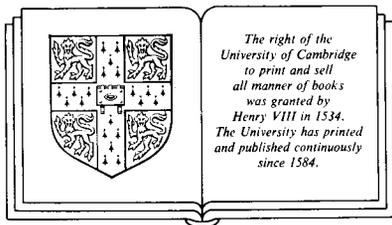


PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CARACAS

POLITICS, ECONOMY, AND
SOCIETY 1777-1811

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1985

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

McKinlay, P. Michael.

Pre-revolutionary Caracas.

(Cambridge Latin American studies; 56)

Bibliography; p.

Includes index.

1. Caracas (Venezuela) – Politics and government.
2. Venezuela – Politics and government – To 1810.
3. Caracas (Venezuela) – Economic conditions.
4. Social classes – Venezuela – Caracas – History.

I. Title.

II. Series.

F2341.C257M37 1985 987.7 85-13294

ISBN 0 521 30450 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52704 X paperback

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Introduction

The current historical portrayal of late-colonial Caracas, and by extension of Venezuela, is that of a society transformed and terminally upset by the Bourbon reforms of the late eighteenth century. A dualistic, colonial economy, supporting a fixed and not particularly comfortable caste society within the framework of a detrimental relationship with the mother country, is seen as creating the conditions for an unusually violent struggle for independence after 1811.

This book portrays a quite different colonial society. By the tail-end of the eighteenth century, Caracas was emerging for the first time as a significant member of the Spanish Empire; and in the process it revealed itself to be an unusually well-balanced and harmonious developing colonial society. An economic flowering unparalleled in the region's long history brought Caracas temporarily out of the relative obscurity in which it had lain, and into which it subsequently relapsed after independence. This economic transformation was accomplished within the confines and with the aid of the empire. Spanish legislation and imperial administrations either anticipated or accommodated the needs of the provincial economy; and the changes in the imperial trade system which may have hurt other American colonies only seem to have given Caracas an added incentive to grow. Not even the increasingly difficult years after 1796, when the negative effects of the Napoleonic Wars intensified, entirely obscured the essentially positive economic relation between province and empire.

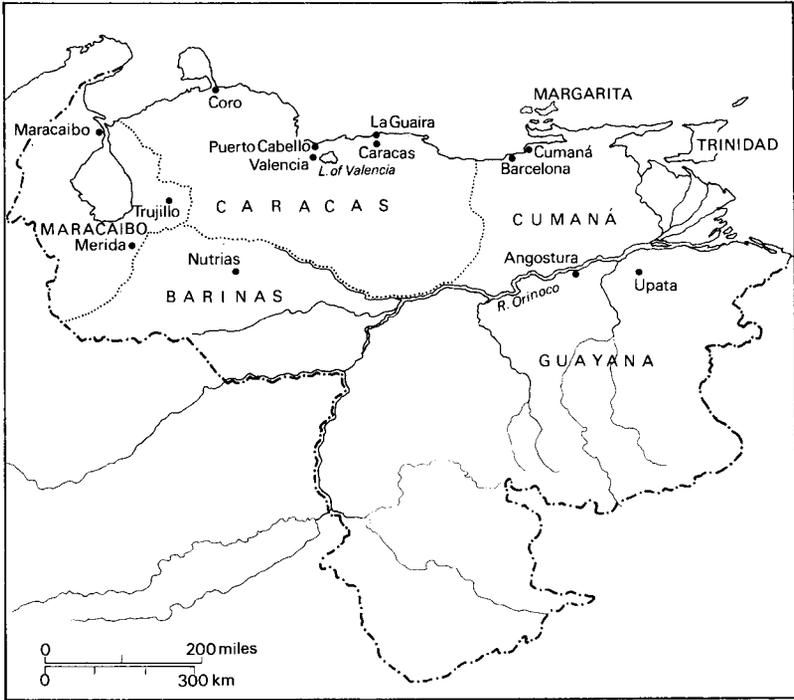
Economic growth was accompanied by political stability and social calm. The picture we have of a captive creole *hacendado* elite producing cash crops for Spanish export merchants is a distortion of the character of the market economy in the province. As we shall see, Caracas in many ways was atypical rather than representative of a plantation economy; and, most importantly, the production sector was not at the mercy of a Spanish mercantile community. The commercial branch of

the economy was too weak and the agricultural interests too strong to allow such an imbalance to develop. In addition, a growing community of interests between the merchants and the creole landed elite was breaking down the traditional separation between the two groups as the colonial period drew to a close. As to the relations between the white caste and the rest of the province's population, economic mobility and a heterogenous occupational structure made for a relatively tranquil social environment. The potential for such a structure to diffuse rather than escalate social and racial tension was considerable, and Caracas was generally more peaceful before 1808 than we have been led to believe.

A similar structural flexibility was apparent in the political sphere. The creole elite of Caracas was most definitely not on the defensive as 1808 approached. Rather, it was experiencing a new assertiveness born of economic success, social pre-eminence and an awareness of political strength. Furthermore, the imperial representatives sent to Caracas from the late 1770s onwards tended to rule and act in the province's interests in consultation with the local elites. The latter consequently felt no compelling need to lay claim to the higher bureaucratic and political posts in the colony, and did not develop the feeling of exclusion from the political process which arose among colonial elites elsewhere in the empire.

The initial reaction of the *caraqueño* ruling groups to the French invasion of Spain in 1808 was therefore genuinely loyal to the cause of the Spanish resistance and of the dethroned Spanish monarch Ferdinand VII: but as the severity of the political vacuum in the empire became more apparent across 1809 and 1810, consensus between unoccupied Spain and the American colonies in general broke down on just how to meet the crisis. At the same time the parallel political revolution set in motion in the mother country from 1808 onwards helped unleash radical ideologies and forces in both Spain and the colonies which questioned the nature of the imperial connection and the ultimate survival of the empire. The struggle for independence across the Americas was the result. That the struggle in Caracas proceeded to become as violent and destructive as it did, is because key individuals, reacting to the political exigencies of the moment, cold-bloodedly chose the use of extreme violence to break the stability of the colonial order which for so many years previously had successfully accommodated disparate political and social elements.

Late-colonial Caracas formed part of the larger Captaincy-General of Venezuela. Caracas had actually been known as the 'Gobernación'



1. The province of Caracas in the Captaincy-General of Venezuela

(Governorship) of Venezuela for much of the colonial period. Imperial decrees in 1776 and 1777 extended 'Venezuela' to incorporate six provinces which until then had been commonly referred to as 'Tierra Firme'.¹ The six were Maracaibo, Cumaná, Margarita, Trinidad, Guayana and Caracas.² Before the creation of the Intendancy in 1776 and Captaincy-General in 1777, the provinces had been subject to the control of the Viceroyalty and Captaincy-General of nearby New Granada on political matters and to the Audiencias of Bogotá and Santo Domingo on judicial questions. Only the province of Caracas had enjoyed any measure of autonomy under its own, not fully-empowered governors and captains-general. The new statutes changed the arrangement radically. The economic, political and military administration of Tierra Firme was centralized in the province of Caracas. The creation of the Audiencia of Caracas in 1786 further strengthened the province's hold on the imperial administration of the colony as a whole.³

The administrative centralization of 1776-7 was primarily a recognition of Caracas' near-total dominance of the links between Venezuela and the empire. La Guaira, the main port of the province, handled almost 90% of Venezuela's trade with Spain.⁴ Caracas' predominance in foreign trade was all the more impressive since the province also led in the production of the major export commodities. Nearly 80% of Venezuela's cacao crop was grown in Caracas, and the two major-growth exports of our period, indigo and coffee, were produced almost exclusively in the province.⁵ In addition, Caracas was the natural geographical and population centre of the region, containing over half of the roughly 800,000 inhabitants of Venezuela.⁶ Furthermore the province was the institutional centre of the Captaincy-General, although it was late in gaining this distinction. It housed the colony's only university (since 1717), the Audiencia (from 1786) and the Consulado (from 1793), and from 1803 was the seat of the Archbishopric of Venezuela.⁷

By 1777, Caracas was also becoming the most valuable non-mining American colony in the empire. Only Havana, its neighbour in the Caribbean, rivalled it in economic importance. This had not always been the case. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Caracas had played only a relatively minor role in the imperial structure, providing cacao for the mineral-producing colony of New Spain.⁸ The rising popularity of cacao in Spain in the early 1700s changed this. The colony, as the major producer of the commodity, attracted the attention of the mother country and in 1728 the Royal Guipuzcoa Company of Caracas was formed to exploit the province. The Caracas Company,

which lasted formally until 1784, was the first, most successful, longest-lived and most thorough application of the corporation colony policy in the Spanish American Empire.⁹ In the process of exercising its power, the company redefined Caracas' relation to the empire: by 1750 Spain had overtaken Mexico as Venezuela's major market and by our period cacao had moved into first place in terms of value in the portfolio of Spain's non-mineral imports from the colonies, with Caracas maintaining a virtual monopoly position as supplier.¹⁰ The colony's economic emergence coincided well with its enhanced political role, signalled by the creation of the Intendancy and Captaincy-General of Venezuela. By 1777 Caracas was set to enter its golden age of economic expansion and political maturity within the boundaries of empire.