


ARTICLE

Britain and the Paraguayan Dictatorship, c. 1820–1840

Alex Middleton 

St Hugh's College, Oxford, UK
Email: alex.middleton@history.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Post-revolutionary Spanish America barely features in existing scholarship on nineteenth-century British political and social thought. But the region was widely discussed, and raised distinctive issues about republican government, the effects of colonial rule, and the operation of absolute power. This article examines how the British debated the autarchic dictatorship erected in newly independent Paraguay. Their attempts to make sense of this spectacular experiment in government, and its architect Dr Francia, helped to crystallize public attitudes towards the condition of Spanish America in the 1820s and 1830s. Francia's broader significance, however, was as a token in wider debates about the proper limits of republican and constitutional principles, and about the merits of arbitrary directive rule in less developed polities. For his admirers, he cast light on how other comparable regimes had gone wrong.

Spanish America's struggle for independence left a deep impression on political argument and intellectual culture in Britain during the 1810s and early 1820s. The remarkable triumph of republican, revolutionary, and constitutional principles, and the dramatic collapse of the Iberian imperial order, made the continent's internal politics a subject of excited speculation. There is some good work on the ideological elements of this conjuncture.¹ But we

¹ Rebecca Cole Heinowitz, *Spanish America and British diplomatic romanticism, 1777–1826: rewriting conquest* (Edinburgh, 2010); Matthew Brown and Gabriel Paquette, eds., *Connections after colonialism: Europe and Latin America in the 1820s* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2013); Constance Bantman and Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva, eds., *The foreign political press in nineteenth-century London: politics from a distance* (London, 2017); Gabriel Paquette, 'The intellectual context of British diplomatic recognition of the South American republics, c. 1800–1830', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 2 (2004), pp. 75–95; Jonathan Harris, 'An English utilitarian looks at Spanish-American independence: Jeremy Bentham's *Rid yourselves of Ultramarina*', *The Americas*, 53 (1996), pp. 217–33; Annie L. Cot, 'Jeremy Bentham's Spanish American utopia', in José Luís Cardoso, Maria Cristina Marcuzzo, and María Eugenia Romero Sotelo, eds., *Economic development and global crisis: the Latin American economy in historical perspective* (Abingdon, 2014), pp. 34–52.

know little, intellectually speaking, about what happened next. The historiography of later British relations with Latin America is dominated by studies of diplomacy, commerce, economics, and the realities of 'informal empire'.² It is doubtless true that when most Victorians thought about South America, they thought first about trade. But trade was not all they cared about. Arguments about the shape of politics and society in Spanish America, in fact, formed part of some of the most pressing debates in nineteenth-century British political and intellectual life.

This article deals with British attitudes towards the dictatorship erected in newly independent Paraguay. This was, to its European contemporaries, one of the most extraordinary states thrown up by the revolutions. It was autarchic, isolationist, rigorously despotic, and – perhaps most remarkably of all – stable. Historians have called its architect and ruler between 1814 and 1840, Dr José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, 'undoubtedly the most bizarre of the new South American dictators', 'perhaps the most singular figure in the history of the region', and a 'paradoxical enigma'.³ There is a large and sophisticated literature which deals with the historical Francia and his policy.⁴ But the reality of Francia's state had little bearing on how it was put to use over the other side of the Atlantic, where the information available about the country was minimal, partial, and unreliable, and where it was often treated sensationally.⁵ Because Francia's politics seemed so out of the ordinary, the attention he drew in Britain was of a different order from most Spanish American leaders of his generation. The subjection of an underdeveloped polity to the will of a single man, cut off from any outside influence, and landlocked within a continent otherwise racked by civil wars, was widely represented as an arresting and instructive political spectacle. Francia's dictatorship would acquire a

² For introductions to these themes, see Rory Miller, *Britain and Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (London, 1993); Alan Knight, 'Britain and Latin America', in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire, III: The nineteenth century* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 122–45; Matthew Brown, ed., *Informal empire in Latin America: culture, commerce and capital* (Oxford, 2008); and for the cultural dimensions of the relationship, Robert D. Aguirre, *Informal empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian culture* (Minneapolis, MN, 2005).

³ John Lynch, *The Spanish American revolutions, 1808–1826* (London, 1973), p. 110; Thomas Whigham, *The politics of river trade: tradition and development in the Upper Plata, 1780–1870* (Albuquerque, NM, 1991), p. 23; Harold E. Davis, *Revolutionaries, traditionalists, and dictators in Latin America* (New York, NY, 1973), p. 132.

⁴ Guides include Jerry W. Cooney, 'The many faces of El Supremo: historians, history, and Dr. Francia', *History Compass*, 2 (2004), pp. 1–18; Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson, eds., *The Paraguay reader: history, culture, politics* (Durham, NC, 2013). The most useful (if dated) bibliographical resources are R. Andrew Nickson, *Paraguay* (Oxford, 1987), and Jerry W. Cooney, *Paraguay: a bibliography of bibliographies* (Austin, TX, 1997).

⁵ For Francia's continental reception, see Bernd Schröter, 'Dr. Francia von Paraguay – Diktator und Reformator im Lichte Zeitgenössischer Quellen', *Lateinamerika*, 25 (1990), pp. 49–61; Günther Kahle, 'Ein Sudamerikanischer Diktator, Dr. Francia von Paraguay, im Spiegel der Europäischen Geschichtsschreibung', *Saeculum: Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte*, 15 (1964), pp. 249–59; Antje Schnoor, *Das Bild des paraguayischen Diktators Dr. Francia in der internationalen Geschichtsschreibung des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 2005); James Dunkerley, *Americana: the Americas in the world, around 1850 (or 'seeing the elephant' as the theme for an imaginary Western)* (London, 2000), pp. 171–7; and n. 21 below.

reputation in certain mid-Victorian circles as the ‘greatest experiment ever made among uncivilized men’.⁶ But there would always be sharply conflicting views about its virtues and vices. The dictator of Paraguay was to some contemporaries a ‘remarkable hero’, to others ‘a cold-blooded, suspicious, terrified, isolated, and most miserable murderer and tyrant’.⁷ He was alternately ‘a kind of legal Robin Hood’, and a ‘sort of Mephistopheles’.⁸

As these quotations begin to suggest, Francia and his state lay across significant fault lines in early nineteenth-century British thinking about what governments ought to do. As it stands, however, all that historians of British ideas have ever said about the Paraguayan dictatorship is that the historian Thomas Carlyle wrote an article about it, in 1843.⁹ Carlyle’s piece was important, and we will return to it.¹⁰ But it was a contribution to a debate. Francia, it is true, was never a great *cause célèbre*, or a subject of much discussion in the most prestigious elite periodicals, and not all commentators on his regime thought it was worth taking seriously. These are presumably the reasons why the episode has been overlooked.¹¹ But much early nineteenth-century writing on Latin America was found in less fashionable journals, and in the margins of studies of other subjects, while unfamiliar political arrangements overseas were often treated irreverently. One reason for paying attention to writing on Paraguay is that it takes us into this less well-charted world of political discussion, and helps to crystallize public attitudes towards the condition of newly independent Spanish America. The other is that Paraguay played a distinctive role in certain wider ideological disputes. In particular, it came to be connected with questions about the proper limits of republican and constitutional government, and about the merits and mechanics of arbitrary directive rule in less developed polities. These were issues of compelling interest for the British during the 1820s and 1830s, as

⁶ *Spectator*, 11 Apr. 1868, p. 7. See also ‘The end of the Paraguayan experiment’, *Spectator*, 16 Apr. 1870, pp. 8–9.

⁷ ‘Life of Dr. Francia, the late dictator of Paraguay’, *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 32 (1838), pp. 83–5, at p. 83; ‘Francia’s reign of terror’, *Monthly Review*, 1 (1839), pp. 241–59, at p. 248.

⁸ *Literary Gazette*, 551 (1827), pp. 515–16, at p. 515; Sir Woodbine Parish, *Buenos Ayres, and the provinces of the Rio de la Plata* (London, 1839), p. 228.

⁹ [Thomas Carlyle], ‘Dr. Francia’, *Foreign Quarterly Review*, 31 (1843), pp. 544–89. All the few mentions of Francia in work on Victorian Britain rest on this one text: e.g. Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian frame of mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT, 1957), pp. 122, 217; James Gregory, *Victorians against the gallows: capital punishment and the abolitionist movement in nineteenth-century Britain* (London, 2012), pp. 184–5.

¹⁰ Beyond dutiful discussion by Carlyle specialists, important readings include Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT, 2010), pp. 236–8; John Morrow, *Thomas Carlyle* (London, 2006), pp. 128–9; Robert G. Collmer, ‘Carlyle, Francia, and their critics’, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 14 (1979), pp. 112–22.

¹¹ For Anglo-Paraguayan commerce and diplomatic relations, see Thomas Whigham, ‘Some reflections on early Anglo-Paraguayan commerce’, *The Americas*, 44 (1988), pp. 279–84; E. N. Tate, ‘Britain and Latin America in the nineteenth century: the case of Paraguay, 1811–1870’, *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv*, 5 (1979), pp. 39–70; V. G. Kiernan, ‘Britain’s first contacts with Paraguay’, *Atlante*, 3 (1955), pp. 171–91; Leslie Bethell, *The Paraguayan war (1864–1870)* (London, 1996), part II.

they reflected on developments in Ireland, the empire, and the wider world. The perceived results of Francia's methods helped to make him, for some, a valuable token in these debates.

The argument made here is that serious British engagement with Francia's dictatorship came mainly from contemporaries who saw something to admire in the regime, and that they wrote about it with a view to reinforcing certain claims about the failings of republican democracy, and about the most effective and most practical means of promoting civilizational progress in less developed parts of the world. Looking at the episode in these terms helps us start to make sense of how independent Latin America was integrated into early nineteenth-century British political thinking, as well as offering new angles on the intellectual history of arbitrary power in this period. The first part of the article looks briefly at what was actually known about Dr Francia in Britain, between the 1820s and the 1840s; the second discusses his role in debates about South America; and the third and fourth parts examine how he illuminated broader points of contention in British public life, respectively in political-scientific and in more straightforwardly political terms.

I

Paraguay was one of the first provinces of the Spanish Atlantic empire to separate. After the 1810 deposition of the viceroy of the Río de la Plata, Paraguayan forces repelled troops sent by Buenos Aires, and the country declared independence under a junta in 1811. For fifteen years, it maintained minimal external commercial and political relations, allowing some intelligence to trickle back to Europe. In the mid-1820s, however, it curtailed international trade and diplomacy entirely. Thereafter, what news about Paraguayan developments reached the other side of the Atlantic was little more than rumour, and Francia's death was reported almost as an annual ritual in British newspapers in the 1830s.¹² The information available about his government was very limited, often highly coloured, and at times outright fictitious. But Paraguay's dictatorship entered public consciousness at a time when it still seemed that anything might be possible in South America: in the early 1820s, meaningful quantities of British capital were invested in the colony of Poyais, which turned out not to exist.¹³ Some of the same sort of marvelling naivety can be found in the early reception of Francia's Paraguay.

Francia first began to appear in British periodicals and published travel accounts in the early 1820s. Initially, it was clear only that a man of that name had asserted supreme authority in Paraguay, that his rule had been recognized by neighbouring states, and that he was not eager to promote foreign intercourse.¹⁴ It gradually emerged that he had shut up his country

¹² E.g. *Times*, 3 Oct. 1831, p. 4; *Examiner*, 1721 (1841), p. 56.

¹³ David Sinclair, *The land that never was: Sir Gregor MacGregor and the most audacious fraud in history* (London, 2004).

¹⁴ 'America', *Edinburgh Annual Register*, 15 (1822), pp. 347–60, at pp. 359–60; H. M. Brackenridge, *Voyage to Buenos Ayres* (London, 1820), p. 99; 'South American affairs', *British Critic*, 15 (1821), pp. 544–57, at p. 552.

against most visitors and imports, and that he ruled with a firm hand, but his political character remained obscure.¹⁵ There was speculation that he was a fifth columnist for the king of Spain, and would rush to the aid of any Spanish army; there were rumours that he had ‘established an anomalous dictatorship in place of the pantisocratic theocracy’ of the Jesuits; there were countervailing claims that he was in fact a devoted member of that brotherhood; while in other accounts he was represented simply as a stern military ruler.¹⁶ By the middle of the 1820s, it had become apparent that he had a penchant for arbitrary detention, not least of a few unfortunate British subjects who had sought to trade with Paraguay, and most famously of the French botanist Aimé Bonpland, celebrated for his work with Alexander von Humboldt.¹⁷ Most assessments of Francia which can be found in the British press at this point, however, were positive. He was described in *The Morning Chronicle* as a disinterested, just, improving ruler, solicitous of the wants and needs of his admiring people, and as the steward of a peaceful country which welcomed refugees from civil wars in the surrounding provinces.¹⁸ An extract from the *Journal des débats* reproduced in *The Morning Post* had him leading Paraguay with ‘equal talent and philanthropy’, overseeing a country with robust educational provisions and a vigorous municipal system.¹⁹ A rather different version of Francia appeared in an anonymous pamphlet of 1826, published in London, which described a man who had extinguished the political passions of his country, and who was regarded with ‘awe and fear’.²⁰ It soon emerged, however, that much of its content – crediting the claims being made by a self-appointed ‘marquess of Guarany’, who was seeking to pass himself off as Francia’s agent (sometimes his successor) at the courts of Europe at this time – was without foundation.

The Paraguayan dictatorship was at length brought into focus by two first-hand accounts.²¹ The first, published in 1827, was the work of Johann Rudolph

¹⁵ ‘Caldcleugh’s and Proctor’s *Travels in South America*’, *British Critic*, 1 (1826), pp. 330–47, at p. 333.

¹⁶ Michael P. Costeloe, *Response to revolution: imperial Spain and the Spanish American revolutions, 1810–1840* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 99; ‘The philosophy of contemporary criticism’, *Monthly Magazine*, 60 (1825), pp. 329–33, at p. 330; ‘Geographical discoveries’, *Edinburgh Annual Register*, 17 (1824), pp. 221–51, at p. 237; [John Barrow], ‘South America’, *Quarterly Review*, 32 (1825), pp. 125–52, at pp. 139–41.

¹⁷ *Times*, 18 June 1825, p. 3, and 20 June 1825, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Aug. 1824, [p. 2].

¹⁹ *Morning Post*, 13 Sept. 1825, [p. 4], reprinted from the *Journal des débats*.

²⁰ *A narrative of facts connected with...Paraguay, under the direction of Dr. Thomas Francia* (London, 1826), pp. 18, 14–15, noticed in e.g. *Times*, 26 Nov. 1826, p. 2. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for pointing out that this was written by the Bolivian publicist Vicente Pazos Kanki. Some writers continued to refer to it long after it was debunked: e.g. Alfred Mallalieu, *Rosas and his calumniators* (London, 1845), pp. 98–9.

²¹ For readings of these texts, and European responses, see Moisés Prieto, “‘History’s so strong’”: the topos of *Historia magistra vita* and the rediscovery of dictatorship in Latin America’, *History of Humanities*, 5 (2020), pp. 225–49; Moisés Prieto, ‘Dictadura y sentimiento: las emociones en un relato europeo sobre el Doctor Francia, Supremo Dictador del Paraguay’, *Iberoamericana*, 18 (2018), pp. 127–50; Leila Gómez, *Iluminados y tráfugas: relatos de viajeros y ficciones nacionales en Argentina, Paraguay y Perú* (Madrid, 2009), ch. 3.

Rengger (in whose voice it was written) and Marcelin Longchamp, Swiss doctors and naturalists who had spent six years in Paraguay between 1819 and 1825, four of them under forcible detention. Their narrative was initially published in French, as a historical essay, but it was rapidly translated into English with a new title centred on Francia.²² The book offered the first chronicle of the Paraguayan revolution, detailed the authors' personal encounters with the dictator himself, and gave a full exposition of the institutions of dictatorial government. Its judgements were measured. Absolute rule in Paraguay was a 'monstrous edifice', and its architect did not win many plaudits, but the book also acknowledged that Francia had succeeded in advancing civilization among the higher ranks of society, and proven the capacity of his country for financial and commercial independence.²³ The second account of Francia came in three volumes, published in 1838 and 1839.²⁴ These were the work of two brothers, John and William Parish Robertson, Scottish merchants who had traded with Paraguay in the early years of Francia's ascendancy, between 1812 and 1815, and who had become disgruntled at the restrictions the dictator placed on their activities. They argued that Rengger had been far too charitable: their third volume bore the neatly synoptic (and French Revolution-echoing) title *Francia's reign of terror*.²⁵ They claimed Francia had committed crimes 'of a character so appalling as to make human nature shudder and recoil', and that his government had 'beaten down the people of Paraguay, till they have licked the dust under the soles of his feet'.²⁶

Rengger and the Robertsons did, at least, manage to agree on most basic facts about the dictator and his state. Francia's early career had been as a brilliant and rigidly moralistic lawyer in Paraguay's capital, Asunción. He had quickly emerged as the leading man in the country after its republican revolution against Spain: from secretary to the junta of 1811, to consul under the country's classicizing constitution of 1813, to temporary dictator in 1814 on a ballot of elected assembly members, to dictator for life on the same

²² Mm. Rengger and Longchamp, *Essai historique sur la revolution du Paraguay, et la gouvernement dictatorial du Docteur Francia* (Paris, 1827); Messrs. Rengger and Longchamps, *The reign of Doctor Joseph Gaspard Roderick de Francia, in Paraguay; being an account of six years' residence in that republic, from July, 1819-to May, 1825* (London, 1827).

²³ Rengger, *Reign of Francia*, pp. 112, 193–4. Someone claiming to be Francia responded to the criticism in a letter published in *The Times: Times*, 6 Nov. 1830, p. 3; and Rengger's response, *ibid.*, 8 Dec. 1830, p. 4.

²⁴ J. P. and W. P. Robertson, *Letters on Paraguay: comprising an account of a four years' residence in that republic, under the government of the dictator Francia* (2 vols., London, 1838); J. P. and W. P. Robertson, *Francia's reign of terror, being the continuation of letters on Paraguay* (London, 1839). There were some further relevant passages in J. P. and W. P. Robertson, *Letters on South America; comprising travels on the banks of the Paraná and Rio de la Plata* (3 vols., London, 1843). Parts of the Robertsons' narrative had appeared anonymously: 'Narrative of captivity in Paraguay', *Newcastle Magazine*, 7 (1828), pp. 104–10; 'A traveller', 'Francia, the dictator', *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 43 (1835), pp. 417–29.

²⁵ Robertsons, *Francia's reign of terror*, p. 389. For their motives, see Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for order: the British empire and the origins of international law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 170–1.

²⁶ Robertsons, *Francia's reign of terror*, p. 9; Robertsons, *Letters on Paraguay*, I, p. 338.

basis in 1816. A conspiracy in 1820 was met with a series of arbitrary executions and incarcerations, which continued until at least 1822. The details of Francia's administration after 1825 were hazy, related by the Robertsons as a list of second-hand anecdotes about his cruelty. But the main lines of his policy were the same in both accounts. He sought to retain all legislative, executive, and judicial power in his own hands; he aimed to render Paraguay economically independent of the world; and he set out to break the power of the country's American-born Spanish elite, and of its Roman Catholic church.

No other substantial primary evidence for the study of Francia and his state would become available in Europe during the nineteenth century. Contemporary disagreements about the regime therefore arose not from reading different sources, but from reading the same two accounts with different priorities in mind. Most early nineteenth-century British writing on Paraguay, in fact, appeared in reviews of these texts, and of other travel accounts which mentioned the country. Most such articles were anonymous, and appeared in literary periodicals and magazines – which largely lacked overt party-political affiliations – and in the book review columns of newspapers. Many of them were directed at a public more interested in sensational information than austere historical fact, and indulged in egregious stereotyping of South American politics. British writing on Paraguay, as such, did not fall into a regular, coherent, explicitly contested partisan debate, and clashing takes on Francia's dictatorship cannot be slotted neatly into 'Whig' or 'Tory' or 'Radical' boxes. There were, nonetheless, significant political and ideological stakes in how the regime was understood.

II

Paraguay stood at an angle to the other new Spanish American republics in the British imagination. It clearly shared with them a similar colonial, social, and revolutionary history, and had been acted on by comparable political forces. But it had to be approached differently. The fact that no regular intelligence flowed from Paraguay at any point in our period meant that the country was seen through a veil of uncertainty, mystery, and (sometimes) romance.²⁷ By the time anything concrete was known, Francia had effectively closed off his state, killing any prospect of British merchants developing a profitable regular commerce, or of British consuls gaining admission. Landlocked as deep within America as Paraguay was – and given the uncertainty about whether the country was prosperous or not, and about what its resources were – there was never any serious question of deploying British naval forces to apply pressure on these arrangements.

The material questions which figured so prominently in domestic discussion of most of the rest of Latin America – about commerce, diplomacy, anti-slavery initiatives, the prospects of mining companies, and the interests of resident British communities – therefore had little or no immediate relevance when it came to Paraguay. There was no policy to be made towards the country, at

²⁷ For the larger history here, see Thomas Phillips, 'Heaven and hell: the representation of Paraguay as a utopian space', *European Journal of American Culture*, 27 (2008), pp. 15–27.

least for the time being. Logically enough, these circumstances much reduced its significance for those in Britain whose interests in South America were mainly practical. Paraguay was not, or at least not in a sustained way, one of the main windows through which the public looked at Latin American politics. Francia's celebrity in Britain never matched that of Simón Bolívar, José de San Martín, or Agustín de Iturbide from the heroic generation of liberators, while of the early *caudillo* leaders, Antonio López de Santa Anna and Juan Manuel de Rosas were both more widely discussed. This was not least because all these men operated closer to the Atlantic coast, the focus of British commerce. Writing on Paraguay's curious regime instead performed the vital interpretative function of throwing the other republics into relief.

Paraguay's role here was partly a matter of timing. Francia's state came into focus in Britain just after the cataclysmic stock market crash of 1825, which had been caused in large part by overheated speculation in Latin American mining shares.²⁸ Beyond the fact that so many mines proved so much less productive than advertised, post-mortem analyses came to insist that the whole region lacked the political and social characteristics required to support robust industrial infrastructure, and remunerative investment. Optimism about the prospects for rapid constitutional and societal progress in the new republics, which had shaped so much discourse on the Americas in the 1810s, waned rapidly from the mid-1820s. For some time thereafter, the dominant theme in British commentary on Spanish American politics was its failure: the instability and fissiparity of the new republics, the tendency to selfish and corrupt misrule among the individuals who (however briefly) managed to establish themselves in power, and the prevalence of war and civil war. Even Radicals could not avoid concluding that the republican institutions manufactured after the revolutions had proven inappropriate. The confusion into which the continent had fallen generated a certain amount of indifference, with *The Illustrated London News* in the 1840s dismissing the dissensions of South America as 'the squabbles of so many kites and crows'.²⁹ But there was considerable interest, also, in accounting for how matters had come to such a pass, and a great deal at stake politically in how this was done. The condition of independent Spanish America was clearly an issue for Panglossian proponents of the virtues of republican and constitutional principles the world over, but it also raised questions about the consequences of transoceanic colonial rule. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the region's political weaknesses were explained primarily by reference to the incapacity of Spanish imperial government, which had (allegedly) been tyrannical, corrupt, narrow-minded, and rapacious, and which had deprived its subjects of the knowledge and virtue required to govern themselves.³⁰ Civil misrule had been compounded by

²⁸ Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 301-5.

²⁹ *Illustrated London News*, 28 Jan. 1843, p. 58.

³⁰ E.g. J. R. McCulloch, *A statistical account of the British empire* (2 vols., London, 1837), II, pp. 595-6; Robertsons, *Letters on Paraguay*, I, pp. 7-8, 41-2, 60-1, 90-1. For context, see Gabriel Paquette, 'The image of imperial Spain in British political thought, 1750-1800', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 81 (2004), pp. 187-214.

the enervating spiritual despotism of a notably dissipated branch of the Roman Catholic clergy. This had left the continent with a problem to solve. One possible solution was presented by Brazil, relatively stable and prosperous under a version of constitutional monarchy. But the political and colonial history of Brazil was quite different from that of the Spanish empire.

This was where Francia's Paraguay mattered. Where most rulers of Spanish American states seemed unable to cling to power for any length of time, Francia appeared to be fixed in place.³¹ Where anarchy, confusion, and warfare seemed to reign in and between the other Spanish American republics, Paraguay inarguably possessed a version of stability, certainty, and external peace. Some British observers assumed that the anomaly would work itself out, and that only Francia's continued existence prevented Paraguay from realizing its geographical destiny as a member of the confederation of its sister provinces in the Río de la Plata.³² As Charles Darwin wrote when travelling nearby in 1833, when 'the old, bloody-minded tyrant' died, the country would inevitably be 'torn by revolutions, violent in proportion to the previous unnatural calm'; and it would 'have to learn, like every other South American state, that a republic cannot succeed, till it contains a certain body of men imbued with the principles of justice and honour'.³³ For others, however, Francia had unlocked the secret of Spanish American politics. He had demonstrated that firm, unflinching, directive government was the way to serve, and to discipline, the races of the continent. These claims, as we will see, were attached to wider political agendas, but they also helped to cast the problem of Spanish America in a new light.

That Francia governed Paraguay, rather than any other American state, added some additional subtleties to the case. Demographically speaking, the country was not especially distinctive. Rengger described a polity with a population of around 200,000, relatively small for its physical size: this number was composed of 7/10 creoles, 1/10 Indians, and 2/10 mixed race and blacks, alongside a community of around 800 Spanish residents.³⁴ In two other respects, however, it was quite out of the ordinary. The first was that it had already been the site of one great political experiment, the system of the Jesuit Missions. The establishment of a largely autonomous, quasi-theocratic *imperium in imperio* in the hands of the Society of Jesus in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had in earlier generations made Paraguay one of the most widely discussed countries in the region, and the episode was taken up again in Robert Southey's 1825 poem *A tale of Paraguay*.³⁵ Some writers in the 1820s and 1830s would treat this history as the basis of

³¹ Chile became politically stable in the 1830s, under the presidency of Joaquín Prieto Vial and the direction of the *eminence grise* Diego Portales, but remained in a state of confusion during the 1820s.

³² *Caledonian Mercury*, 18 Nov. 1826, [p. 3]; Rengger, *Reign of Francia*, p. vii; Parish, *Buenos Ayres*, p. 237; 'Letters on Paraguay', *British and Foreign Review*, 7 (1838), pp. 569–611, at p. 611.

³³ Charles Darwin, *Journal*, 18 and 19 Oct. 1833, in Paul H. Barrett and R. B. Freeman, eds., *The works of Charles Darwin*, II: *Journal of Researches*, I (London, 1992), p. 128.

³⁴ Rengger, *Reign of Francia*, pp. xii–xiii.

³⁵ 'History of the viceroyalty of Buenos Ayres', *Annual Review*, 6 (1807), pp. 260–3, at p. 263.

Francia's despotism, arguing that the civil government of the Jesuits had been perfectly calculated to train men as instruments of tyranny.³⁶ The second important point about Paraguay was geographic. It was the only major landlocked independent state to emerge from the revolutionary era.³⁷ Containing two major rivers, the Paraguay and the Paraná, it did not lack facilities for trade: that its access to transoceanic commerce depended entirely on the disposition of its neighbours, however, clearly presented political dilemmas. Francia's ability to control flows of information so tightly, and to exclude foreign influence so thoroughly, was widely seen to be rendered possible only by his state's lack of a seaboard.

III

British interest in the Paraguayan dictatorship stemmed only in part from its location within, and bearing upon, the politics of Spanish America. What elevated the state into a matter of more general public concern were sensational representations of the reach of Francia's dictatorial authority. His regime was widely described as the most systematic despotism of modern times, if not in the history of the world.³⁸ No representative body was summoned again after Francia had been made dictator for life, in which guise he dominated every institution of state, refusing to delegate: Paraguay's government, from top to bottom, was in the words of one commentator 'nothing else than the will of Doctor Francia'.³⁹ This was an arresting spectacle even for British contemporaries not especially interested in South America. When they reached for figures with whom to compare Francia, rulers of neighbouring American states rarely entered the picture. The most common association was instead with the titans of the French Revolution: Francia was 'the Napoleon of South America', or 'the Robespierre of Paraguay'.⁴⁰ Almost as prevalent were analogies with 'Asiatic' despots, specific and generic, including Mehmet Ali, the reforming pasha of Egypt.⁴¹ Nero and the imperial tyrants of Rome also featured, as did the Medes and the Persians: Francia could be more terrible than the former, and more absolute than the latter.⁴² In one exuberant article, Francia became

³⁶ 'Letters on Paraguay', *Dublin University Magazine*, 12 (1838), pp. 474–84, at pp. 478–9; [W. D. Cooley], *The history of maritime and inland discovery*, III (London, 1831), p. 276. Others praised the Jesuits' beneficence: e.g. 'Notices of new works', *Metropolitan Magazine*, 23 (1838), pp. 9–12.

³⁷ Bolivia retaining a seaboard until 1884.

³⁸ 'Francia's reign of terror: sequel to Letters on Paraguay', *Athenaeum*, 585 (1839), pp. 27–8, at p. 27; 'The dictator of Paraguay', *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, 337 (1838), pp. 193–5, at pp. 194–5.

³⁹ 'Dr. Francia's reign in Paraguay', *Monthly Review*, 5 (1827), pp. 374–86, at p. 379.

⁴⁰ 'Letters on Paraguay', *Dublin University Magazine*, 12 (1838), p. 481; 'Letters on Paraguay', *British and Foreign Review*, 7 (1838), p. 602. French writers also used the Napoleon analogy: e.g. Alcide D'Orbigny, *Voyage pittoresque dans les deux Amériques* (Paris, 1836), p. 219.

⁴¹ Robertsons, *Letters on South America*, I, pp. 19–20; 'The reign of Dr Joseph Gaspard Roderick Francia in Paraguay', *Examiner*, 1019 (1827), pp. 501–3, at p. 502.

⁴² 'Francia's reign of terror', *Monthly Review*, 1 (1839), p. 246; 'Dr. Francia's reign in Paraguay', p. 374; Robertsons, *Letters on Paraguay*, II, p. 300.

a 'modern Solon', a 'Tiberius of two hundred thousand souls', and a 'Louis XI. of the tropics'.⁴³

In these ways, writers on Paraguay found hooks for their readers. But they also began to connect the country more seriously with wider contemporary debates about the nature, possibilities, and consequences of despotic forms of government.⁴⁴ As Melvin Richter has discussed, throughout the nineteenth century, disputes about the character, operation, and merits of 'despotism', 'dictatorship', and their cognates were 'an integral part of political discourse throughout Europe'.⁴⁵ In early nineteenth-century Britain, hostility to the autocracies which proliferated across the Continent was central to national identity.⁴⁶ But the parameters were different for less developed parts of the world. Even political liberals were often prepared to accept that authoritarian, directive rule by enlightened cadres or individuals could be in the interests of populations not yet equipped for self-government.⁴⁷ Versions of this assumption helped to rationalize British authority over India and the 'tropical' colonies, underpinned support for other colonial and territorial empires, and guided much contemporary thinking about the best way to administer Ireland. Precisely where the lines ought to be drawn between societies and peoples for whom such treatment was and was not appropriate, however, was a subject of endless disagreement.⁴⁸ So too, even more acutely, was the problem of what lines of policy were most effective and practical in such settings – especially the question of whether there was a role for exemplary violence and harshness in the government of less civilized populations. Early nineteenth-century British writers, theorists, and politicians engaged in extended, fierce, and not entirely coherent debates about these intricate and more than philosophical issues, shifting between a huge range of geographical

⁴³ *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 June 1827, [p. 2], reprinted from the *Constitutionnel*.

⁴⁴ In the hands of British reviewers, Francia was by turns a 'dictator', a 'despot', an 'autocrat', a 'tyrant', and an 'absolute ruler', and the selection of terms rarely did much analytic work. Cf. Andreas Kalyvas, 'The tyranny of dictatorship: when the Greek tyrant met the Roman dictator', *Political Theory*, 35 (2007), pp. 412–42, and the historiography surveyed in n. 3 therein.

⁴⁵ Melvin Richter, 'A family of political concepts: tyranny, despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, dictatorship, 1750–1917', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4 (2005), pp. 221–48, at pp. 237–8. See also Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter, eds., *Dictatorship in history and theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and totalitarianism* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁴⁶ Bernard Porter, "'Bureau and barrack": early Victorian attitudes towards the continent', *Victorian Studies*, 27 (1984), pp. 407–33; Markus J. Prutsch, *Caesarism in the post-revolutionary age: crisis, populace and leadership* (London, 2019).

⁴⁷ Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), esp. ch. 5.

⁴⁸ For this problem in imperial policy, see Alan Lester, Kate Boehme, and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the world: freedom, civilisation and liberalism in the nineteenth-century British empire* (Cambridge, 2020), esp. part I. Some Positivists made the case that autocratic rule was in general the best means of promoting ordered social progress: see John Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America, 1800–1850* (Oxford, 1991), p. 421; and e.g. Richard Congreve, *The Roman empire of the West* (London, 1855), pp. 61–2.

(and historical) contexts as preoccupations changed.⁴⁹ Paraguay's dazzlingly pure despotism, in this context, became another battlefield on which to fight about the government of less developed peoples.

In the first place, Francia's regime became a case-study in emerging arguments about the political and social mechanics of 'despotic' polities. More substantial treatments of the political science of despotism started to emerge towards mid-century, but these followed extensive discussions of the practicalities of autocratic rule in more specific contexts.⁵⁰ A *Fraser's Magazine* article of 1852 on the Argentine dictator Rosas remarked that '[t]here is no portion of political science more attractive or interesting to study at present than the law of dictatorship': a subject which covered the means by which absolute rule was established, the characteristics of the peoples among which it took hold, and the kinds of men and policy suited for success in the task.⁵¹ These were precisely the questions which had preoccupied writers on the Paraguayan dictatorship, who attempted to solve the twin puzzles of how Francia had asserted such unchallenged authority, and why his state was so unusually stable. Commentators borrowed pell-mell from Rengger and the Robertsons in constructing theories, using their evidence to support a cascade of arguments about what precisely was going on in Paraguay. These did not fall into neat patterns. Speaking very broadly, however, a distinction can be drawn between analyses which insisted that Francia's ascendancy was founded on force and fraud, even if brilliantly conceived and masterfully executed; and readings which suggested that there was some moral, intellectual, or ideological component to his authority.

In both cases, great emphasis was laid on the susceptibility of the population Francia ruled. There was little dissent from the claim that the character of the native Guarani people of Paraguay left them prone to accepting despotic government. They were represented as docile, ignorant, easily swayed, and devoid of the moral or physical courage needed to resist oppression.⁵² They were a nation of 'extreme simplicity and subserviency', who had long been accustomed to 'the despotic sway of a captain-general', a condition for which the Jesuit Missions were often seen to bear some responsibility.⁵³ This was not a case in which fetters had been fastened on a people who had learned, or even obviously desired, to be free. The question was less whether dictatorship was an appropriate form of government for Paraguay, sociologically and demographically speaking, than whether the particular species of dictatorship Francia had established was defensible.

⁴⁹ For debates about absolute rule in British history, see J. W. Burrow, *A liberal descent: Victorian historians and the English past* (Cambridge, 1981).

⁵⁰ Henry, Lord Brougham, *Political philosophy* (3 vols., London, 1842–4), I; George Cornewall Lewis, *A treatise on the methods of observation and reasoning in politics* (2 vols., London, 1852), II, pp. 50–60.

⁵¹ 'Rosas, the dictator of Buenos Ayres', *Fraser's Magazine*, 45 (1852), pp. 596–602, at p. 596.

⁵² 'Francia's reign of terror', *Monthly Review*, 1 (1839), p. 242; Robertsons, *Letters on Paraguay*, II, p. 302.

⁵³ Parish, *Buenos Ayres*, p. 229; 'Dr. Francia, the dictator of Paraguay', *Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, 13 (1832), pp. 17–26, at p. 19.

The Robertsons' version of Paraguay as a miserable tyranny, ground down under the jackboot of a spiteful and possibly insane autocrat, attracted plenty of reproductions. In these accounts, Francia was a cold, calculating, almost inhuman figure, whose only appetite had ever been for power.⁵⁴ His election as dictator-for-life rested on bayonets, coercion, and calculation, in a way that for some critics recalled Napoleon's 1799 machinations in the Council of Five Hundred.⁵⁵ The 'active, designing, unprincipled' Francia, aided by 'climate, education, habits, and institutions', had managed to bind his people 'in a state of utter helplessness'.⁵⁶ From this perspective, the seeming impregnability of the Paraguayan dictatorship was easily explained. It rested on fear. Fear of surveillance and arbitrary punishment deadened the political feelings of the Paraguayans, who fell prey to wretchedness, misery, and inanition.⁵⁷

Most British writers on Paraguay's dictatorship, however, saw more subtlety in the sources. This began with their readings of Francia. In a few cases, he became an uncomplicated patriot, who sought selflessly to serve his people and his country.⁵⁸ More typically, interest was piqued by the tensions in his career. His financial disinterestedness and ascetic lifestyle, which appeared to persist even after he dominated the entire machinery of the state, signalled that more than just materialism and lust for power motivated him.⁵⁹ Many writers accepted that he had once possessed 'that simple and severe species of virtue which is essential in the formation and preservation of a republic', even if he had at length been corrupted by the possession of irresponsible power.⁶⁰ Thinking of this kind underlay the repeated claim that the Paraguayans had willingly elected Francia as dictator, as the ablest man in the country.⁶¹

Paraguayan politics, seen from these kinds of angles, had to be founded on more than terror. The alternative model was that some sort of moral nexus existed between the autocrat and his people. It was widely asserted, in fact, that Francia held a command over the minds of the Paraguayan people 'as has seldom been equalled in ages of the most gross superstition'.⁶² This seemed

⁵⁴ 'Letters on Paraguay', *Dublin University Magazine*, 12 (1838), pp. 482–3; 'Letters on Paraguay', *British and Foreign Review*, 7 (1838), p. 605.

⁵⁵ *Cleave's Penny Gazette*, 30 Oct. 1841; 'Sketch of the progress and state of literature', *Le belle assemblée*, 6 (1827), pp. 277–307, at p. 280.

⁵⁶ 'Francia's reign of terror', *Monthly Review*, 1 (1839), p. 246.

⁵⁷ 'Letters on Paraguay', *Dublin University Magazine*, 12 (1838), p. 484; P. Campbell Scarlett, *South America and the Pacific* (2 vols., London, 1838), 1, p. 138. In some versions, the key to Francia's rule was the 'unlimited license' he allowed his soldiers and officials: 'The reign of Dr. Francia', *London Magazine*, 9 (1827), pp. 11–25, at p. 20.

⁵⁸ *Literary Gazette*, 551 (1827), p. 515.

⁵⁹ By some distance the most widely extracted portions of both Rengger's and the Robertsons' texts were those which dealt with Francia's personal habits and conversation.

⁶⁰ Mrs Erskine Norton, 'Francia, dictator of Paraguay', *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 43 (1835), pp. 331–46, at p. 341.

⁶¹ 'Paraguay and the dictator Francia', *London Saturday Journal*, 1 (1839), pp. 167–9, at p. 167; 'Life of Dr. Francia, the late dictator of Paraguay', p. 83.

⁶² J. A. B. Beaumont, *Travels in Buenos Ayres, and the adjacent provinces of the Rio de la Plata* (London, 1828), p. 91.

to depend, on one hand, on his command of scholarly and scientific knowledge. British writers on Paraguay rarely failed to mention Francia's library – reputedly the only one in the country – and his collection of mathematical instruments, globes, maps, theodolites, air-pumps, and electrifying machines. Woodbine Parish, former consul at Buenos Aires, wrote that Francia 'was looked upon with a kind of reverential awe, as a person of wonderful acquirements and sagacity'; some articles suggested that he was made dictator on account of his reputation as 'something like a Doctor Faustus or Albertus Magnus...not only a lawyer and politician, but an astronomer, algebraist, linguist, land-surveyor, and martinet besides'.⁶³ One travel account alleged that his authority was buttressed by nightly public exhibitions of his prowess in astrological observation, held before admiring multitudes in the capital city.⁶⁴ Reviewers doubtless dwelt on these points because they underlined Francia's distinctness from, and newsworthiness as against, the military *caudillo* rulers who dominated much of the rest of Spanish America. But they also implied that Francia's regime must rest on foundations more legitimate, or at least durable, than fear and force; and that his despotism might be more than a holding operation, and instead a means of promoting scientifically informed progress.

The other explanation offered for Francia's hold over his people was more straightforward. The dictator of Paraguay offered an attractive policy programme. In particular, he had cultivated the loyalty of the native population by ostentatious gestures of hostility towards social groups and institutions privileged under the old colonial administration. The country's small Spanish population bore the brunt of these moves: at different points, Francia banned intermarriage between Spaniards, and dramatically (albeit temporarily) incarcerated the Spanish population of Asunción. His confiscation of the property of the Catholic church, and voiding of the privileges of an entrenched clerical elite, efficiently eliminated an alternative focus of loyalty at the same time as signalling opposition to unjust hierarchical distinctions. Francia's whole government was, in this framing, an alliance 'between the despot and the rabble', in which he confined his countenance and encouragement to the common people.⁶⁵ These measures were presented elsewhere, it should be stressed, as examples of the arbitrary whims of a paranoid, anti-clerical tyrant. But the point is that Francia's Paraguay was not treated in Britain simply as a sensational and horrifying example of the depths which unconstrained despotism could plumb in uncivilized countries. Just as often – and despite the Robertsons' best efforts – it was handled as a political phenomenon worth taking seriously. Not only was it of value in studying the 'law of dictatorship', and in drawing out competing sets of assumptions about the social and political mechanisms behind absolute power, but it would also prove significant in bolstering broader arguments about the condition of modern politics.

⁶³ Parish, *Buenos Ayres*, p. 229; 'Letters on Paraguay', *British and Foreign Review*, 7 (1838), p. 606.

⁶⁴ Alexander Caldcleugh, *Travels in South America, during the years 1819–20–21* (2 vols., London, 1825), I, p. 135; cf. Rengger, *Reign of Francia*, pp. 41–2.

⁶⁵ 'The reign of Dr Joseph Gaspard Roderick Francia in Paraguay', p. 503.

IV

Clashing readings of the Paraguayan dictatorship illuminated important points of contention in British public life between the 1820s and the 1840s, but not in a straightforward way. Francia's state did not fit the categories which regimented most domestic controversies about politics overseas: it did not raise questions about British responsibility and policy, and it belonged to a state of society too different from Britain's own for there to be room for direct comparisons.⁶⁶ It intersected more obliquely with the political dissensions of the period.

This is not to say that Paraguay was absent from mainstream political discourse. Mainly, in an era of increasingly heated controversy over free trade, it was brought up in relation to commercial policy. Francia, having closed down international trade entirely, was cited as the logical end-point of protectionism, and was raised in parliament in relation to his 'Chinese system of exclusion' and his attitudes towards commerce.⁶⁷ Not much more could be done with him in this context, however, as it was impossible to judge the success of his policy. Elsewhere we find Ireland being likened to Paraguay in the independence of its political notions, and Conservative promises to Scottish church parties in the 1840s being compared with Francia permitting a prisoner to buy himself more comfortable chains.⁶⁸ Unglossed allusions of this kind, most from before the publication of Carlyle's essay, indicate that Francia's Paraguay was to some extent a familiar quantity in early nineteenth-century Britain.⁶⁹

Its real significance, however, lay in the support it offered to a particular political outlook. We have heard that in judgements of Francia's Paraguay, it was the exercise rather than the existence of dictatorial power that was the issue: even Francia's most unrelenting critics, like the novelist Mrs Erskine Norton, recognized that he had possessed 'the most splendid opportunity ever enjoyed by a man, of rendering the most lasting and essential benefits to his country'.⁷⁰ But all the most substantial accounts of Francia were by writers who saw in him a model of hard-headed pragmatism, in a world which was going in less appealing directions.

British writers who sought to make sense of Francia's Paraguay in the second quarter of the nineteenth century did so in the midst of controversy

⁶⁶ For these categories, see Jonathan Parry, *The politics of patriotism: English liberalism, national identity, and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006); Alex Middleton, 'Victorian politics and politics overseas', *Historical Journal* (advance access).

⁶⁷ R. Torrens, *The principles and practical operation of Sir Robert Peel's bill of 1844 explained* (London, 1848), p. 75; *Spectator*, 28 Mar. 1840, p. 10; Sir Harry Verney, *Hansard's parliamentary debates, third series*, 19:694, 16 July 1833; William Ferrand, *ibid.*, 62:828-9, 19 Apr. 1842.

⁶⁸ 'Earl Spencer and the state of parties', *Westminster Review*, 41 (1844), pp. 257-95, at p. 261; Captain F. B. Head, *A few practical arguments against the theory of emigration* (London, 1828), pp. 61-2.

⁶⁹ Francia became the subject of an unsuccessful 1851 novel by the inventor E. Clarence Shepard, which gave him a long-lost son and put the pro- and contra-Francia arguments in the mouths of its two protagonists, but which ended in an inconclusive bloodbath: E. Clarence Shepard, *Francia, a tale of the revolution of Paraguay* (London, 1851).

⁷⁰ Erskine Norton, 'Francia, dictator of Paraguay', p. 341.

over the alleged grip of an improvident mawkishness and sentimentality in the councils of the nation. Partly, this dealt with domestic policy, especially attitudes towards criminals and secondary punishment. The debate focused, however, on Britain's foreign and imperial policy, and on the causes associated with the hub of contemporary humanitarianism at Exeter Hall: peace societies, solicitude for (former) slaves, and the institutionalized protection of aborigines in the colonies. These movements would be synthesized and satirized by Carlyle as the 'Universal Sluggard-and-Scoundrel Protection Society' in his *Latter-day pamphlets* of 1850.⁷¹ But no dispute over the deployment of British authority overseas in this period took place without voluble protest that mistaken and self-defeating principles around the sanctity of human life, happiness, and political freedom were being prioritized over more tangible, longer-term social and political interests.⁷² Such claims were frequently allied to wider expressions of anxiety about drift and populism in the management of national politics, and calls for stronger political leadership. It is worth noting that Gladstone's celebrated cry of 1843, 'when will anybody govern anything?', was thrown out in the same year that Carlyle published his article on Francia.⁷³

In trying to make out the premises and agendas behind contemporary condemnation of the Paraguayan dictatorship, it is tempting to want to read later Liberal critiques in to earlier writing. Francia attracted a brief flurry of public discussion in 1892 after he was included in the Positivist calendar of great men, edited by Frederic Harrison, a publication dedicated to those who had 'promoted the progress of mankind': in it, he was lauded as 'scrupulously honest, inflexible in purpose, merciless even to his own family in his devotion to the commonwealth'.⁷⁴ These claims irked, among others, the Liberal statesman John Morley, who pointed out – correctly – that Francia's defenders had been obliged to plead insanity in extenuation of some of his most questionable acts.⁷⁵ Morley had previously argued, in an 1870 article on some of Carlyle's writings, that the 'lean iron Francia, in his passion for order and authority', had stamped out 'the very life' of his nation.⁷⁶ In that piece, Morley implicitly accepted that Francia had wanted to promote social progress. He argued, however, that Paraguay's dictator had misconceived the necessarily gradual nature

⁷¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-day pamphlets. No. II. Model prisons* (London, 1850), p. 25.

⁷² See Alex Middleton, 'Rajah Brooke and the Victorians', *Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), pp. 381–400.

⁷³ Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: God and politics* (London, 2007), p. 36.

⁷⁴ Frederic Harrison, ed., *The new calendar of great men* (London, 1892), p. vi; S. H. Swinny, *ibid.*, pp. 577–8.

⁷⁵ John Morley, 'A new calendar of great men', *Nineteenth Century*, 31 (1892), pp. 312–28, at p. 323. Liberal luminaries would continue to deal similarly with Francia: James Bryce, *Modern democracies* (2 vols., London, 1921), I, p. 215; James Bryce, *South America: observations and impressions* (London, 1912), pp. 525–51.

⁷⁶ Editor [John Morley], 'Carlyle', *Fortnightly Review*, 8 (1870), pp. 1–22, at p. 21. On Morley's hesitancy about defending despotism under British authority as secretary of state for India, see Jon Wilson, 'The silence of empire: imperialism and India', in David Craig and James Thompson, eds., *Languages of politics in nineteenth-century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 218–41, at pp. 233–4.

of societal change. To hurry after it by military discipline and peremptory law-making was to pursue only a superficial good, as well as being certain to have harmful direct consequences.⁷⁷ This reasoned rejection of authoritarian directive rule can be seen to line up philosophically with claims made in the 1820s and 1830s by Radicals, Whigs, and Liberals about the errors of coercion in Ireland, and the arbitrary habits of British colonial governors.

The problem is that contemporary denunciations of the Paraguayan dictatorship were not articulate about their philosophies of government. In some cases, they seem to have rested on blanket hostility to government by arbitrary power, placing weight on generalized assertions about its 'injurious effects' on the 'external and temporal prosperity' of human societies.⁷⁸ But Francia's early nineteenth-century opponents made only minimal efforts to understand his position, and mainly contented themselves with enumerating spectacular examples of his violence, cruelty, and oppression. Their assumption seems to have been that despotism of the vicious, forensic kind indicated by these vignettes was so obviously an evil in itself that there was no way in which it could be rationalized. So Francia's opponents dwelt on his arbitrary capital sentences and incarcerations, the horrifying condition of the state prisons (not least the absence of class distinctions between prisoners), his innumerable violations of property real and moveable, and his uniquely intensive system of surveillance, police, and passports.⁷⁹ His alleged practice of personally distributing the ammunition for state executions was widely picked out, as was an episode in which he instructed his sentinel to shoot on sight any passers-by who looked at his residence. His isolation of Paraguay from the rest of the world, moreover, was presented as a deliberate means of stemming the influx of knowledge and enlightenment, which was always inimical to tyranny.⁸⁰ There was, in short, little developed argument in most negative assessments of Francia's dictatorship, but plenty of melodrama. The point writers on this side of the fence sought to make was not that Francia was wrongly attempting to drill his society into order, but that he was a tyrant, and that tyrants were a bad thing. Most penny-a-line sensationalist accounts of Francia's regime adopted this general approach.

Defenders of Francia were more engaged, more creative, and more numerous. They did not so much set out to rebut the critiques that were offered, as argue from different premises. Attempts to turn Francia's career into one of placid beneficence were rare, beyond the odd effort to render him 'a modern Alfred'.⁸¹ There was no denying that he had used exemplary violence and terror in healthy quantities. Few other contemporary writers even employed the rhetorical strategy Carlyle did, of compacting Francia's worst severities into a handful of years.⁸² For his defenders, the cardinal point about Francia was not

⁷⁷ [Morley], 'Carlyle', p. 21.

⁷⁸ 'The dictator; or two scenes in Paraguay', *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, 184 (1847), pp. 17–22, at p. 21.

⁷⁹ 'The public and state prisons at Paraguay', *Imperial Magazine*, 11 (1829), pp. 127–31.

⁸⁰ 'Tea of Paraguay', *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, 412 (1839), pp. 382–3, at p. 382.

⁸¹ *Literary Gazette*, 551 (1827), pp. 515–16.

⁸² Carlyle, 'Francia', p. 574. Cf. 'Dr. Francia, the dictator of Paraguay', p. 534.

that he was benign, or perhaps even sane, but that he was politically necessary. Republicanism and constitutional government in Spanish America had, they argued, resulted in chronic instability, lawless bloodshed, and civilizational regression. Under Paraguay's rigorous despotic regime, however, conditions had been created in which social progress could take place.

These central arguments underpinned most serious-minded British writing on the Paraguayan dictatorship produced during the 1820s and 1830s, though they were pursued with varying levels of enthusiasm. Francia's obituary in *The Times* concentrated on the fact that, while the rest of Spanish America was wracked by permanent revolution, his provinces alone had remained safe from war and massacre: it called him a 'high and talented man' who had 'radically changed' the character of his community.⁸³ John Barrow, a prolific writer on imperial and foreign issues for the conservative *Quarterly Review*, adopted a similar line.⁸⁴ His conclusion was that, however stern Francia's despotic sway had been, 'the country subjected to it has escaped thereby a thousand evils to which the other Spanish colonies have been exposed during the same period', and that it would be no surprise if it were to emerge that 'on the whole, this district, hermetically sealed by its half-crazy dictator, has made more progress than any of the rest'.⁸⁵ For other contemporary writers, Paraguay showed more straightforwardly how other states and rulers had gone wrong. Francia's rejection of naive, doctrinaire republicanism had allowed him to safeguard the true interests of his country and his people: for the *New Monthly Magazine*, his plan of non-intercourse had 'saved' the country from 'the turbulence of democracy'.⁸⁶ Paraguay's dictator had understood that the anarchy of the neighbouring republics was due to their incomplete political education, and he had sought to preserve his state from the same fate. He employed terror, admittedly, but as the *Monthly Magazine* explained, his object in doing so was 'to reform the morals of his people, to eradicate their besotted prejudices, to elevate them in the scale of civilized man', and his tyranny had indeed prepared the Paraguayan population for future independence.⁸⁷ For the *London Magazine*, though liberty in Paraguay was obviously extinct, Francia's experiment was one in benevolent rather than oppressive and self-interested rule: 'the tyrant governed his subjects solely with a view to their benefit'.⁸⁸ And progress was in train: one pamphlet noted that Francia had doubled the population of his state, and made 'incredible' local improvements, without imposing burdensome taxation or incurring any public debt.⁸⁹

⁸³ *Times*, 9 Oct. 1841, p. 3.

⁸⁴ J. M. R. Cameron, 'John Barrow, the *Quarterly Review*'s imperial reviewer', in Jonathan Cutmore, ed., *Conservatism and the Quarterly Review: a critical analysis* (London, 2007), pp. 133–50.

⁸⁵ [John Barrow], 'Letters on Paraguay – Dr. Francia', *Quarterly Review*, 63 (1839), pp. 342–69, at p. 369.

⁸⁶ 'The conversazione, on the literature of the month', *New Monthly Magazine*, 54 (1838), pp. 277–88, at p. 283.

⁸⁷ 'Dr. Francia, the dictator of Paraguay', p. 26.

⁸⁸ 'The reign of Dr. Francia', p. 13.

⁸⁹ William Walton, *A letter, addressed to Sir James Mackintosh, M.P.* (London, 1829), p. 186.

In short, firm, decisive, directive rule had created in Paraguay an oasis from the political discontents of republican Spanish America. It had demonstrated that political stability and progress was in fact possible in that part of the world, provided that immediate aspirations for mature constitutional and democratic forms were abandoned, and provided that there was not too much tenderness about the political rights and bodily integrity of uncivilized peoples. The Paraguayan dictatorship, in this guise, became a symbol for the constituency in British politics which aligned itself with the hard-headed realities of empire and world power over uninformed domestic idealism. At a time when Spanish America was often employed as a rhetorical analogue for Ireland – as a harbinger of what Repeal of the Union might lead to, demonstrating what happened when peoples threw over their systems of government without having matured the character and habits necessary to create an effective substitute – it seems plausible to suggest that the Irish implications might have been in the back of some minds.⁹⁰

It must be stressed again that this sympathetic characterization of the Paraguayan dictatorship was not the easy one, given the available source material. Rengger, and especially the Robertsons, were both far readier to criticize Francia's regime than they were to credit it. Framing Francia as a hero rather than a villain, or even as a ruler with a constructive political vision, meant reading against the grain. So it is all the more striking that so many contemporary writers on Francia's Paraguay used it to support claims about the superior merits of order, directive rule, and salutary violence, against the infatuations of republican revolutionaries and Exeter Hall.

Later evidence, however, seemed to run more clearly in favour of the Paraguayan dictatorship. When the country was reopened to commerce and diplomacy after Francia's death, an influx of new information seemed to suggest that his quarter-century at the helm had left a state enjoying a high level of material prosperity relative to its neighbours. Britain's naval intervention in the politics of the Río de la Plata in 1845–6 involved a journey up the Paraná to Asunción, and an Anglo-Paraguayan agreement was finally concluded in 1853.⁹¹ On the basis of what these new contacts revealed, a parliamentary report of 1847 praised Francia's economic husbandry, and commentators were particularly struck that in the early 1850s Paraguay was solvent enough to commission British steamships.⁹² This promising state of affairs did not last. The desolating wars of 1864–70, which for the second and last time in the nineteenth century drew concerted British attention back to Paraguay, wiped out a huge proportion of its population. The responsibility here, however, was laid firmly at the feet of Francia's successors, Carlos Antonio López and Francisco Solano López, in what by then had come to seem a

⁹⁰ E.g. [Nassau Senior], 'King's Argentine Republic', *Edinburgh Review*, 87 (1848), pp. 534–65, at p. 565.

⁹¹ David McLean, 'Trade, politics and the navy in Latin America: the British in the Paraná, 1845–46', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 35 (2007), pp. 351–70.

⁹² *House of Commons parliamentary papers*, LXIV.1, 769 (1847), pp. 294–5; 'The treaty with Paraguay', *Daily News*, 5 Nov. 1853, [p. 6]; 'British-built war-steamers for Paraguay', *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, 5 (1854), p. 1161.

peculiar dictatorial tradition.⁹³ Francia's name continued to circulate in later nineteenth-century public discourse on Spanish America, figured variously as 'the *reduction ad absurdam*' of personal government, as the leader of a 'Communitistic despotism', and as a byword for 'firm, inflexible, paternal' government.⁹⁴ Some persisted in condemning his regime as a brutal tyranny, usually along lines less subtle than those laid out by John Morley.⁹⁵ On the whole, however, Francia's Paraguay continued to be rated an honourable exception to the turbulence in the other contemporary American republics, the policy of isolation credited with having saved the state from disintegration.⁹⁶

All this brings us, at last, back to Carlyle. His essay 'Dr. Francia' was first published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1843, a few years after the critical flurry inspired by the appearance of the Robertsons' volumes in 1838–9, and the article circulated more widely in editions of his *Critical and miscellaneous essays* thereafter. The piece was unusual in that Carlyle had researched it thoroughly, aiming to read all the available sources.⁹⁷ He claimed to struggle with the process of composition, confessing to his editor that he had been 'obliged to babble far too much about the *adjuncts* of the man, not knowing the *man* to any right extent at all!', and that 'one really *has* and can have nothing but a kind of *balderdash* to write about him'.⁹⁸ As an analyst of British responses to the Paraguayan dictatorship, Carlyle was not especially accurate. His suggestion that Francia had incited 'much vague wonder' was certainly correct, but it is hard to find any sign of the 'great shock to constitutional feeling' he claimed to detect.⁹⁹ His insistence that of all recent South American phenomena, 'by far the notablest...is Doctor Francia and his Dictatorship in Paraguay' was not widely shared.¹⁰⁰ But what should be clear by now is that Carlyle did not pluck Francia out of the air. More than this, he did not do anything

⁹³ *Times*, 5 June 1867, p. 9; Captain Richard F. Burton, *Letters from the battle-fields of Paraguay* (London, 1870). See Hendrik Kraay and Thomas L. Whigham, eds., *I die with my country: perspectives on the Paraguayan war, 1864–1870* (Lincoln, NB, 2004); James Schofield Saeger, *Francisco Solano López and the ruination of Paraguay: honor and egocentrism* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

⁹⁴ 'The war in Paraguay', *London Quarterly Review*, 34 (1870), pp. 296–327, at p. 300; 'Paraguay', *St. James's Magazine* (July 1862), pp. 475–9, at p. 477; E. J. Dillon, 'The ruin of Spain', *Contemporary Review*, 73 (1898), pp. 876–907, at p. 903.

⁹⁵ E.g. George Thompson, *The war in Paraguay* (London, 1869), pp. 4–5; and for a more balanced account, George Frederick Masterman, *Seven eventful years in Paraguay* (London, 1869), pp. 29–32.

⁹⁶ *The supplement to the Penny Cyclopaedia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, I (London, 1851), p. 602; 'Mansfield's Paraguay, Brazil, and the Plate', *Fraser's Magazine*, 54 (1856), pp. 591–601, at p. 601; [P. W. Gifford], 'From Montevideo to Paraguay', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 52 (1885), pp. 96–111, at p. 107–8.

⁹⁷ Lynch, *Caudillos*, p. 420.

⁹⁸ Thomas Carlyle to John Forster, 23 June 1843, in Ian Campbell et al., eds., *The collected letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (42 vols., Durham, NC, 1970–), XVI, p. 216; Thomas Carlyle to John Forster, 10 June 1843, *ibid.*, XVI, pp. 194–5.

⁹⁹ Carlyle, 'Francia', p. 552.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 551.

particularly unusual with the dictator of Paraguay.¹⁰¹ Carlyle's declared aim in writing the essay was to 'lead certain readers into various reflections, constitutional and other, not entirely without benefit'.¹⁰² He argued that 'a reign of liberty' had proven 'unendurable' in Paraguay in the years immediately after the revolution; but that with Francia in power, 'great improvement...did in all quarters forthwith show itself'.¹⁰³ Francia governed rigorously, but according to clear and just rules – much like the gods – and in a manner rationally adjusted to the condition of the society in which he found himself.¹⁰⁴ Under that unflinching and far-seeing authority, Paraguay had made tangible progress across a raft of different areas in its national life, ranging from urban planning, to agriculture, to education, to security, to the repression of superstition.¹⁰⁵ In their essence, these arguments were familiar. Carlyle was not the first writer exercised by misplaced sentimentality and liberalism in British political discourse to see in Paraguay a useful symbolic corrective. In estimating Francia as the right man in the right place, Carlyle stood broadly in line with the majority opinion among his contemporaries. His attempt to understand the 'puzzle' Francia presented was the most bracingly written of the early nineteenth century, but it neither exhausted nor led British efforts to make sense of Paraguay's experiment in dictatorial isolationism.¹⁰⁶

V

Francia's Paraguay did not sit at the heart of British debates about politics and society in early republican Spanish America, its unique character rendering it more a curiosity than a centrepiece. But the angle at which it stood to those wider discussions helps us to understand their stakes. Trade, and the best means to secure more trade – coercive and otherwise – were clearly core concerns in British thinking on independent Spanish America. The region was also seen, however, as one of political experiments, which could resonate with broader domestic agendas and assumptions.¹⁰⁷ Paraguay drew a level of public attention disproportionate to its commercial or geopolitical importance because it offered a model of government altogether distinct from the revolutionary republicanism which seemed to dominate the rest of Spanish America. Part of the appeal of that model was that it could be painted in lurid, sensational terms. But the real reason it mattered, intellectually and politically, was because it invited reflection on how Spanish America had arrived at the parlous condition it was said to be in; and, more than that, because it offered suggestions as to how the region ought to be governed in order to overcome the poisonous heritage of

¹⁰¹ Beyond using Francia's dictatorship to support a few idiosyncratically Carlylean positions, not least an enthusiasm for the terrorization of shoemakers: Carlyle, 'Francia', pp. 584–5; cf. Thomas Carlyle to Margaret A. Carlyle, 12 May 1835, Campbell et al., eds., *Carlyle letters*, VIII, pp. 114–18.

¹⁰² Carlyle, 'Francia', p. 552.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 572–3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 575–80, 585.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 575–85.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

¹⁰⁷ E.g. 'Letters on Paraguay', *British and Foreign Review*, 7 (1838), p. 571.

Spanish colonial rule. Debate around these questions would run on for much of the nineteenth century, latching on to different Spanish American polities in different decades. Francia himself, as we have seen, would continue to divide opinion in politically revealing ways.¹⁰⁸

The Paraguayan dictatorship mattered also for what it contributed to wider disputes about the determinants of political progress in less developed parts of the world. Most of those who wrote seriously about Francia recognized that his government had been robust, violent, even cruel. But they insisted that it had worked: his dictatorship had delivered physical security, material prosperity, and social progress, in a region where all those commodities were at a premium. This presentation supported broader claims about the power of firm, unsentimental, arbitrary government to deliver tangible civilizational benefits, and about the errors of those who insisted that political freedoms and the values of ‘humanity’ ought to be prioritized instead. At a time when similar claims were being made about a number of other experiments in (allegedly) enlightened directive government – in the hands of Mehmet Ali in Egypt, in the hands of utilitarian administrators in British India, in the hands of Whig ministers in Ireland – assertions of Francia’s success in establishing an oasis of stability amidst a morass of disorder clearly helped to bolster an increasingly powerful strand of political and social argument. In these ways – and there would be many others – independent Spanish America began to take on a significant role in British debates about some of the larger political and governmental problems of the nineteenth century.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to audiences at Oxford and Exeter for listening to earlier versions of this article, to Jon Parry for his comments on a draft, and to the editors and referees at the *Historical Journal* for their criticisms.

¹⁰⁸ This would be true also in other European countries, and in the United States. For US critiques of Francia, see e.g. Charles A. Washburn, *The history of Paraguay* (2 vols., Boston, MA, 1871), I, p. 167; Thomas J. Page, *La Plata, the Argentine Confederation, and Paraguay* (New York, NY, 1859), pp. 124–5, 204.

Cite this article: Middleton A (2022). Britain and the Paraguayan Dictatorship, c. 1820–1840. *The Historical Journal* 65, 371–392. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X21000339>