

THE INERTIA OF CLIO: The Social History of Colonial Mexico*

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This article represents an attempt to understand the changes that have taken place in the traditional vision of colonial society in New Spain as shaped by past historiography, drawing on works published between 1970 and 1981. This essay was not conceived as a bibliographic summary that would examine themes, review hypotheses, and evaluate the sources used by different authors. Instead, my analysis will give greater importance to the topics that have captured the attention of scholars than to their published works, it will emphasize the scientific community rather than particular scholars, and it will focus more on those themes that in my view characterize the social processes of New Spain than on the central themes of current historiography.

I have taken the 1960s as a necessary starting point for anyone wishing to understand the advances made by social history because these years represent, and not only at the level of social history, a moment of great optimism. This optimism resulted from the conjunction of an objective fact with a hope: the crisis of traditional historiography and the existence of historiographical models capable of facilitating a new understanding of the colonial past. In effect, during the 1960s the idea that the social dimension that can be known and therefore studied is the institutional dimension came under definitive attack. According to this institutional concept, political institutions played the role of orienting and making functional social reality, which was contrastingly viewed as having anarchic tendencies and lacking in autonomy and dynamism. The crisis of the institutional interpretation of the society of New Spain resulted from the effects caused by the development of historical demography, economic history, and ethnohistory. Because of historical demography and economic history, scholars began to conclude from the relationship between land and society (Moreno Toscano 1968) and the relationship between economic crisis and social crisis (Florescano 1969) that colonial society was endowed with dynamism and characterized by a series of mechanisms of its own. Thanks to ethnohistory, evidence

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has documented the specific articulation between Indian society and mestizo-white society (Gibson 1964; Taylor 1972). These pioneer investigations opened the way for a new vision of the society of New Spain.

TOWARD A NEW CHARACTERIZATION OF COLONIAL SOCIETY

The abandonment of the institutional perspective raised doubts about the traditional argument that the basis of colonial society was legal in nature, emphasizing instead its economic and social character. Thus the way was opened for new analyses that could explain the functioning and mechanisms of reproduction of the society of New Spain.

Demonstrating the relationship that existed between the demographic crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and diet, the studies of Cook and Borah (1971–79) represent a kind of transition between the old institutional approach and the new social approach. These studies permitted a new analysis of the predominantly rural context of the society of New Spain. Thanks to Cook and Borah and to the recent studies by Cross (1978, 1979) and Cross and McGreevey (1982), the rural dimension can now be approached in terms of the resources necessary for the functioning and reproduction of society. These analyses tell us that only by correlating population with agricultural resources, measurable historically in the evolution of diets, can the standard of living of the different social sectors be understood.

The complex question of standard of living, which can be indirectly illuminated by the studies of epidemics (Cooper 1965; Florescano and Malvido 1982), can be better understood by analyzing the demographic crises that, as Malvido (1973, 1982) has shown, allow one to comprehend the different phases of the emerging relationship between resources and population. This relationship emerges as not only changing over time but as having a different rhythm from the interaction between population and production. On this topic, Morin (1979) has provided a study of one significant region—Michoacán in the eighteenth century.

If the rural foundations of the society of New Spain are reflected in the complex interaction that occurred between population and production, it is evidently necessary to reconsider the suggestions of Palerm (1972) and Palerm and Wolf (1972), of the geographer Robert West (1966), and of Sherburne Cook (1949), a biologist turned historian. The renewed emphasis on the analysis of social history from an ecological perspective allows increased reflection on the infrastructural continuities that existed between the pre-Hispanic and the colonial periods. These continuities may soon be better understood thanks to the studies of Olivera (1972), Quezada (1972, 1975), Carrasco and Broda (1976, 1978), Reyes (1977), and Prem (1978). These studies offer an image of pre-Hispanic society in

which resources in general and land in particular required social discipline and regulation at local, regional, and state levels.

A better understanding of what is generically called “pre-Hispanic society” can enhance comprehension of the form taken by the impact resulting from the clash between Mesoamerican and Iberian societies, which has been traditionally described as a collision between two antithetical organizational logics. If this characterization is accurate, then why did a series of Indian social forms survive almost intact in the new social structure? The recent study by Sempat Assadourian (n.d.), although focused exclusively on the economic dimension, offers some useful ideas for reflection. The continuities and discontinuities caused by the Hispanic invasion appear to comprise a theme that could provide a new interpretation of the manifest functions (as in the organization of estates) and of the latent functions (as in kinship) that were present in the society of New Spain until the crisis of the seventeenth century.

The problematic of resources is linked to the topic that has been the object of the greatest number of studies in this decade—the hacienda. The reasons for this enormous interest in the hacienda, which has allied Mexican, North American, and European scholars, seem to me to be related to the fact that the hacienda has been considered an expansive economic and social form that was capable of subordinating other organizational forms (such as small holdings and community property). In the last decade, knowledge about the functioning of haciendas has greatly improved. The studies of Barrett (1975), Couturier (1976), Brading (1978), Ewald (1976), Harris (1975), Konrad (1980), Nickel (1978), Semo (1977), and Tutino (1975) have revealed much about the internal organization of the hacienda’s productive life, the rationale behind the utilization of the different kinds of labor, the economic behavior of *hacendados*, and the close link between agricultural and commercial activities. These contributions have permitted the elaboration of a new interpretive outline of the functions of the hacienda and its economic role in the society of New Spain.

The dangers of subordinating the interpretation of the society of New Spain to the hacienda have been intelligently argued by Florescano (n.d.), who maintains that despite its great importance, the hacienda was not the only engine of colonial society. Building on Florescano’s idea, it can be said that the hacienda was one of the elements that contributed to the broader interactions among population, resources, and production, thus opening the field to a new and rich series of questions concerning the mechanisms that regulated the interactions that characterized the economic and social basis of the society of New Spain.

An answer to this question may come from the studies on prices. The few analyses available—for example, the already classic study of corn prices by Florescano (1969), those by Garner (1972) and Galicia

(1975), and the additional documentation of the great crisis of the 1780s (Florescano 1981)—foster at most the understanding that those price fluctuations that had real repercussions on society were agricultural, especially corn prices. If prices, as indicators of the form that the market took, had scant capacity for regulating production and consumption, then the society of New Spain was characterized by a low level of commercialization and therefore was not a society regulated by market forces. The consequence is that in the near future, one of the tasks (perhaps a thankless one) will be to identify which social aspects were conditioned by the market. Thus the social history of New Spain will be incorporated into the rich historiographical and anthropological debate of the past two decades that seeks to differentiate the forms that the market can take in history. The only study existing today that attempts to deal with these aspects is the above-mentioned study by Florescano (n.d.), which was written for the *Cambridge History of Latin America*.

Signs exist that market problems are beginning to interest historians, as is shown in the recent study by Van Young (1981). This work represents the most serious attempt to analyze in detail the economic and social role of the market in a single region, in this case Guadalajara. Despite the fact that his model is based essentially on two variables (population and resources), Van Young succeeds in demonstrating that the basic tendency of regional society in the seventeenth century was one of social divergence. Following Van Young's argument, one can conclude that the market intensified the difference between rich and poor, or to use a concept more suited to a society of the old regime such as colonial Mexico, the difference between the landowning estate and the popular estate. From this study it can be seen, despite Van Young's minimizing the historical evidence, that the form the market took was not self-regulatory.

The historical studies of the last ten years thus offer several elements for characterizing colonial Mexican society in a way that differs radically from the past: they assert that its foundations should be sought in the interaction among population, resources, and production and in the scant influence exercised by the market on this interaction. In addition to seeking to analyze more profoundly the foundations of the society of New Spain, scholars should give greater emphasis to the area of ethnicity. In fact, the multiethnicity evidenced by colonial society is still difficult to understand because the few relevant studies tend to forget that the ethnic dimension appeared simultaneously with the estate dimension. This failure to synthesize ethnic and estate dimensions has produced strange results: Semo (1973), for example, ended up by falling back on the traditional institutional outline, distinguishing the "republic of Spaniards" from the "republic of Indians."

Achieving a real understanding of the interpenetration of eth-

nicity with estates would require an act of courage: one would have to forget the interpretative outline advanced by the traditional indigenist approach, which tends to reduce ethnic fact to economic fact, with the result that the Indian is viewed as the equivalent of a peasant. The crisis of the traditional indigenist approach, which Bonfil Batalla (1980) has demonstrated, opens a new path for historical analysis, the only tool capable of determining not only the relationships established between ethnic groups but also the degree of autonomy of each group within the society. The above-mentioned studies of Olivera, Reyes, Quezada, Farriss, and Nutini again are most significant for rethinking the question of ethnic groups and estates in historical terms.

It is clear that more knowledge of the degree of autonomy enjoyed by various ethnic groups can help in viewing differently the complex interactions that arose within colonial society. Many words have been devoted, particularly in congresses and symposia, to the articulation of Indian society. Yet we are still far from comprehending that this articulation is not a phenomenon that occurred once for all, immutable in time and space. Those who have addressed the complex question of the diversity of historical forms taken by Indian societies have not been historians but anthropologists like Cook and Diskin (1976), Nutini and Bell (1980), and Bricker (1981). Thanks to them, historians have begun to understand better that the latent functions present in Indian societies, such as the *compadrazgo* system and millenarianism, make it possible to reconstruct and reinforce ethnicity. American scholars undoubtedly have been more sensitive to this topic than Mexicans, the former having benefitted from the major cultural enterprise represented by the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, particularly the volumes dedicated to ethnohistory (Cline 1972). This work opened the way for a new approach, exemplified in *Beyond the Codices* by Arthur Anderson (1976). This study demonstrates the existence of numerous historical testimonies in Nahuatl that provide an internal vision of Indian society, allowing this society to be studied in the same depth as mestizo-white society. The study by Pérez Jiménez and Jansen (1979), which reestablished the validity of Mixteca documentation, points in the same direction.

The need to review the ethnohistorical material and to discuss its utilization is a tacit testimonial to the willingness of historians to approach colonial Indian society in a different manner than in the past. The last few years have witnessed a healthy tendency to try to understand the degree of autonomy enjoyed by Indian society. Historians are finally beginning to understand the Indian system of logic regarding the use of natural resources (Carmagnani 1981; Loera 1977, 1981; Farriss 1980); Indian strategies on population and production (Chance 1978; Farriss 1978; Robinson and McGovern 1980; Tutino 1976); and Indian social and political organization (Carmagnani 1982; Chance n.d.; de Vos 1980; Klein

1966; Wasserstrom 1980). Thanks to the excellent study by Lockhart (1981), scholars are beginning to understand the complex symbolism of the Indian world.

The totality of these studies and the growing interest in the internal aspects of the Indian society help to overcome the traditional conception of Indian societies as passive, lifeless societies, the remnants of a glorious past. Unfortunately, this same interest in the ethnic dimension has not spread to the study of black and mulatto ethnic groups, of which only Palmer (1976) and partially Israel (1975) assess a few elements.

The differential analysis of the various ethnic dimensions present in the society of New Spain reflects the historiographic need to determine the degree of tension and cooperation that existed among different ethnic groups and thus to draw comparisons with what is known about other preindustrial societies. If the historiographic suggestions made by Otto Hintze are applied to New Spain, it can be said for Mexican colonial society also that the subject for historical analysis is not the individual but a larger group, the estate. In the Mexican context, estates are characterized by not being an institutionalized form, but apparently greatly determined by the dimension of ethnicity. If the dimension of estates, concerning which only the studies of Israel (1975) and Liehr (1976) have shown certain aspects, was the basic organizational form of the society of New Spain, the tension between city and countryside was, in contrast, the dynamic element. In effect, the tension among the urban factors—such as increasing commercialization and the expansion of the colonial bureaucracy—and the rural factors—such as the growth of the informal power of the creoles—tended to transform the society of New Spain over time. Hence the analyses of urban reality can reveal some aspects of the estate dynamic.

One of the first questions for urban historiography has been to determine the intensity of the urban phenomenon during the colonial period. It is well known that the urban centers constituted one of the characteristic elements of Mesoamerican society; and as Lombardo de Ruiz (1973) has shown for the great urban center of Mexico-Tenochtitlán, cities formed the apex of a complex urban network. The disappearance of the hierarchically ordered urban network was one of the most significant consequences of the conquest, and it occasioned the beginning of a secular process of ruralization. The long-term consequence, as Moreno Toscano (1973, 1974) demonstrated, was the total hegemony of Mexico City at a commercial level, and above all at an administrative level. Studies on Mexico City, thanks to the work of the Seminario de Historia Urbana (1974–76) coordinated by Moreno Toscano (1978), constitute the best contributions to knowledge of a colonial capital.

In the last few years, knowledge of the smaller urban centers has expanded remarkably. More is now known about Zacatecas (Bakewell

1971), Guanajuato (Brading 1971), and Oaxaca (Chance 1976, 1978); but the study of Moreno Toscano (1974) on the relationship between the city and the region is the best study published in the last ten years for understanding city-countryside dynamics. Moreno Toscano's analysis allows one to view Mexico, like other societies founded on estates, as also being characterized by a varied regionalization of social life. Strictly speaking, it is no longer possible to speak, as in the past, of *the* society of New Spain; one should speak instead of the colonial societies included in the geographic area occupied by New Spain.

In spite of their great value, the existing studies do not permit an understanding of the specific character of urban strata with regard to both membership in the landowning estate and in the popular estates. The impression the available studies leave is of a lack of clear differentiation between the urban landowning estate and the rural landowning estate, as well as of little differentiation among popular groups, as DiTella (1978) has shown for the first third of the nineteenth century.

This lack of differentiation does not imply that the estates were a homogeneous whole. On the contrary, there were sources of conflict and tension within and among the estates. Partial evidence of these conflicts and tensions, which are indicators of the social dynamic, can be obtained from the studies on nonagricultural economic activity and on the rebellions and the wars of independence.

The studies on the mining industry (Brading 1971; Bakewell 1971), the textile industry (Super 1976), and commerce (Moreno Borchart 1976; Boyer 1977; Hoberman 1977) all have given due emphasis to the considerable interpenetration that took place not only between agricultural and nonagricultural activities, but also between economic activity and the bureaucracy. The study by Liehr (1976) is still the only one that because of its detailed analysis of the municipal government of Puebla, illuminates the social and economic interests of the local landowning class. By means of its control over the local economy, Liehr asserts, the landowning class managed to control not only the popular classes but also neutralized the control exercised by the colonial authorities. Additional local and regional studies could provide a more detailed picture of the characteristics of and differentiations within the landowning class. A close approximation limited to the last period is offered by the studies of Brading (1973), Stein (1981), and especially Ladd (1976). From these studies, the idea emerges provisionally that the internal differentiation of the landowning class did not reflect the opposition of commercial and rural interests but the opposition of regional interests. Once again one notes that in New Spain, as in other areas of the old regime, territoriality was a characteristic element of society.

In the same way that the studies on economic activity illustrate

the nature of class interests and show how the landowning class organized its power network, the studies on the rebellions and the independence period can offer many elements to enhance understanding of the nonindigenous popular sectors that, all things considered, have left lesser traces in the documentation. This situation does not imply that the popular sectors cannot be studied. Even a quick look at the guide to parish documents collected by the Genealogical Society of Utah (Cottler et al. 1976) and the documentary directories drawn up by the Archivo General de la Nación for Mexico City is sufficient to understand that a wealth of documentation awaits an author.

Although one review of interesting sources is available (Huerta and Palacios 1976), it is obvious that not all studies of the rebellions and the wars of independence shed light on the dynamics of the popular sectors. Social history is especially interested in the studies that examine the rebellions (Katz 1982; Coatsworth 1982) and independence (Semo 1978) from a structuralist approach. Structural analyses help one understand the paternalistic, clientelistic relations that were established between the landowning and popular estates, as well as the alliances among various groups that were formed in the differentiated rural society. Perhaps in the near future studies emphasizing the mechanisms of the rebellions will clarify the organizational capacity of the popular sectors. Reading Taylor (1979) carefully, one can perceive the historically measurable existence of a form of behavior, or life-style, typical of the mestizo and mulatto popular sectors. With Taylor's recent analysis as a starting point, it is easier to understand the results provided by Hamnett (1982) on the organization of the popular sectors during the fight for independence because it can be hypothesized that armed rebellion was nothing more than an extreme form of a specific life-style. A deeper analysis of the study carried out twenty years ago by Martin (1957) on vagabondage and the recent study by Scardaville (1980) may reveal in the next few years something new about the popular sectors. Such an analysis may also confirm the validity of Humboldt's observation of the lack of social differentiation between the urban and rural popular sectors.

Analysis of the internal dynamics of the estates and the interaction between them leads to the topic of social discipline. This theme is particularly important for preindustrial societies that display market forms that tend not to be self-regulating. In such societies, the conception exists of regulation by "contract," according to which individuals judicially and constitutionally delegate their sovereignty to a natural lord. From this formulation, present for example in the *Política indiana* of Juan de Solorzano Pereira, it is possible to set forth in new terms the relationships between society and estate without confusing social organization with institutional organization, as in the past. The need to

reconceptualize the new connection between society and state is suggested by the studies on forms of labor (Frost, Meyer, and Vásquez 1979) and also by those on military organization (Archer 1977), political-religious disciplining (Cleudinnen 1982), repression of crime (Bazan 1964; MacLachlan 1974), and social deviation in general (Alberro 1974, 1981). In the near future, it will be possible to salvage the contributions of the institutional analyses and to characterize Mexican colonial society without succumbing to institutionalist, economic, or sociologizing temptations.

THE NEED FOR A NEW PERIODIZATION FOR SOCIAL HISTORY

In the preceding pages, I have tried to show that in the last ten years genuine methodological and thematic innovation has occurred in the field of social history. The number of studies has expanded and social history is now a discipline in a process of consolidation. This optimistic viewpoint is shadowed, however, by a lack of innovation in the preexisting diachronic scheme that continues to be essentially the same as the periodization used in the past by institutional historiography.

In this regard the practitioners of social history can be criticized for having failed to develop a new periodization (Seminar on Social Historiography 1979). The result has been that the elements of rupture present in social history have been glossed over by the traditional periodization. An example of how innovations in social history could have rejuvenated the traditional diachronic outline is offered by Borah (1979). Although he is more inclined to reinforce the traditional view that the history of Mexico did not really begin until the Spanish Conquest, Borah recognizes the existence of numerous elements that emphasize the social continuity that existed between the pre-Hispanic period and the colonial period.

Borah, like other historians, seems thus to owe something to the anthropologists who first argued this topic of continuity in the context of discontinuity (Carrasco 1961, 1971) and developed it in the last decade (Carrasco and Broda 1976, 1978). Thanks to these studies and to those of Nutini (1976), Olivera (1972), Reyes (1977), and Quezada (1972, 1975), historians of the conquered society are in a position to understand that colonial reality was much more complex than has been hypothesized in the past. Indeed, if pre-Hispanic societies were characterized by multiethnicity, hierarchical arrangement, territoriality, and kinship, it becomes evident that the forms of colonial domination, by the fact of their arising in an estate context, would have found very fertile soil in the Mesoamerican context. In the light of these new insights, it is possible to posit in new terms the entire process of the

conquest and to reevaluate the abilities and capacities traditionally attributed to the conquistadors.

Merely comparing the study by Cline (1949) on the congregation of Indian villages with the recent study by Farriss (1978) is enough to demonstrate how, despite all the obstacles and mental inertia, the attitude of historians has changed. While Cline emphasized that the *pax hispanica* was the starting point of a new social dynamic, Farriss underlines contrastingly how the congregation of the Indian villages did not destroy the corporate character of the communities in the Yucatán. Farriss puts forward the new and thought-provoking hypothesis that the conquest affected Indian society less than did the new economic reforms of the eighteenth century.

Detailed study of the issue of continuity and discontinuity between pre-Hispanic society and colonial society may soon shed new light on all the sixteenth century and the first third of the seventeenth, facilitating comprehension of the complex problematic of colonial society's formation. Understanding this process involves not only the study of new aspects, such as new forms of production and social patterns, but also the analysis of the persistence of old patterns of behavior, indigenous as well as Iberian. In studying the indigenous behavior, close attention should be given to unconscious patterns of behavior, which were possibly the least altered by the forms of domination imposed by the conquistadors.

Research on patterns of behavior is potentially important for providing new elements with which to understand the crisis of the seventeenth century. One has the impression, in fact, that the debate over this crisis, which Borah (1951) began thirty years ago, has been overly centered on the extent of the interaction between demographic crisis and relative economic stagnation, with the result being that an exaggerated importance has been attributed to economic factors.

According to current research, the so-called seventeenth-century crisis included the period from the last third of the sixteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth century and coincided with the European crisis of the same period. The available indicators, especially those on mining production (Bakewell 1971), show that this period cannot be defined as one of economic crisis. This interpretation has been strengthened in the last few years by a series on the Hacienda Real published by TePaske (1976) and the excellent study by TePaske and Klein (1981). Given that the crisis is not exclusively associated with economic factors, one can conclude that the decline of the seventeenth century was actually a historic phase that reestablished an overall social equilibrium. In this sense, the studies by Israel (1974, 1975), which analyze the complex interactions that arise between the different ethnic groups and their political reflections, constitute a fresh approach. In

contrast, the hypotheses of Frank (1979), which lack any historiographic foundation, are meant to explain almost tautologically the crisis of the seventeenth century as a consequence of the transformation of the Indian communities and the rural social structure into an integral part of the European economy.

Perhaps better understanding of the seventeenth-century crisis can be reached through the concept of social reequilibration and restructuring, which would oblige historians to revise their ideas about the interaction between monetary economy and natural economy, the interaction between city and countryside, and the articulation among different ethnic groups. One has the impression that the real formation of colonial society coincided with this structural crisis (Assadourian n.d.)

For the following period, the information available is essentially demographic. Thanks to Cook and Borah (1971–79), Calvo (1973), Morin (1973, 1979), Rabell Romero (1974), and Vollmer (1973), scholars possess improved documentation. This situation allows us to posit the issue of whether just one phase characterizes the period between the seventeenth-century crisis and the independence crisis. Demographic information suggests the hypothesis that a distinction can be made between a phase of the consolidation of colonial society during the period from the 1640s through the 1730s and an expansionist phase during the period from the 1730s through the 1810s. We could thus hypothesize a new periodization for the society of New Spain that recognizes a foundation phase (up until the crisis of the seventeenth century), a consolidation phase (between the crisis of the seventeenth century and the first third of the eighteenth century), and an expansionist phase (between the first third of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth century).

This new periodization seems to me of the greatest importance because it makes explicit the findings achieved by social history in the last ten years and allows historians to overcome an erroneous strategy based on the assumption that the great transformations, which were obviously institutional in nature, took place during the sixteenth century (the era of the conquest) and the last third of the eighteenth century (the era of the Bourbon reforms). Although this assumption encourages studies of the last half-century of colonial life in the expectation of revealing more about not only the Bourbon transformations but the social forms that preceded the reforms, continuing this approach would impede an adequate understanding of the specificity of the forms assumed by colonial society in the period from the 1640s through the 1730s. This challenge may be highly significant for social history in the next ten years if we genuinely seek to establish a new image of colonial society.

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