**Niall’s Notions: South America:**

Under the *Property* section of his book *Civilization*, under the subheading “American Revolutions”, Niall Ferguson discusses the fundamental, historical differences between North and South America.

Ferguson states that Spanish rule in Latin America ended forty years after British rule in America. Then, he asks the question:

… While one revolution cemented the democratic rights of property-owners, and brought into being a federal republic that within a hundred years was the world’s wealthiest country, the South American revolutions consigned all of America south of the Rio Grande to two centuries of division, instability and underdevelopment. Why was that?

As may be expected, private property is seen by Ferguson as key to this distinction.

In July 1818, the Constitution of the First Venezuelan Republic was proclaimed. The Constitution confined the right to vote to property owners, which excluded a much larger population than equivalent rules in North America did. According to Ferguson “the result was that the propertyless, including large numbers of freed slaves, rallied to the royalist cause”.

Only the promise of land and enfranchisement swelled the military ranks of Simon Bolivar, whom Ferguson describes as “the man who should have been South America’s George Washington”. His army was full of former slaves, as well as people from Britain and Ireland. In all, around 7,000 British and Irish volunteers signed up to help liberate South America from Spanish rule.

After victory against the Spanish, Bolivar established what he called “Gran Columbia”, which encompassed parts of modern Panama, Ecuador, Columbia, and Venezuela.

When he explores why Gran Columbia did not become the core of a new United States of Latin America, Ferguson argues that the cause is related to Bolivar’s intense determination to centralize power, the lack of experience of South Americans with democratic decision-making.

Ultimately, Gran Columbia became a dictatorship and not a democracy. Ferguson notes: “in post-independence Venezuela, nearly all of the land was owned by … just 10,000 people – 1.1 per cent of the population”. Conversely, “the rural property-ownership rate in the United States in 1900 was just under 75 per cent”.

Ferguson also notes that: “of the 7,000 who set off for Venezuela, only 500 ended up staying. Three thousand died in battle or from disease, and the rest went home to Britain”.

A month before his death from tuberculosis in December 1830, having resigned his post of president, Bolívar wrote a last despairing letter:

I have ruled for twenty years, and from these I have derived only a few certainties:

1. (South) America is ungovernable, for us;
2. Those who serve a revolution plough the sea;
3. The only thing one can do in (South) America is to emigrate
4. This country will fall inevitably into the hands of the unbridled masses and then pass almost imperceptibly into the hands of petty tyrants, of al colours and races;
5. Once we have been devoured by every crime and extinguished by utter ferocity, the Europeans will not even regard it as worth conquering;
6. Were it possible for any part of the world to revert to primitive chaos, it would be (South) America in her final hour

After Bolivar’s death, according to Ferguson, democratic experiments failed because, at the first sign that they might be expropriated, the wealthy elites turned to armed forces to restore the status quo by violence. Clearly, as Ferguson notes, this was not a recipe for rapid economic growth.

Since the two American revolutions, the United States has had one constitution, and Venezuela has had twenty-six, each more disposable than the last. Ferguson states that “unlike in the United States, where the constitution was designed to underpin ‘a government of laws not of men’, in Latin America constitutions are used as instruments to subvert the rule of law itself”.

Analysis Questions:

1. Was Simon Bolivar a hero or a villain in the history of Latin America? Justify your answer with at four points? (Five Marks)
2. How does the notion of private property contribute to the relative success of the modern United States and the relative struggles of modern Latin America? (Four Marks)
3. Obviously, the notion of private property is closely tied to philosopher John Locke? In this section of his book, Niall Ferguson explores slavery in North and South America. Infer Locke’s views on slavery and justify your answer. (Three Marks)
4. Based on earlier course knowledge, why, in your credible opinion, was the United States able to draft a constitution that has lasted almost 240 years? Offer three reasons. (Three Marks)