

Stefan Rinke\*

## ▷ Pillars of the Republics: Early Monuments and the Politics of Memory in the Post-Colonial Americas<sup>1</sup>

When trying to explain the success of democracy in the United States in 1831 Tocqueville used the comparative method in singling out the most important explanatory factors. He concluded that it were not the natural circumstances like absence of envious neighbors or the availability of natural resources which decided about success or failure of democratic institutions. According to Tocqueville, Latin America boasted the same favorable preconditions and yet he noted: “There are no nations upon the face of the earth ... more miserable than those of South America”. He argued that the “customs of the people” in relation to the laws were the decisive comparative advantage of the United States (Tocqueville 1990: vol. 1, 320-321)<sup>2</sup>. If we translate “customs” into the modern term of political culture we can see that Tocqueville’s explanation is still very much in currency in the social sciences. Indeed, historians of Latin America have frequently argued that the problem of the comparative underdevelopment of the region in part has to be explained by the resistance of traditional socio-cultural structures to modernization. According to this point of view, traditional attitudes and mentalities helped to perpetuate a political culture that proved an obstacle to democracy from the very start.

There is certainly much truth in these observations. Yet, the undifferentiated acceptance of Tocqueville’s evaluation by later generations of (explicit and implicit) comparativists has often led to generalizations about the linear historical success story of the United States and the (necessarily) corresponding story of the failure of Latin America (Lipset 1997; McFarlane 1984). We might ask if whether these narratives of success and failure have indeed been as unambiguously clear from the very beginning of independence in the Americas as retrospection might suggest. Especially when looking closely at the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there are many developments discernible which can reveal the complexities of the different roads to ‘progress’ in the Americas and which

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\* *Stefan Rinke is Assistant Professor of Latin American History and member of the Central Institute of Latin American Studies at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt. For further information see <http://www.ku-eichstaett.de/GGF/ZILAS/koenig.htm>.*

<sup>1</sup> I wish to extend particular thanks to my colleagues John Brooke, Karl Borromäus Murr, and Michael Riekenberg for their insightful criticism of earlier versions of this essay. In addition, I thank my former colleagues at Tufts University (especially my research assistant Anita Gombos), the Augsburg study group on comparative history, and the panel “Creating Identities in the Americas” at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (Boston 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion of Tocqueville’s use of the comparative method see Smelser (1976: 7-37).

need more attention by comparative scholarship<sup>3</sup>. These come into view by looking at cultural –the so-called ‘soft’– objects of comparison which more often than not have been shunned by comparativists because of the methodological problems their study implies (Kaelble 1999: 70-77; Kocka 1996: 57; Welskopp 1995: 341).

If we consider the negotiation of collective memory as an important part of these ‘soft’ objects then we should again turn to Tocqueville<sup>4</sup>. In a lesser known passage of his all-time classic entitled “Why the Americans raise some insignificant monuments and others that are very grand” he noted that “... in democratic communities the imagination is compressed when men consider themselves; it expands indefinitely when they think of the state. Hence it is that the same men who live on a small scale in cramped dwellings frequently aspire to gigantic splendor in the erection of their public monuments” (Tocqueville 1990: vol. 2, 53). Of course, the remark referred to the young United States and to its projected capital and of course Tocqueville did not feel the need to use a comparison here. Small wonder given his verdict about Latin America in general.

Yet, had the Frenchman visited the Río de la Plata in that period he might have noted a similar discrepancy between the social and political conditions and the simultaneous desire to create a consciousness of a national history by constructing lasting monuments to the revolution. Sharp-minded analyst that he was, Tocqueville would probably have noted the structural reasons for these similarities: Both the United States and the River Plate had fought bloody and lengthy wars for independence. Both had inherited regional divisions and rivalries that complicated the task of state formation. Both experienced deep political crises which rendered the old sociocultural structures and their interpretive rituals and symbols anachronistic. Even more problematic was the construction of nationality –understood here according to Pierre Bourdieu in a cultural sense as one of the basic assumptions that “structure what is thought” (Bourdieu 1992: 39)<sup>5</sup>. Neither boasted a strong central government or an important nationalist movement to achieve this aim by political mobilization like in Europe. The shared understanding of the meanings of the nation, the symbolic practices of external delimitation and internal integration had to be created in a process of cultural innovation that emerged in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This essay is a first attempt to discuss the creation of the early monuments celebrating independence in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the process of cultural innovation. Case studies are the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown, close to Boston, and the *Pirámide de Mayo* in Buenos Aires. Both were erected in or close to cities that were centers of the independence movements informing revolutionary upheaval in neighboring colonies. The cases chosen are examples for monuments of regional identity which claimed –more or less successfully– a larger, national significance. The paper will discuss the social actors involved in the construction, their aims, and their achievements. The comparative perspective is used in order to show that the early post-colonial United

<sup>3</sup> In his comparative study of the Americas in the age of revolution Langley (1996: 10) has pointed out that the “contrast [between the north and the south in the 1830s] was perhaps too sharply drawn.”

<sup>4</sup> For a recent discussion of the term ‘collective memory’ see Confino (1997). For attempts to compare collective memories see e.g. Lagrou (1997).

<sup>5</sup> For recent in-depth analyses of nationality and nationalism in Latin America see König (2000), for the United States Waldstreicher (1997).

States and River Plate faced similar problems in constructing a sense of national identity through symbols in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The existence of certain problems in common –especially of dissent about the proper meaning of the monument– demonstrates that both were part of a hemispheric process of the formation of nationality based on a republican form of government. Dissent about what was to be the nation became an integral part of these early republics and the monuments built in this period reflect this. Although the United States came first and were an available cultural model of a so-called ‘new nation’ in the Americas processes at the River Plate were not simply a carbon copy of the standards of symbolic practice set in the north. Rather the social actors involved differed as well as the means and the constructed meanings of symbolic representation. The reasons for these differences were manifold and they included traditional interests, attitudes, and mentalities. These, in turn, lay at the core of a much higher degree of regional antagonism that complicated the task of nationbuilding at the River Plate. In addition, the history of the monuments proves the importance of the first half of the nineteenth century as a formative phase of nationbuilding structuring designs which were later consolidated<sup>6</sup>.

What can the monuments under study tell us about the utilization of national symbolism in the very different contexts of the ‘new nations’ under study here? What were the similarities and what the differences between the two cases studied and what do they reveal about the two specific larger processes of nationbuilding that they were a part of? In the following, I will first analyze the role of political monuments as a crucial part of the rituals of commemoration in the new states. Thereafter, I will sketch separately the history of the construction of the monuments under study. I will conclude with a comparative discussion of these processes.

## I

While the wars for independence were still waging in the Americas in the 1780s and 1810s respectively revolutionary elites shared a clear understanding of the significance of their deeds for their own times and for future generations. With their fight they destroyed the sanctified foundations of legitimate monarchical rule that had bound colony and metropolis for generations. Once the fighting was over, the radicalism that had helped the newly independent communities come into being had to be tamed. The new states to be built out of the struggle had to rest on new bases of legitimacy, authority and stability. These pillars of the republics still had to be created. Symbolic practices and political rituals were used to generate a usable and unified vision of the revolutionary moment as a foundation for present and future. They were aimed to create the emotional ties necessary for identification with the modern concept of the nation.

Clearly, the interpretation of history and the construction of a historical consciousness lay at the core of this process. For the River Plate, Michael Riekenberg (1995) has

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<sup>6</sup> For the significance of the formative phase see Riekenberg (1995: 92-93) and López-Alves (2000: 8 and 141). For a different evaluation of the period’s significance for nationbuilding see Chiamonte (1983: 52).

shown the close relationship between processes of nation-building and the implementation of history. Negotiated, accepted, and re-negotiated in a public sphere the master narrative of a group's history becomes a basic element of the "imagined community" of the nation based on strong emotional ties. As Daniel Webster, leader of the monument movement in the United States, remarked in 1825: "Human beings are composed, not of reason only, but of imagination also, and sentiment; and that is neither wasted nor misapplied which is appropriated to the purpose of giving right directions to sentiments, and opening proper springs of feeling in the heart" (Webster 1930: 43). In this process of "giving right directions to sentiments" emotional bonds are further strengthened by the double claim of authenticity and of rationality. Argentina's foremost nation-builder and master-narrator Bartolomé Mitre recognized in 1858 that the study of history "gives rational fundaments to the admiration for the famous men of the past"<sup>7</sup>.

However, this process caused numerous problems. First, there were intense struggles about who was to be considered a "famous man of the past" worthy of national veneration. Second, the conservative aim to support the new order and institutions with the commemoration of the revolutionary legacy was inherently paradoxical (Bodnar 1992: 19). Third, the very newness of the recently independent societies obstructed the immediate emergence of national commemorative traditions. Fourth, and most importantly, regionalism and localism opposed the project of symbolic national cohesion. This tension was pronounced in both the United States and even more so in the River Plate in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it produced fragmentation and localization. In both societies the core concept of liberty was first associated with the regions and not with the central states. Indeed, there existed multiple versions of the revolutionary past according to region, social class, ethnic group, and political conviction (Riekenberg 1995; Waldstreicher 1997).

But as León Pomer has recently written: "Memory might crystallize a national identity capable of subordinating regionalisms, religions, colors of skin, and various identities" (Pomer 1998: 46). Ironically, the need to commemorate resulted from the very fact of the newness and the necessity to break with the past (Gillis 1994: 8). Symbols relating to the revolutionary wars were almost immediately created. In the U.S. a civil religion with a god-like George Washington and Independence Day as holy day developed (Kammen 1993: 64-66; Schwartz 1982; Zelinsky 1988: 30-35; Travers 1997; Newman 1997). Public parades and festivities played an important role in the slowly emerging public sphere in the provinces of the River Plate (Flöel 1997; Vogel 1987)<sup>8</sup>. In addition, projects for the perpetuation of patriotic memory in the form of monuments held a prominent place in both societies.

Why monuments? The category of political monuments which is of interest here is first found as symbols for the emergence of a public sphere in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Nipperdey 1990: 193-196). As a mode of representation these monuments came to occupy a specific place in that sphere combining the impression of the eternal monolith with the passing but regularly repeated commemorative festivity. As part of the symbolic repertoire of national identity the monument became especially relevant because of its visibility and more importantly because of its permanence. Generally speaking, a monument is

<sup>7</sup> Mitre in his *Historia de Belgrano*, quoted in Pomer (1998: 36).

<sup>8</sup> For European scholarship on the culture of public festivities in the period under study see Ozouf (1976); Maurer (1991); Düding et al. (1988); Hettling/Nolte (1993).

a continually visible interpretation of the past. It is the symbolic embodiment of an eternal repetition and as such an integral part of the functioning of memory. The monumentality and obelisk form of the monuments under study here emphasizes this visibility. Different designs express different meanings and they were acrimoniously debated in the nascent public spheres of the former colonies<sup>9</sup>. Apparently, the final creation is the winner in this fight over interpretations, claiming authenticity and tolerating no alternative visions. As art historian Kirk Savage has pointed out: “Public monuments are the most conservative of commemorative forms precisely because they are meant to last, unchanged, forever” (Savage 1997: 4). They are master narratives of the nation turned in stone, implicit attempts at harmonizing the deep tensions that marked their conception (Savage 1994: 135-136; Bodnar 1992: 15). It almost goes without saying that these discussions about the past basically reflect the political disputes of the present. In that respect, the monuments of public memory are expressions of power and can be understood as lessons of the powerful to the public (Levinson 1998: 10).

Yet what kind of power does this imply? Is the differentiation between winner and loser, powerful and powerless so clear-cut? Of course, it is not. The generations that built the monuments held conflicting ideas about the political future of their liberated states and about the social system that was to prevail in them. Thus the monuments that were erected although at first sight monolithic and with a clear didactic purpose of teaching virtue and patriotism reveal their ambiguity when the different perspectives of experiencing them are taken into account. These perspectives differ according to region, ethnic group and social class. But these very differences are also its strengths as a symbol which constitutes a sense of common ground even though consensus about interpretations is lacking (Kertzer 1989: 69). Contrary to the intentions of their creators monuments do not hold a clear, undisputable, and permanent meaning. Their interpretation remains open and the way they are understood changes according to historical and social context.

Official intentions and popular appropriations of the monuments may even be opposed. In the case of the early River Plate and the United States new social elites sought to express cohesion and unity becoming cultural entrepreneurs in the process. In both cases these groups were not tightly organized but rather constituted loose networks with often heterogeneous goals and different access to resources. With their symbolic repertoire, however, they coincided in reaching out to supply regional peripheries with cultural meaning and also with models of citizenship and social order so that the latter could identify with the imaginary community of the nation-state (Spillman 1997: 34-35). The popular level sometimes accepted and internalized the messages the elites intended to convey with the monuments and the festivities connected to them. Sometimes it expressed specialized interests or even resistance, e.g. through jokes, laughter or simply indifference (Bodnar 1992: 16-17; Beezley et al. 1994: xiv-xvi)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> This essay will not discuss the iconographic aspects of the monuments under study. For the U.S. see: Zukowsky (1976). For Egyptian influences in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century: Carrott (1978); Irwin (1974). For classical iconography and its resurgence in general: Springer (1999). For influences of the French Revolution in the River Plate: Burucúa et al. (1990). For classical influences from Europe and from Inca mythology: Zabala (1962: 28); Payró (1972: 34).

<sup>10</sup> For the German context Wolfgang Hardtwig (1990: 266-267) has emphasized the methodological problems in estimating the reactions of the popular level.

Obviously, then, the movements to erect monuments and to use them for commemorative purposes have not taken place in a social vacuum. The obelisks and the symbolic practices related to them represent and create social spaces by delimiting them from the 'other'. This 'other' is first and foremost the former colonial metropolis from which to emancipate, but it is also the internal 'other'—that is those social actors who do not participate in the movement or hold unorthodox views about designs and meanings and who thus represent a danger to the privileged vision as intended by the creators of the monument. Historian Charlotte Tacke has shown that the symbolic value of a national monument is not only important in the sense of imagining community but also in imagining social difference. The everyday practices of monument building, fund-raising, and commemorative festivities demonstrate this function. Promoters and opponents alike envision their respective ideas of social order through these actions and through the festive culture connected to the monument (Tacke 1995: 22-23).

## II

Yet before something like an everyday culture of monuments could develop in the early United States and the River Plate the monuments had to be prepared, financed and built and these activities were not easily accomplished. In the United States, there was neither the money nor the political will on the part of the state to energetically execute the projects (Kammen 1993: 71-78). Despite a similar lack of funds the situation was different in the River Plate region (Vogel 1987: 34). When were the ideas conceived? Who realized them and how? What were the intentions of the founders?

The chronologically first monument was the Bunker Hill Monument celebrating one of the early skirmishes of the revolution (June 17, 1775) at a hill close to Charlestown which ended with the retreat of the American troops. The memory of the so-called Battle of Bunker Hill was first revived in 1776 after the evacuation of Boston by British troops when the remains of General Joseph Warren, the martyr of Bunker Hill, were reinterred at King's Chapel and the eulogist assured the "sweet Ghost" that his countrymen had already built "in their breasts . . . eternal monuments to thy bravery" (Warren 1877: 13). Indeed, in the following years Freemasonry promoted a cult of the Revolutionary martyrs which included Joseph Warren (Brooke 1996: 300). Yet, ten years later at the opening ceremony of the bridge over the Charles River when the battle was officially remembered for the first time after the war there was still no real public monument. It took until June 1794 before the first specific celebration of the day of the battle was organized by the Charlestown Artillery. Several months later in the same year, King Solomon's Lodge of Charlestown appointed a committee to erect a monument and in December it was dedicated.

With the monument the lodge intended to honor the memory of Warren who also had been Grand Master of Freemasons. Yet the dedication ceremony was not exclusively a Masonic event and its meaning did not remain restricted to an act in remembrance of an illustrious dead hero<sup>11</sup>. Representatives of the political and economic elites participated

<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Foote (1997: 118) interprets the first monument as nothing but "a typical battlefield marker of the sort one would expect to honor leaders and fallen soldiers."

in a procession the order of which reflected social hierarchy. In his speech, Worshipful Master John Soley stressed the importance of monuments in teaching future generations to cherish the values of liberty and of material prosperity. Addressing the heterogeneous crowd as “we, citizens of Columbia” he created an atmosphere of equality that was qualified by his demand for “obedience to the voice of [the] country” as represented by those who had led the procession (Warren 1877: 11). Constructing a foundational myth General Warren’s death was interpreted as the ultimate sacrifice necessary for the foundation of a unified new society to emerge out of the Confederation. Like the dedication of the cornerstone of the Capitol a year before, the creation of the monument was—at a local level—clearly a symbolic act to link Freemasonry with Republican values and proves the cultural importance of Masonry in this period (Bullock 1996: 137; Brooke 1996: 300). In addition, it was an act of self-assertion on the part of the New England region the political dominance of which had begun to wane by the mid-1790s (Waldstreicher 1997: 251-252).

The public use of the monument remained sporadic in the following years. However, memory became part of party politics as the Boston/Charlestown Republican Coalition named itself Bunker Hill Association although rather celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July instead of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June (Travers 1997: 166). The Battle of Bunker Hill made new headlines when a dispute about the record of revolutionary General Israel Putnam was fought out in the *North American Review* in 1818. Young congressman Daniel Webster defended the heroic interpretation of the battle and later joined a group of journalists, politicians, businessmen, and academics that pushed for the appropriation of the site and for the erection of a more representative revolutionary monument that would replace the Masonic obelisk. The composition of the group reflected the changing realities of political power in Massachusetts with a new populist style on the rise that was soon to lead to the creation of the National Republicans and the Whigs dominated by Webster<sup>12</sup>. In 1823 that group of cultural leaders formed the Bunker Hill Monument Association whose explicit aim it was to rear “the FIRST PILLAR of the Republic”. This pillar was to be erected in New England “as the plains of Massachusetts were first stained with the blood of the patriots” (Warren 1877: 43). Thus, the project was to retain deep roots in Massachusetts regional and local pride while at the same time reaching beyond this level to represent a first national monument. If in the original monument to Warren of 1794 the individual hero had been emphasized it was now the whole nation to be celebrated in the serene form of the obelisk. This new monument was intended to teach a lesson in republicanism, in patriotism, in sacrifice, in the benefits of order, prosperity, and above all of union.

The New England-wide subscription campaign was aimed to transgress social boundaries by accepting even small amounts of money. New Englanders living abroad were also addressed but the results were not always satisfactory. In New York the call was rejected as “too local and too distant” (Warren 1877: 77). The association had to rely on the financial donations mainly from Massachusetts. In 1825, fifty years after the battle, the laying of the cornerstone was celebrated in the presence of the Marquis de Lafayette, numerous Revolutionary War veterans, and representatives from other states and the

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<sup>12</sup> I owe this explanation to John Brooke.

Federal Government in an exuberant public event. Again Freemasons figured prominently in the procession that moved from Boston to Charlestown and the Grand Master of Masons in Massachusetts laid the cornerstone of the monument.

In a celebrated speech Daniel Webster, now president of the Monument Association, made sure to emphasize New England's leading contribution to the history of America from colonial times to the Revolution. Thus he satisfied the need for symbolic self-reassurance of a region the national leadership of which had continued to decline since the 1790s. Yet, in the central passages of his oration Webster left the level of New England in order to invoke the spirit of union and harmony among all Americans thus implicitly and ingeniously claiming moral leadership for his home region. He painted an exultant picture of the progress of the young United States in the first half century since the battle and of the great future that still lay ahead. In his optimistic vision of the incredible "progress made during the last half-century" on a global scale he included the accomplishment of Latin American independence (Webster 1930a: 63). Webster left no doubt that it was the United States which had been the first to establish the standard of liberty for "civilized man" and that the Latin neighbors had to follow that course in order to succeed (Webster 1930a: 73). Although the large majority of people present was not able to see Webster, let alone hear the orator's discourse, for many the emotional experience of an event the size of which was giant by the standards of the time was overwhelming. Immediately, news about the ceremony spread nationwide and gave rise to similar monument initiatives, for example in the Southern metropolis Charleston. Yet, in the Old South the events at Bunker Hill led to the project to build a competing, a specifically southern version of revolutionary commemoration (Travers 1998: 12).

Anyway, the initial enthusiasm for the Bunker Hill Monument soon evaporated and the association faced difficulties in their fund-raising efforts. Again and again work had to be suspended and the incomplete shaft remained an embarrassing sight. That is not to imply, however, that the topic vanished from public debates. In the 1830s, interest in the revolutionary past revived not the least due to the literary work of authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes and to the efforts of surviving Revolutionary War veterans to remain included in the pension lists (Young 1981: 619). The shaft in progress already figured prominently in the popular imagination. For workers and artisans of this period memory of the Revolution remained an essential ingredient of their class identity (Gillespie 2000: 47-49). Thus they emphasized the very incompleteness of the monument as a symbol for the fact that the revolutionary promise had not been fulfilled for them and that the process of industrialization was threatening to turn the United States—once "the workingman's country"—into an "old" country with impregnable social hierarchies (Gutman 1973: 568). Trying to cover up their embarrassment the upper classes of Charlestown and Boston claimed that even the incomplete Bunker Hill Monument was a proof of their cities' reputation as the cradle of liberty in America (Hammett 1976: 852).

The breakthrough for the completion of the monument was finally achieved in 1840. In that year, a group of female activists under the journalist and editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah J. Hale, organized a successful fund-raising fair. Introducing new and forward-looking methods of fund-raising and publicity work the fair gave women a chance to act in a public arena (Okker 1995: 71). The process of monument (and nation-) building thus gained an additional gendered dimension which was reinforced by the political



events that coincided. The national convention of the Whig Party, presided by Daniel Webster, brought a multitude from all parts of the country to Boston and raised receptiveness for the Lady's Fair. In turn, the convention profited immensely from the publicity of the fair and the cunning politician Webster used it to propagate a bitter attack against the presidency of Andrew Jackson. Significantly the same convention also proved the power of the Antimasonic wing of the party (Howe 1979: 2 and 57). Masonry –until the mid-1820s a powerful motor in all matters relating to the monument– was clearly on the wane by the early 1840s having lost its once powerful social status after the crisis of 1826 (Bullock 1996: 277-283).

Indeed, the lodges kept a low profile when in 1843 Webster gave his second Bunker Hill oration; this time for the dedication of the monument<sup>13</sup>. Again he powerfully invoked the patriotic feelings of the audience in what was an enormous public ritual with a huge crowd of people of all social strata and many different generations attending. U.S. President John Tyler was present at the ceremony as were numerous officials from the different states. Again an event related to the Bunker Hill Monument introduced a new quantitative dimension in terms of participation. Certainly this implies a high degree of concurrence between the elites that constructed the event and their audience. With aged veterans taking part in the ceremony, historical authenticity of revolutionary times again supported the claim to rightful social leadership that Webster endorsed on this occasion. In contrast to his earlier oration he explicitly voiced the claim for U.S. superiority in the Americas. In 1825, Webster had considered Latin America as a younger brother who only had to follow the course of the United States in order to make progress. Now, under the impression of rising tensions with Mexico he presented the neighboring region as the very counterpoint to the freedom and civilization that his own country boasted (Webster 1930b: 99-105). Webster reminded his audience that the excellence of the United States as expressed by the giant proportions of the monument had its foundations in unity.

“This column stands on union,” Webster proclaimed in 1843 (Webster 1930b: 88) and his words were symbolically emphasized by festive toasts to the Old South. The union of the United States, however, was much more fragile than the obelisk which had been built as its symbolic representation. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the integrative power of the Bunker Hill Monument did not reach beyond the boundaries of New England and the North. In that year, a solemn raising of the American flag on top of the monument and a speech by Webster's son set the stage for the conflict to come. National unity beyond political division was powerfully invoked at the occasion. As the official historiographer and leading member of the Bunker Hill Monument Association George Washington Warren pointed out: “It was a spectacle worthy of Bunker Hill, and of her heaven-born mission, –sublime and stirring enough to have fixed in loyalty any swerving Southern heart, could it only have been brought within its inspiring reach” (Warren 1877: 363). In fact, between 1861 and 1865 the Southern Confederacy claimed its own version of the nation's revolutionary ideals emphasizing states' rights, sovereignty, and a specific cultural identity that intended to be the very counterpoint to No-

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<sup>13</sup> King Solomon's Lodge publicly celebrated the erection of a copy of its original monument that was placed within the new one a week after the official dedication ceremony (Warren 1877: 336-337).

rthern models (Rubin 2000: 91). During the Civil War, the Bunker Hill Monument's character as a significant site of regional identity was reinforced. When a year before the centenary of the United States the centennial of the Battle at Bunker Hill was celebrated the fact that Bunker Hill Day, June 17<sup>th</sup>, had still not been declared a regular Massachusetts –let alone national– holiday demonstrated the diminishing importance of this particular site. At the same time, another and bigger obelisk in the capitol city, the Washington Monument, was to erase the remnants of the Bunker Hill Monument from national imagination.

### III

Similar to Tocqueville, Webster had sharply contrasted the experiences of his own country and Latin America in 1843 in an act of national self-assertion given the double threats of external conflict and internal disintegration through regional and political polarization. Yet, when looking at the record of monument building, there were parallels between the situation in the two Americas. Much like in the United States national monuments had a slow start in Latin America. In most countries the political turmoil of the early post-independence period left little time for monumental projects. However, in the River Plate region where for more than half a century civil wars effectively prevented the emergence of statehood such a monument was indeed created in what in retrospect appears as an exceptional act of early revolutionary symbolic politics.

Not even a year after the events of May 1810 which had precipitated the fall of the viceroy and established a state of de facto independence from Spain the *cabildo* of Buenos Aires decided to commemorate the revolutionary moment by public celebrations and by building a monument in order to encourage the spirit of liberty in the community. The monument was to have the shape of a pyramid and it was to be adorned by hieroglyphics. The project was immediately carried out in record time. In about six weeks an adobe obelisk of 13 meter height with a decorative ball on top was set up in front of the city's cathedral. On May 25, the dedication of the *Pirámide de Mayo*, the May Pyramid, decorated with pennants, colorful lanterns, and allusive banners was the central event of the first patriotic holiday (Riekenberg 1995: 152; *Monumentos y lugares* 1944: 4-5; *Vigil* 1959: 57-58).

Yet, exactly what the pyramid was to stand for was hotly debated from the beginning and remained hieroglyphic. The *cabildo* of Buenos Aires clearly intended the monument to be a solid expression of local pride. After all the port had not only been the site of the May events but also of the successful resistance against British invasions in 1806 and 1807. Of course it also claimed a leading role in the new state which it wanted to create in the boundaries of the former viceroyalty. Thus the *cabildo* insisted on symbolic allusions to the glorious events in the recent history of the city. Buenos Aires' claims, however, did not go unchallenged. The governing *junta* which included representatives from the hinterland resisted the idea to limit what was intended as the meaning of the monument to the purely local level. Such a one-dimensional interpretation of events would have had the potential to furtheracerbate the existing tensions amongst the factions of the revolutionary elites. From the *junta's* point of view, the monument though located in the central place of Buenos Aires was to be a symbol of the common struggle for liberty

and of the future project of national unity. Thus the *junta* preferred the modest and neutral inscription: “25 de Mayo de 1810” (Zabala 1962: 41)<sup>14</sup>.

The solution proved acceptable because it constituted a compromise which left the interpretation of the monument open. During the wars of independence songs and poems attached to the obelisk called upon the “Argentinos leales y valientes” to observe unity and break the Spanish chain (Zabala 1962: 42-43). Yet, in the following decades the obelisk was used by widely different political factions. The Unitarians as well as the Federalists used it to express their views by fixing their posters at its sides. Under the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas the surface of the pyramid was used to denigrate political opponents. Riekenberg (1995: 153) has argued that the only constant factor in the symbolic language of the monument in this early period was the reference to the break with Spain. Apart from that the pyramid remained a contested site of public policy well into the 1850s. In addition, many contemporaries were displeased with the rather small monument and in 1826 Rivadavia planned to replace it for a larger more representative one (Payró 1972: 37)

Despite the partisan abuse the pyramid remained the single most important symbol of the revolutionary moment in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The frequently illuminated and festively decorated monument at the center of the Plaza de la Victoria was used on various occasions to celebrate the military victories of the wars of independence and also to exhibit the dead bodies of executed traitors (Zabala 1962: 57-63). Moreover, it became the site of the annual celebrations on the 25<sup>th</sup> May and since 1816 –when the formal independence of the United Provinces of the River Plate was declared at the Congress of Tucumán– also of the second national holiday on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July. It were these events that regularly reminded participants of the existence of a *patria argentina*<sup>15</sup>. Until the 1870s, celebrations on both national holidays lasted three to four days and they included illuminations, military parades, religious services, theater plays, patriotic dances, fireworks, and music<sup>16</sup>. Republican symbolism replaced royal symbols which –in the form of the royal standard– had still been present in 1811<sup>17</sup>. Acts like these proved that in the course of the 1810s the process of symbolic emancipation from Spain was clearly the focus of the events.

Funded and controlled by the *cabildo*, the celebrations surrounding the *Pirámide de Mayo* were intended as a “ritual of rule” (Beezley 1994) uniting all sectors of society in a public space and reproducing social hierarchies by establishing the order of the festive event. Indeed, the commentator of *El Centinela* noted in an article about the recent holiday on June 1, 1823: “Nunca se ha observado más orden, en medio del contento y diversión general” (Zabala 1962: 49). The *cabildo* occasionally bought the freedom of slaves

<sup>14</sup> In her recent study González Bernaldo (1999: 310-311) overemphasizes the claims of the *cabildo* while downplaying the role of the *junta* which after all made the final decision.

<sup>15</sup> For the development of the term and concept of ‘Argentina’ see Chiamonte (1997: 63-71) and Shumway (1991: 7). Chiamonte claims that in the first decades of the century the semantic meaning of the term ‘argentino’ was restricted to *porteño*.

<sup>16</sup> For the changes in festivities and the new drive to build monuments in the decade of the 1880s see Bertoni (1992).

<sup>17</sup> A national coat of arms, anthem, and flag were introduced in the 1810s (Cánepa 1953). For the relevance of colonial elements in early national imagery see Halperin (1972: 174).

who were then ceremoniously manumitted and it organized lotteries to the benefit of the poor (Vogel 1987: 154-156 and 167). In this manner elites were displaying their wealth and power while at the same time symbolically embracing the populace. Yet, there are numerous hints that the celebration was not always as orderly as the commentator claimed for 1823. According to official sources already in April 1811 during the foundation ceremony the passionate crowd forgot proper decorum and turned the event into a disorderly celebration. The definition of disorder was controversial and in 1811 even the public shout: “¡Viva la libertad!” for some authorities went too far and had to be qualified by “¡Viva la libertad civil!” (Zabala 1962: 25 and 30). In the course of the decades an increasing divergence in celebration styles developed. After the general event the masses continued to mingle in the Plaza de Mayo while elites assembled for dinners and balls in expensive hotels<sup>18</sup>.

The speeches and sermons given on the occasions reflected the gradual changes. The rhetorical use of terms such as ‘America,’ ‘liberty,’ ‘patria,’ and ‘revolution’ became more frequent. In addition, in the presence of the monument an ‘Argentine’ historical consciousness was constructed consisting of Spanish and indigenous traditions. Independence was thus seen as a recovery of the ancient rights and glories of the indigenous population of America. Certainly, revolutionary elites did not intend to emancipate the Indian tribes still living in the Southern Cone. Rather they utilized the image of the oppressed Indian as a reflection of their own situation (Riekenberg 1995: 64-67). Fearing the specter of social revolution, some even propagated the organic order of Inca society as a model and the idea of a monarchy under an Inca king was seriously considered at Tucumán (Kahle 1983; Rípodas Ardanaz 1993: 248-250).

What is more, the new symbols were soon imitated in the provinces. The national holidays were celebrated in the provincial centers following the model and the regulations from the capital. A pyramid of victory was used as part of the celebrations in Córdoba after 1816 (Flöel 1997: 115). In 1853, the city of Corrientes received a similar column on its Plaza 25 de Mayo (Gómez 1942: 48). These monuments constituted not only sites of memory but also outdoor public spaces for the display of unity and strength, for the affirmation of revolutionary values, and for the meeting of socially heterogeneous crowds. The adoption of a common set of symbolic actions hints to the existence of a spirit of community amongst the provinces of the River Plate already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>19</sup>.

The foundations of that community were fragile indeed. Between 1810 and 1853 there existed no permanent constitution for the future Argentina and despite the confederation from 1831 to 1853, including the dictatorship of Rosas, the structural foundations of the state remained feeble (Chiaromonte 1993: 81). When in May 1852, opponents of Rosas celebrated the dictator’s fall at the *Pirámide de Mayo* (Zabala 1962: 66) this did not mean an end to the troubles. Rather the state of national disintegration and civil warfare amongst the provinces remained the foremost problem of the region of the River

<sup>18</sup> This process was accompanied by the emergence of an increasingly complex social life (González 1999). For the differentiation of celebratory styles in Córdoba see Flöel (1997: 166 and 174-185).

<sup>19</sup> For the emergence of different categories of identity in the region see Chiaromonte (1989); Riekenberg (1995: 25-61).

Plate. Thus, despite the shared symbolism ruling elites of Corrientes, for example, did not intend to follow the cultural leadership of Buenos Aires but rather constructed their own version of the recent past emphasizing the accomplishments of that province and its most famous son General José de San Martín. At the height of the conflict between the confederation and Buenos Aires in 1858, the province of La Rioja rejected to observe the national holidays because of their *porteño* origin (Riekenberg 1995: 126 and 129). A frustrated intellectual like Echeverría wrote in 1846: “La patria del correntino es Corrientes; para el tucumano es Tucumán; para el porteño, Buenos Aires; para el gaucho el pago en que nació. La vida e intereses comunes que envuelve el sentimiento racional de la patria es una abstracción incomprensible para ellos y no pueden ver la unidad de la República simbolizada en su nombres”<sup>20</sup>. The problem to inspire the periphery with the “rational sentiment of the patria” as defined by the center of Buenos Aires remained a conflictive issue not to be resolved before the 1880s.

However, political scientist Fernando López-Alves has recently argued that despite the grave disruptions of state-building due to the internecine wars the high degree of militarization (peaking in the Rosas dictatorship) was important in that it contributed to a degree of centralization especially in the province of Buenos Aires that went far beyond the usual level in Latin America at the time. Urban militias and their rural recruits acted as a foundation of the state and the prestige enjoyed by military figures was correspondingly high (López-Alves 2000: 177-183). Thus the fall of Rosas in 1852 did not constitute a new beginning –as key figures of the later nationbuilding process like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento would have liked us to believe– but rather the continuation under different conditions of the larger national project (González 1994a: 199).

The context changed insofar as in the 1850s and 1860s Buenos Aires managed to install its claim to leadership in the political and economic process of national unification as well as in the construction of a national historical consciousness (Riekenberg 1995: 108-121). Elites from the port city deliberately styled themselves as standing in the tradition of the May Revolution and connected this interpretation of the past with their call for modernization, i.e. liberalization of trade and further centralization. Rebellious groups from the interior, on the other hand, used arguments like the alleged resistance against a new form of colonial oppression by Buenos Aires to legitimize their actions. Yet, their provincial visions were doomed to fail since the necessity of some form of national unity for the achievement of economic progress was accepted as unavoidable. In this development political leaders of Buenos Aires like Mitre successfully “laid claim to ‘national’ traditions” (Riekenberg 1995: 164). It was part of their achievement in the following years to include a figure like San Martín in the national pantheon and thus facilitate the integration of provincial elites as well as that of the army.

The occupation of the national imagination by Buenos Aires was reflected in symbolic practices. The May Monument as well as the 25<sup>th</sup> of May as national holiday reached central status and displaced alternative concepts. The symbols of May were closely tied to the revolutionary events in the city of Buenos Aires while on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July an act that had taken place in the provinces was celebrated. In the contest of primary importance between the two national holidays the 25<sup>th</sup> of May won the field while the July holiday

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in González (1994a: 188).

increasingly lost its relevance<sup>21</sup>. Correspondingly, the status of the *Pirámide de Mayo* in Buenos Aires was enhanced. Similar to what happened to the first Bunker Hill Monument in 1843, the old May Monument was replaced in 1856 by a larger and more representative obelisk which carried the older one inside. On order of the town council of Buenos Aires, a statue of liberty was put on top of the construction and the sides of the structure were adorned with relievos of rising suns and laurel crowns (Payró 1972: 45-64; Zabala 1962: 73-76; González 1999: 309-314; González 1994b: 244-247). Thus, the pyramid received its final symbolic content as a representation of republican values and liberty with an allusion to the Indian past<sup>22</sup>.

In the following decades the monument was widely imitated in the provinces. During the 1880s a standardized version of the May Pyramid was set up even in smaller provincial communities (Gómez 1942: 126). In that decade, when national unity under the leadership of Buenos Aires was finally accomplished the new capital decided to reshape its central places, the Plaza de Mayo and the Plaza de la Victoria into one representative public square. With reference to Rivadavia's project of 1826 plans for the construction of a completely new monument to independence were discussed between 1883 and 1887. Political leaders like Mitre and Sarmiento voted for the change claiming that the remodeling of 1856/7 had already destroyed the obelisk's authenticity and thus the legitimacy of its existence. Yet, the plans were not carried through (Zabala 1962: 79-82). The *Pirámide de Mayo* was left untouched for it had gained wide acceptance as a symbol of nationality in the Argentine public; as one commentator put it: "El monumento de la revolución de Mayo ... ha sido, y es, por su origen y por su destino lo más eminentemente nacional que ha existido, y que existe sobre la tierra argentina"<sup>23</sup>.

#### IV

Were the two monuments which have been analyzed here in fact from the beginning so eminently national? What contributed to their appeal? In this conclusive part these and related issues will be addressed. But first, the omissions of the essay have to be stated. The role of the slowly emerging public sphere, press, and new forms of sociability have not been discussed extensively and deserve more attention in future studies. In addition, the gender aspect of the monument movements has only been mentioned for the North American case because the current state of research does not admit any conclusions as to the role of women in the public sphere of the monument at the River Plate. The construction of ethnic exclusion, the participation or abstention of African-Americans and (the highly organized) Afro-Argentines in the sphere of the monuments is another topic that remains to be studied. Finally, an in-depth analysis of the social groups

<sup>21</sup> For the conflicting interpretation of the national holidays originated in the time of Rivadavia and Rosas see Vogel (1987: 162-64), Flöel (1997: 116-118 and 168).

<sup>22</sup> The iconographic language of the new monument and its of liberty which was created by the Frenchman Joseph Dubourdieu is discussed in González (1999: 311) without, however, mentioning the meaning of the relievos. For the European models see Agulhon (1979: 110).

<sup>23</sup> Andrés Lamas: "Los planes de la municipalidad y el Monumento de Mayo". In: *Nueva Revista de Buenos Aires*, new series, 4, vol. 10 (1884), pp. 400-417. Quoted in Zabala (1962: 133).

which created and participated in the processes of raising funds, of building, of celebrating, and of remodeling the monuments is highly desirable.

What this paper intended to show, however, is that national identity formation was a slow and problematic process in both the United States and the provinces of the River Plate in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, in both societies certain local interest groups—closely tied to important cities—felt the need to erect monuments to the revolutionary cause at the beginning of national independence. The individuals who formed these groups belonged to the political, economic, and military elites of their respective cities. In the United States the private initiative of a Masonic lodge and a Monument Association stood behind the movement and the fund-raising efforts. A broad social spectrum of men and women contributed financially to the work and thus became members of the association. Though not directly influencing the decisions of the board their symbolic inclusion meant that they were part of the process of building symbolic meaning. In the River Plate the erection and the remodeling of the May Pyramid were decreed and paid for by the government of Buenos Aires. Direct financial contributions of the populace were not possible until in the late 1850s a monument for General San Martín was built. In the 1880s, when the plans for a central national monument to replace the pyramid were discussed the Argentinians came up with the idea of starting a national fund-raising campaign for a more representative national monument.

Yet, in the River Plate, too, the monument was part of a constant process of negotiating and re-negotiating meaning. What both obelisks shared was the fact that their emergence on the cognitive landscape was a process of long duration in a slowly emerging public sphere. The Freemasons and associations of New England had their counterpart in the Masons, dance groups and literary societies of Buenos Aires. As one dimension among many, the monuments and the public celebrations connected to them proved to be a sphere in which new forms of voluntary association were experienced. In turn, the new associations taught the function of the new republican order through their own hierarchies and through their public deeds. In doing so those in power followed the didactic intention of teaching subalterns the new allegiance and of turning them into *ciudadanos*/citizens. Schoolboys sang patriotic songs in Buenos Aires and walked in the parades at Bunker Hill; free adults of both sexes from all social strata and different ethnic groups joined them. Thus the obelisks fulfilled the function of creating an imagined community while at the same time establishing and reaffirming the existing social order by reinstating the belief in the legitimacy of institutions which the revolutionary elites had not very long ago fought against. In that regard, the interpretation of the monument's symbolic language remained dominated by local elites. However, some of the sources from the River Plate tell us a different story offering a corrective to the perspective of official historiographers. From the beginning, unruliness and disorder seem to have been part of the carefully planned public festivities.

The elites who had designed the monuments never completely succeeded in their aim to produce social consensus by institutionalizing memory. Nevertheless, heterogeneous groups of social actors turned the obelisk into a living site of memory by means of fixed festivities and also by irregular events ranging from the solemn farewell to the troops marching into battle to the spontaneous celebration of military victories. The partisan use of the monuments—the banners and inscriptions of the Rosas period, the Whig convention—contributed to the lasting effects of the monument as important sites in the

public sphere of the new republics. It showed that contrary to the symbolic claim of the monolithic obelisk the understanding of the imagined communities remained highly controversial. Both the processes of monument building and of filling it with meaning were contested grounds in Charlestown/Boston as well as in Buenos Aires. But the very dissent and politicization was a crucial part of the significance of the monuments in the 'new nations' because by creating a sphere of common ground –albeit debated– it contributed to their strength as symbols.

In evaluating the function of the two monuments it is obvious that those who invested their energies to built them had understood their inherent exploitability as a political argument from the very beginning. Builders had understood that he who defines the hero or the heroic event and places it in the pantheon of sanctified memory profits from the glory. Yet, it is important to recall the different contexts in which the monuments were created. While in the case of Charlestown/Boston the individuals who started to work for the construction did so after a considerable period of peacetime the driving forces in Buenos Aires were the revolutionaries themselves who were still in the midst of fighting. In fact, the *Pirámide de Mayo* could already look back on more than thirty years of existence when the Bunker Hill Monument was completed. Thus, initially the monument builders of the River Plate were able to lay a much stronger claim to historical authenticity and to create an aura of credibility and legitimacy than their U.S. counterparts. The actors at Bunker Hill, in contrast, had to solve the problem of temporal distance. They did so by utilizing aged war veterans as decorative icons for their patriotic pilgrimages from Boston center to Charlestown whenever possible.

The *Pirámide de Mayo* was much more of a promise to a future of liberty and prosperity than the early Masonic monument or the Bunker Hill Monument although the latter, too, was a site that envisioned a consolidated future as much as it reconfirmed the status already achieved by the still young United States. Later, the allocation of the meaning of the monuments as expressed in their design developed in opposite directions. The personal involvement of the monument builders in Buenos Aires prevented them from erecting a monument to an individual hero. The revolutionary leaders of the River Plate chose a symbolic allegory to liberty as a metaphor for independence instead. The first monument in the United States was explicitly aimed at honoring the memory of General Warren although it, too, had the shape of an obelisk which was used to invoke national integration. The nationbuilders in Buenos Aires discovered their predilection for the individual hero, the typical equestrian statue, in later decades while the later-born generations in the United States aimed at creating a depersonalized memory of their revolution with the new Bunker Hill Monument.

What the two post-colonial societies shared, however, was the conspicuous lack of inner unity that had a strong influence both on the motivation for and on the fate of the monuments. The obelisks fulfilled an important function as long as –to speak with George Washington Warren– the “swerving hearts” were still “within their inspiring reach”. But this was not always the case. To different degrees the regional divisions within the United States and the River Plate determined the fate of the two monuments until the 1880s. The funds for the Bunker Hill Monument had been raised almost exclusively in New England. Its symbolic power was not sufficient to bridge the deep regional tensions that peaked in the Civil War. At the River Plate these tensions were even deeper and it took until the 1880s to outgrow a state of almost permanent civil warfare. When looking



at these processes it is the more astonishing that it was in Buenos Aires where one of the earliest monuments to independence in the Americas was created. Yet, regionalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive concepts but rather tend to reinforce each other. In this context, the *Pirámide de Mayo* was an admittedly weak but still a permanent point of reference in the symbolic repertoire of the nation at the River Plate.

What is more, the May Pyramid made a rather surprising career given its local significance in the beginning. Its later success as a symbol of national relevance was not the least related to the topography of the monument in the central square of the city that became the undisputed capital of the country. In Bunker Hill, too, the claim to authenticity and thus to the symbolic control over the interpretation of the Revolution as the myth of origins of the 'nation' was expressed by the location of the monument. However, the role of Boston and New England was declining while that of Buenos Aires was on the rise. This was reflected in the perception of the monuments. In contrast to the younger Washington Monument, the Bunker Hill Monument never really conquered the status as "pillar of the republic" in the popular imagination that its builders had claimed for it. Moreover, today it has lost its significance as a site of memory in the public sphere and is hardly ever mentioned in contemporary discussions<sup>24</sup>. The May Pyramid, in contrast, lost its touch of localism gaining national significance when copies of it were erected in the provinces. This significance is reflected even today, for example, in the celebrations of Argentine soccer fans. The monument today remains a secularized and transformed version of an "altar of the nation" that contemporaries talked about in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>.

One of the advantages of the comparative perspective that has been used in this essay is that it can reveal much clearer the processual character of the construction of national identity than the analysis of a single case-study can. In addition, it allows us to suggest that the conventional linear success story of the United States and of the corresponding story of the failure of Argentina especially in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century needs to be checked more closely. Certainly, the conspicuous differences in the social make-up of the monument movements and in their utilization of the obelisks proves that similar forms of the symbolic language of the nation can function in very different sociocultural contexts. Yet, the example of the two monuments also implies that when compared with the United States of the same period the beginning process of nationbuilding in the River Plate shows similarities in the complicated interaction between local, regional and trans-regional concepts of identity among various social groups. Thus in both societies dissent about the proper understanding of the 'new nation' and the nature of the symbolic pillars it was to rest upon became a basic condition of existence.

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<sup>24</sup> The recent discussion about the naming of the new highway bridge from Boston to Charlestown is rather exceptional. Yet, if a "Bunker Hill Bridge" can bring a revival of the monument remains doubtful.

<sup>25</sup> For the transformations of conventional national symbolism in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries see Riekenberg et al. (forthcoming). Despite having lost much of their former status monuments in general remain highly contested sites of memory in public discourse as recent debates from places as diverse as Germany (Jeismann 1999), the United States or postcommunist Eastern Europe (Levinson 1998) prove.

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