

In memoriam:
François-Xavier Guerra
(1942–2002)

by Nikita Harwich Vallenilla

On November 10th 2002, a recently revealed cancer finally severed, after only a few months, the life of one of Europe's most distinguished and internationally acknowledged Latin Americanist historians: François-Xavier Guerra, whose research and publications decisively contributed to a profound conceptual and methodological renovation of contemporary Latin American political history analysis.

Born in Vigo, Spain, in 1942, François-Xavier Guerra chose France as his intellectual fatherland, after settling there to complete his secondary and university studies. Recruited in 1969 by the Panthéon-Sorbonne University of Paris (University of Paris-I), he was appointed, in 1985, to the chair of Latin American History, upon the retirement of his prestigious predecessor Professor François Chevalier.

It was under the tutorial guidance of Chevalier that Guerra undertook and completed his *Doctorat d'État* thesis on the Mexican revolution. Published in 1985 in Paris, *Le Mexique de l'Ancien Régime à la révolution* (in English: Mexico, from Ancien Régime to Revolution) remains a landmark reference in terms of its reassessment as to how the revolution actually came about from both a political and a social point of view. A thorough re-examination of the Porfirian years through the analytical instrument of collective biographies (or prosopography) enabled Guerra to identify the patterns that linked some of the major actors of the *Porfiriato* into sociability networks (*réseaux de sociabilité*) which, in turn, prepared the framework for the political upheaval to come. More than a break with the past, the Mexican revolution was viewed by Guerra as an attempt to solve one of the essen-

tial problems of contemporary politics: the interplay between traditional societies and the modern State. In other words, the political system brought about by the revolution was little more than the continuation of the *Porfiriato* through different means. Translated into Spanish by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1988, the book raised – as could be expected – a considerable uproar in Mexico, since it modified the traditional political perspectives with which the revolution had hitherto been considered. One of the major points of criticism was centred on the fact that, by privileging a political approach, Guerra tended to ignore the underlying economic and social causes that led to and sustained the revolutionary process itself. In this respect, the heated debates that opposed him to Alan Knight, who had just completed his major work on the Mexican revolution, are well worth remembering.

Following the same lines of thought, Guerra now turned his attention to the independence process of the Hispanic-American nations to be. Published in 1992 in Madrid, as part of the Fifth Centennial Mapfre Collection, the ten essays brought together in the single volume *Modernidad e independencias. Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas* (in English: *Modernity and Independences. Essays on Spanish Revolutions*) chose to consider the Spanish and Hispanic-American early nineteenth century political upheavals as having a common grounding, common values and partaking from common socio-cultural structures. In doing so, Guerra was able to shed new light on the developments of the key period between the years 1808–1812, when sudden ideological mutations accelerated the move towards political modernity, while accentuating at the same time the complex interplay between old order resistances and the new demands for national and popular sovereignty.

The pioneering relevance of Guerra's approach was that it enabled Latin America's specificity to connect itself with the general trends of western political historiography and thus decisively contributed in offering new grounds for comparative studies and research. Patronage relationships, the various forms of sociability (*sociedades de pensamiento*, masonic lodges, etc.), even caudillism, are common features to both sides of the Atlantic and the expressions of the same forms of political holism. Following the steps of his intellectual mentors – historians François Furet and Maurice Agulhon, sociologists Louis Dumont and François Crouzet – or, looking further back to the seminal writings of Augustin Cochin and Alexis de Tocqueville, Guerra,

from the point of view of an historian, sought to ascertain and analyse the permanent structures of politics and thus confer a renewed dimension to political history in general and Latin American political history in particular.

By founding his research group on the history of political phenomena (*histoire du politique*) in Latin America, in 1990, Guerra created the institutional framework for new generations of French and Latin American scholars. The Wednesday afternoon and early evening sessions of the doctoral seminar were soon to acquire a reputation that went well beyond the walls of the venerable Sorbonne and proved to be – for those who had the privilege of attending them – a memorable experience in intellectual stimulation.

At the same time, a fruitful cooperation network was established with universities in Spain, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as in Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela and Chile, leading to a wide array of academic and student exchanges. The results, in terms of publications, can be highlighted by mentioning three major collective works which Guerra contributed in conceiving and in editing. First of all, *De los imperios a las naciones. Iberoamérica* (Zaragoza 1994, directed by Antonio Annino/Luis Castro Leiva/François-Xavier Guerra; in English: *From Empires to Nations, Iberian America*), which brought together over twenty authors from various nationalities on the subject of the disintegration of the Spanish and Portuguese American empires and the attempts at the construction of the new Latin American nation-states. The following year, *Las Revoluciones Hispánicas. Independencias Americanas y Liberalismo Español* (Madrid 1995, edited by François-Xavier Guerra; in English: *Hispanic Revolutions, American Independences and Spanish Liberalism*), the result of an Escorial Summer Course, reassessed, according to Guerra's opening essay, "the logics and the rhythms of Hispanic revolutions". Finally, *Los espacios públicos en Iberoamérica. Ambigüedades y problemas. Siglos XVIII–XIX* (Mexico 1998, coordinated by François-Xavier Guerra/Annick Lempérière et al.; in English: *Public Spaces in Iberian America. Ambiguities and Problems. XVIIIth–XIXth Centuries*) stressed the hybrid nature of the political discourse developed in the early years of the Latin American independence process.

Active member of the Saint-Simon Foundation in Paris, of AHILA (Association of European Latin Americanist Historians), codirector of

the CNRS Mixed Research Unit “Empires, societies, nations. Latin America and Western Mediterranean (XVIth–XXIst Centuries)”, untiring promoter of new scholarly talents, uniquely devoted to his numerous students – and aptly revered by them in return –, François-Xavier Guerra had been preparing over the last few years, apart from his multiple contributions to scholarly journals and collective works, a vast synthesis on the symbolic forms of political modernity in Latin America (nation and republic, public opinion and citizenship, etc.) which his untimely death leaves unfinished. Scheduled for November 2003 in Paris, an international symposium will render a deserved homage to his merits as an enlightened pathfinder of new dimensions in the realm of historical studies.