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The Influence of the School of Salamanca on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States

Ricardo Rivero Ortega

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1. Introduction

This year, 2026, marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of the United States, a text remarkable for many reasons, though not wholly original nor free of intellectual debts to the best European tradition.

It is in that line that I place Spanish classical thought, of which the so-called **School of Salamanca** is a fundamental part, headed by **Francisco de Vitoria**, the Dominican friar who arrived in the city on the Tormes five hundred years ago to take possession of the Prime Chair of Theology, after training at the University of Paris and following a brief period at the College of San Gregorio in Valladolid. I have written before about his roots and academic worth (Rivero Ortega, R., 2025).

I devote this effort, with conviction, to recalling our principal thinkers because both the British and the French have tried to displace them and minimise their contributions. Thus, in every scholarly exchange on the democratic tradition and public liberties, the history of the **Comunidades of Castile** or of **Leonese parliamentarism** ought to come before the Glorious Revolution or the storming of the Bastille. Because long before either event, fundamental rights, the dignity of the person and the sovereignty of the people were already being defended in Spain. And the Spaniards carried those messages to America through the universities of Santo Domingo, Lima, Mexico City and Bogotá.

To give an example: the **Perpetual Law of Ávila (1520)** may be regarded as the first draft of a modern Constitution in Europe, with ideas that came out of the Salamanca cloister, whose deliberative records were later burned to prevent imperial reprisals after the execution of Padilla, Bravo and Maldonado.

Nor is there any doubt about the connections between the School of Salamanca and the thought of American emancipation: “Suárez came to be the irrefutable intellectual influence in Spanish America” (Stoetzer, 1966, p. 72). This thesis, presented in 1961 at Georgetown University (Washington), points to the opposition of enlightened despotism to the spread of the Jesuit’s ideas, already widely diffused among all

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