logically be combined with proper respect for "el Hombre de las Leyes": most devotees of the latter have always recognized the exceptional character of the former, even if their evenhandedness has not always been reciprocated by the Bolivarians. But what we see today is a tendency of groups that once eagerly upheld the name of Santander and took his side in his final quarrel with Bolívar to turn their backs on him and more often than not blacken his name with the same epithets conventionally hurled at establishment politicians. At least that is what we see in Colombia itself, where Santander had been the object of his own hero cult. Obviously I am not referring to countries where he remains a largely unknown figure, or to Venezuela, where Santander had many friends and allies in his lifetime but has been systematically vilified almost ever since.

In Colombia, too, the vilification of Santander is nothing new, but for most of the nation's independent history it was a favorite cause of hard-line Conservatives. One of the first examples that come to mind is *El mito de Santander*, by none other than Laureano Gómez, written well before Gómez at the end of his career became a convert to bipartisan collaboration.¹ Gómez reiterated all the principal attacks made on Santander during his own life, from alleged peculations to sectarian blood lust, but it was his intellectual alignment with a version (however

moderate in practice) of liberal anticlericalism that chiefly stirred the Conservative chieftain's vitriol. However, just when Conservatives were toning down or discreetly setting aside their critical views of Santander, he began losing favor in the Liberal camp, in which regard the decisive turning-point, at least for historians, was the appearance of the biography of Bolívar by Indalecio Liévano Aguirre; though first published in Mexico in 1956, its widespread influence derives from later Colombian editions.² A collaborator of Alfonso López Michelsen in the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal and later López's foreign minister, Liévano was not overly concerned with questions of Catholic orthodoxy but in another monograph took Santander to task for mismanagement of Colombia's 1824 foreign loan,³ and in his life of the Liberator he portrayed Santander as leader of a narrow regional oligarchy unable to appreciate either the social or the Latin Americanist dimensions of Bolívar's vision.

A cruder expression of basically the same theses put forward by Liévano Aguirre could be found in a subsequent comic-book history entitled *La historia de los partidos políticos*, where Santander appears as the head of a "pandilla de 'próceres,' 'héroes nacionales,' y demás ladrones" who became known as "'el Hombre de las Leyes' porque cuando iba a hacer algún negocio sucio, se inventaba una ley para justificarlo."⁴ The specific instances it then presents generally have to do with some sort of oppression of the poor by the rich, with Bolívar naturally portrayed as defender of the former. Disenchantment with Santander was a bit slower to find expression among professionally trained academic historians, of whom in truth there were not yet many in Colombia when Liévano's work first attracted

attention, and in these circles it certainly has not carried all before it. Even so, an approach broadly similar to that of Liévano informs the work, for example, of Oxford-trained Hermes Tovar Pinzón. Although most of his publications deal either with the colonial period or more recent history, Tovar has contributed a number of articles and book chapters on the independence and Gran Colombian eras, and he does not hesitate to contrast "la política intrigante e inmoral de Santander" with the truly "popular" bases of Bolívar's final dictatorship.⁵

Liévano's interpretation is easily discernible, too, in the writing of Gabriel García Márquez, who does not mention him in the "Gratitudes" with which he closes *El general en su laberinto*⁶ but elsewhere has frankly acknowledged his indebtedness. He does so, for example, in a lengthy interview that appeared in the weekly *Semana* about the time of publication of the novel and in which he enigmatically describes Santander as "un hombre admirable," yet one who

...representaba exactamente el pensamiento conservador de España. Fue el creador de unas instituciones perfectas en el papel, pero con una visión muy limitada. Bolívar, en cambio, era un liberal desatado....⁷

The Nobel laureate's underlying assumption in this reversal of the association made by traditional Colombian historiography of Santander with liberalism and Bolívar with conservatism would seem to be that Santander's institution-building served to enclose the Colombian people in a straightjacket unsuited to the reality of their time and place, whereas Bolívar was open to anything at all that needed to be done to help his people. Not all Santander's detractors would put the matter in exactly those terms, but the extent to which his public image has declined is suggested by an interview with the head of the Academia Colombiana de Historia, Santiago Díaz Piedrahita, that also appeared in *Semana*. One of the questions posed was, "A propósito de historia, ¿Bolívar sí era el bueno y Santander el malo?" The style of the interviewer was in this case intentionally provocative, yet the clear implication is that most people nowadays would accept as

self-evident truth the assertion contained in the question. (Díaz Piedrahita fended it off with a nicely balanced reply.)⁸

The rejection of Santander by most of today's Colombian left is particularly striking in light of the fact that in his final conflict with Bolívar he on the whole had the support of those whom we may anachronistically term the "leftists" of his own day. Here I refer most obviously to Admiral José Padilla and his followers among the pardos of the Caribbean coast, but one could also mention the case of José María Obando, who rallied much of the lower-class population of the Cauca in his vendetta against the aristocracy of Popayán to which he was himself related through an illegitimate line. To what extent these figures may have had a concrete radical agenda to promote is far from clear, but they themselves constituted a social agenda in that they challenged the dominance of long-entrenched regional elites. In the slightly more recent past, it is striking to note that such representatives of the country's *old* left as Ignacio Torres Giraldo, among the founders of the Colombian Communist Party, retrospectively took the very same position in favor of Santander in his quarrel with the Liberator as did Padilla, Obando, et al.⁹ So did that quintessential radical of the early 20th century, José María Vargas Vila.¹⁰ To what, then, can this curious reversal be attributed?

One advantage that Bolívar has always held over Santander is his obvious personal charisma. None other than Pedro Bonaparte, nephew of the sibling whom Napoleon sought to establish on the throne of Spain, commented on Santander's impressive "don de mando";¹¹ yet supposedly it was Santander himself, at the Convention of Ocaña, who pleaded against an invitation to Bolívar to address the gathering on the ground that the Liberator was so persuasive in face-to-face encounters that he could cause almost anyone to abandon previous strongly-held opinions.¹² The same Bolivarian charisma still resonates in historical memory, written or otherwise, thanks to the accounts of his political-military achievements and personal gestures that have come down to the present, and thanks also to the grace and wit so evident in the preserved body of

own writings. The latter qualities are sadly lacking in the somewhat stolid literary output of Santander--letters, diary, official messages--where most of the efforts to insert a lighter touch are too heavy-handed to be convincing.

Santander's inferiority to Bolívar as a writer is clearly not, however, the reason for his fall from favor. At most, if he had possessed a more engaging style, people might pay closer attention to all he wrote in his own defense, which at present they do not do; and that is just as well, for by their monotonously self-justificatory tone and general lack of subtlety these writings really do him more harm than good. A more fundamental problem is that the very things Santander so proudly stood for and for which he was at one time reverentially praised by Colombian Liberals--as well as some Conservatives and foreign commentators--no longer arouse the same admiration among his compatriots. The most familiar of all Santander quotations, inscribed on walls and monuments throughout Colombia and repeated in civic manuals (often in slightly variant wording) is the line, "Las armas os han dado la independenciam; las leyes os darán libertad."¹³ That was certainly a guiding credo of Santander, and contemporary authors who remain loyal to Santander continue to invoke it. In his otherwise favorable review of what has become the standard biography of Santander, by Pilar Moreno de Angel, Malcolm Deas did feel compelled to chide the author for her overuse of the designation "Hombre de las Leyes" (originally coined by Bolívar himself).¹⁴ And there cannot be much doubt that the continual references to "El Hombre de las Leyes" by Pilar Moreno and others are really counterproductive for his image, conjuring up thoughts of hypocritical and self-serving "leguleyismo." In a similar vein, Horacio Gómez Aristizábal entitled his two-volume contribution on Santander to the series "Pensamiento Latinoamericano," *Santander y el Estado de Derecho*¹⁵--whereas all too many Colombians today tend to ridicule the very idea that they live under a "state of law." As for Santander's second-most-familiar pronouncement, "La constitución hará el bien como lo dicta; pero si en la obediencia

se encuentra el mal, el mal será"--contained in his address on first assuming the vice-presidency in 1821¹⁶ and likewise often reproduced with slight variations--to most present-day Colombians it would appear the height of irresponsibility at the very least, and not merely because the proudly launched Constitution of 1991 has so quickly defrauded the expectations placed upon it.

The specific policies that Santander pursued while in office generally arouse today as little enthusiasm as his overall insistence on constitutional legality. A conventional liberal of his own time, he sincerely believed in the advantages of free-enterprise capitalism. He accordingly espoused neither government-imposed agrarian reform nor ambitious codes of workers' rights and benefits nor nationalization of basic industries and resources. He favored "opening" to foreign trade and investment, although he qualified his position on trade during his presidency of New Granada by espousing a moderate protectionism. All this is fully in line with the views of neo-liberal technocrats (although Santander himself was paleo- rather than neo-), but it appears to be currently out of line with the thinking of either the general public or avant-garde opinion-makers. Santander is often taken to task, moreover, for measures that he actually had little to do with. Thus the comic-book history cited above blames him for the legislation that called for distribution of the Indian *resguardos* in the form of private parcels as well as for the abolition of the Indian tribute, despite the fact that all this was done by the constituent congress meeting in Cúcuta, while Santander was in Bogotá toiling away as Bolívar's vice-president for New Granada. The first of these measures is decried as a means of transferring the lands in question "a los ricos," though in practice very little was done about enforcing it one way or the other by Santander or anyone in the short run. The second is described as a move that harmed the poor by replacing an existing tax burden with one even heavier, which was not exactly true. Such an interpretation of the abolition of tribute might have served to deflect criticism from Bolívar for his restoration of the tribute in 1828--yet the latter detail is one of those that leftist admirers of the

Liberator simply do not mention.¹⁷

Santander's support of public education and of various restrictions on the wealth and influence of the church should logically have won him praise from the same people who misleadingly cast him as an oppressor of the Indians. After all, as president of New Granada he promoted primary and secondary schooling even as he and the leaders of Congress were holding down military expenditures, and it had been his support of Benthamite textbooks as well as of the first round of anticlerical measures—e.g., closing of minor convents, limitations on mortmain—that provoked the most virulent opposition to him as vice-president of Gran Colombia.¹⁸ In this regard it may be of interest to note that García Márquez, when explaining to his interviewer what he considered the differences between Colombia and Venezuela, emphasized the fact that Venezuela already in the nineteenth century had secularized its institutions, whereas in Colombia, he implied, the institutional church continued to function as a key obstacle to intellectual and other progress.¹⁹ There was some truth in what the great novelist said, but when he blamed Santander for getting Colombian institutions off to a bad start, as already mentioned, he displayed ignorance of what Santander and his collaborators had done to initiate a similar secularizing process that admittedly did not go as far in New Granada as in Venezuela and was then in part rolled back by the Liberator's final dictatorship. I cannot blame García Márquez for never having read my *Santander Regime in Gran Colombia*, but I do suspect that the preoccupation of present-day Santanderistas with their hero's devotion to the law and the constitution has tended to obscure those policies of his that even left-leaning populists would have to recognize as progressive, however much they might minimize (all too often justifiably) their long-term effectiveness.

Neither has Santander's defense of civil as against military prerogatives won favorable comment from those who today are critical of the role of the Colombian military. Presumably one reason for this is the association of the militarism that his faction opposed with the policies of Bolívar, in whose hands, as perhaps in those of Hugo Chávez at the present time, military force

and directness are seen as having been placed at the service of the popular sectors. No doubt even more important, however, is the mere assumption that Santander and his people made much of the dangers of military domination only because of their own jealous rivalry with Bolívar and his coterie of mostly non-granadino military colleagues.

Santander's approach to international relations has also damaged his standing, and in this area his more recent detractors find common ground with those Conservative traditionalists who never accepted the "Polar Star" doctrine of Marco Fidel Suárez, i.e., that Colombia should look to the United States as both model and helper. Far from warning, as Bolívar did, that the United States was destined to "plagar la América de miserias en nombre de la libertad,"²⁰ Santander as vice-president of Gran Colombia distorted the Liberator's concept of a strictly Hispanic American league by inviting the United States to the Congress of Panama—a move that Bolívar gracefully accepted when informed of it,²¹ though we can assume without enthusiasm. Liévano Aguirre, in addition to what he says in his biography of Bolívar on the same topic, published a separate short work entitled *Bolívarismo o monroísmo*,²² in which Santander is linked with the latter in nefarious opposition to the Liberator's agenda of Latin American integration. This one aspect of Santander's legacy is underscored less often by contemporary critics than his opposition to Bolívar in Gran Colombian political rivalries, but even when it is not mentioned explicitly, the continual references to Bolívar's well-founded suspicions of United States policy carry an implicit rebuke to Santander and others like him for their effort to ingratiate themselves with the northern colossus. Santander is, at a minimum, guilty by association. By contrast, Bolívar is not held guilty for calling, somewhat vaguely, for a British protectorate over the new Spanish American nations, or even for his suggestion of alienating Latin American territory to Great Britain, as he had offhandedly done at one point with regard to Nicaragua and Panama.²³ The way in which the Liberator's admirers ignore the latter proposal is perhaps the best of all examples of what may be called the "teflon" quality adhering to Bolívar's

image, whereby actions or proposals of his that do not satisfy current standards of correctness are simply passed over.

Santander, alas, does not seem to possess a similar quality, and a number of his personal traits that are thus all too readily remembered put him at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the Liberator. A good example is his known fondness for money. Even if we dismiss the allegation that he personally profited from mismanagement of the 1824 foreign loan, it is hard not to raise an eyebrow at the speed with which he asked for the adjustment of his back salary account on returning to New Granada from European exile in 1832.²⁴ The trait in question makes a painful contrast with Bolívar's record of financial disinterest, including the free hand with which he gave away personal assets to friends, relatives, and deserving widows. Then, too--last but not necessarily least--there is a problem with Santander's love life. His one long-term relationship was with Nicolasa Ibáñez de Caro, in most respects an admirable woman even if already married to someone else, but she scarcely compares in glamor and excitement with Bolívar's inimitable Manuela Sáenz, who has become a cult figure in her own right.²⁵ Moreover, Santander's treatment of Nicolasa was in the end rather shabby. After the death of her royalist-bureaucrat husband, when he could have legally married her in the eyes of both church and state, he failed to do so and instead entered into a marriage more of convenience than of love with doña Sixta Pontón. Santander died not many years later, though not before producing three legitimate children in addition to the earlier illegitimate son whom he recognized in his will and conceivably others unknown or unrecognized.²⁶ In this matter of human offspring he clearly surpassed Bolívar, whose lack of proven descendants is another of the embarrassing details to which the Liberator's "teflon" quality has proven so impervious. But then Bolívar is the father of five republics, and the "Hombre de las Leyes" can never hope to compete with that claim to fame.

Santander's treatment of Nicolasa is a detail that his recent detractors have made surprisingly little use of, but his relationship with

her is nevertheless given as one of the primary reasons for his poor image in a generally well-argued defense of Santander by Germán Riaño Cano. Yet Riaño, who in his title calls Santander "el Gran Calumniado,"²⁷ does not underscore the seeming ingratitude of Santander toward the woman who had been his lover over a period of many years. He notes instead the mere fact that this relationship outside of holy matrimony led to deep resentment toward Santander on the part of José Eusebio Caro, the son born to Nicolasa and her legitimate husband, not to mention her grandson, Miguel Antonio Caro. Since the two Caros were respectively a founder of Colombia's Conservative Party and the country's greatest Conservative ideologue, their personal hatred significantly heightened the anti-Santander vendetta of traditional Colombian Conservatism.

In further explanation of Santander's problematic image, Riaño notes the lack of a comprehensive, solidly documented study of the "Hombre de las Leyes" prior to that of Pilar Moreno.²⁸ Curiously, however, and I would say unfortunately, Riaño does not appear to fully grasp the nature of Santander's contemporary predicament. He lumps Indalecio Liévano Aguirre alongside Laureano Gómez among the detractors of Santander, as though he were just another Conservative polemicist; and he quite ignores the case of García Márquez. While answering hoary accusations of financial malfeasance and defending the role of Santander in assorted causes célèbres of the period, he thus never deals head-on with the thesis of Santander as a leader of selfish and narrow-minded oligarchs in their effort to thwart the popular (or even "populist") endeavors of Bolívar. For Santander to gain his proper place in the pantheon of national heroes, it is clearly not enough to prove that, yes, he truly was "El Hombre de Las Leyes." It would be better to resurrect, refining as need be in the light of present-day historical methodology, the vision of Santander previously advanced by members of the nation's "old left"--including left-leaning Liberals of the pre-Liévano era--that portrayed him not just as a devotee of the law and constitution but as sponsor of basic institutional reforms and far-sighted foe of the military-clerical-

landed elites ("el feudalismo...alto clero y los militares reaccionarios" in the words of Torres

Giraldo²⁹) that in actual fact were supporting not him but Bolívar.

Notas:

1. Laureano Gómez, *El mito de Santander*, 2 ed., 2 vols. (Bogotá: Editorial Revista Colombiana, 1966).
2. Indalecio Liévano Aguirre, *Bolívar*, 1a ed. (México: E.D.I.A.P.S.A, 1956), 2 ed. (Medellín: Editorial La Oveja Negra, 1971).
3. *Razones socio-económicas de la conspiración de septiembre contra el Libertador* (Caracas: Biblioteca Venezolana de Historia, 1968).
4. Published by Editorial El Machete (Bogotá, 1972?). There is no date of publication, but the preface by anonymous "autores" is dated April 1972; nor are pages numbered.
5. "Problemas de la transición del Estado colonial al Estado nacional (1810-1850)," in J.P. Deler and Y. Saint-Geours, comps., *Estados y naciones en los Andes*, 2 vols. (Lima, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos and Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos, 1986), II, 384.
6. Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1989, pp. 269-272.
7. *Semana* (Bogotá), 14 March 1989, p. 33. His tribute to Liévano Aguirre appears on p. 28 of the same interview.
8. *Semana*, 10 June 2002, p. 26.
9. *Los inconformes: historia de la rebeldía de las masas en Colombia*, 5 vols. (Bogotá, Editorial Margen Izquierdo, 1972-1974), II, 8-21.
10. For the view of Vargas Vila, see *Escritos sobre Santander*, 2 vols. (Bogotá: Biblioteca de la Presidencia de la República, 1988), I, 165-168.
11. Cited in, among others, Pilar Moreno de Angel, *Santander: biografía* (Bogotá, 1989), 569.
12. José Joaquín Guerra, *La Convención de Ocaña*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Bogotá: Biblioteca Banco Popular, 1978), II, 313. The ultimate source for this detail is a letter written by a Bolivarian delegate, Joaquín José Gori, which can hardly be considered definitive proof that Santander made the statement; yet it remains quite believable.
13. Laureano García Ortiz, *Algunos estudios sobre el general Santander* (Bogotá: Biblioteca Popular de Cultura Colombiana, 1946), p. 65.
14. *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 71:1 (February 1991), 175.
15. Bogotá: Publicaciones de la Universidad Central, 1990.

16. *Gaceta de Colombia*, 4 October 1821.
 17. *Historia de los partidos políticos*, cit. On tariff policy see José Antonio Ocampo, comp., *Historia económica de Colombia*, 2d ed. (Bogotá: Biblioteca Familiar Presidencia de la República, 1997), 140-142, and on the measures relating to Indians, Bushnell, *The Santander Regime in Gran Colombia* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1954), 174-177, and "The Last Dictatorship: Betrayal or Consummation?," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 63:1 (February 1983), 90-92.
 18. Bushnell, *The Santander Regime in Gran Colombia* (Newark, DE, 1954), 195-248, and "Vidas paralelas de dos pueblos hermanos: Venezuela y Nueva Granada después de la separación," *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia de Venezuela*, LXXXIII:330 (abril-junio 2002), 300-301.
 19. *Semana*, 14 March 1989, p. 31.
 20. Letter to British minister Patrick Campbell, 5 August 1829, in Simón Bolívar, *Obras completas del Libertador*, 3 vols. (Havana, 1950, and Caracas, 1963[?]), III, 279. On the "Polar Star" concept of Suárez, see, e.g., James D. Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia: The Laureano Gómez Years, 1889-1965* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 102-103.
 21. Letter to José Rafael Revenga, 8 April 1826, in Bolívar, *Obras completas*, II, 349.
 22. *Bolivarismo y monroísmo* (Caracas: Biblioteca Venezolana de Historia, 1971).
 23. Juan Diego Jaramillo, *Bolívar y Canning 1822-1827* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1983), 188, 206, 214, 244-248, and *passim*.
 24. Moreno de Angel, *Santander*, 567, points out that Santander was not a particularly rich man to begin with and had drawn no salaries since 1828, but even she has to note that the complaint about "saqueo" of his property by his enemies that he included in his request was unfounded.
 25. Pamela Murray, "'Loca' or 'Libertadora'? Manuela Sáenz in the Eyes of History and Historians, 1900-c. 1990," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 33:2 (2001), 291-310.
 26. Luis Eduardo Pacheco and Leonardo Molina Lemus, *La familia de Santander*, 4th ed. of part I (Bogotá: Banco Popular, 1978), 115-116, 156.
 27. Germán Riaño Cano, *El gran calumniado, réplica a la leyenda negra de Santander* (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 2001), 233.
 28. *Ibid.*, 231-232.
 29. *Los inconformes*, II, 17.
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