

ECONOMIC FORCES AND SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT IN COLONIAL
NEW SPAIN:
A Comment

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The outpouring of colonial Mexican social history that marked the 1970s had its origins in the previous decade. As Marcello Carmagnani's article points out, historians had come to appreciate the limits of institutional approaches to this field of inquiry. Contributions in demographic history, economic history, and ethnohistory strongly indicated that the dynamics of colonial life were other than had been identified to date and that even periodization and the eras of transition in the colonial period—let alone the reasons behind the transitions—might be different if measured by other standards.

But it was not merely dissatisfaction with the institutional studies that caused the new interest in social history and the exploration of new approaches to it. Historians of Latin America tend to be comparative in approach because the field generally requires them to be knowledgeable about the variety of societies and developments found across the continent. Consequently, social historians of colonial Mexico drew upon the models and achievements of scholars working on other regions and time periods. They also learned much from historians who had worked on other countries and from issues and techniques of other disciplines.

Nor can one ignore the character and relative abundance of source materials that have been unearthed and utilized by social historians. The insights afforded by notarial registers, judicial files, business records, personal correspondence, censuses, petitions, applications, and membership lists made plain those values and relationships that were of primary importance in the societies under examination but which had been largely ignored in previous histories. Historians could now better understand the attitudes and principles of organization that formed the basis of colonial society and thus investigate those factors that provided stability and cohesion and those that fostered change.

Carmagnani's article, overall, has an emphasis on the rural, the

agrarian, and the indigenous, perhaps imposed by his skepticism about the centrality of urbanism and the extent of a market-based economy in colonial Mexico. It likewise offers a largely static view of the colonial period, with its insistence on the appropriateness of the "estate" model of social analysis and its failure to explore in depth or in systematic fashion the dynamic elements at play in the colonial world. The shortcomings of the author's analysis are apparent in his discussion of agrarian society. He notes quite rightly that the hacienda has remained the primary focus of agrarian studies in the past decade. But why has this been so? Beginning at least with Taylor's work on Oaxaca (1972), historians of agrarian structures have emphasized the diversity of landholdings to be found within a region and, of equal importance, the ways in which estate complexes grew or shrank over time. Thus, "hacienda" as a category remains useful, but it now means virtually any market-oriented agrarian enterprise in which the owners did not themselves constitute the primary labor force but instead employed some combination of resident and temporary laborers. The hacienda remains central to agrarian studies because it constituted a conduit between the urban and rural sectors of the colony, responded directly to other developments in the colonial world, and now serves as a measure of a region's economy and society.

Carmagnani stresses that agrarian enterprises were not segregated from nonagrarian ones but rather frequently made up one component in a complex of business holdings. He does not mention that kinship and the desire of businessmen to establish diversified, yet integrated or at least complementary, undertakings were the forces that linked rural enterprises to urban ones. Studies of individual estate complexes, such as those by Harris (1975) and Couturier (1976) and of commercial and mining enterprises, such as those by Bakewell (1971) and Brading (1971), have shown how kinship and marriage were often the avenues through which businesses expanded and diversified in their early stages and later the glue that held together the large, diversified business complexes over the long term. Sense of family and the desire to advance one's lineage were the values that propelled entrepreneurs to expand their operations, while instabilities inherent in specific fields of the economy compelled them to pursue diversification in order to create family fortunes that could endure across generations. The talents, capital, and adaptability existent within the larger kinship group provided the means of adapting family holdings to changing times and economic shifts.

Yet another approach to agrarian society has been the regional study. In works such as those by Van Young (1981) and Brading (1978), this genre has shown several virtues. It reveals the variety of agricultural holdings existing at any time in a set area and also makes clear the degree

and character of change through time in the size, orientation, and labor forces of such estates. The interplay among agrarian enterprises, the rise and consolidation of some and the disintegration and collapse of others, the issues of timing and causation have all been investigated to a greater degree in the regional studies of the 1970s than previously.

A closely related issue that weighs heavily upon this article is the penetration of market forces into the agrarian sector and especially the role of the city in the economy. Carmagnani stresses the colonial Mexican city as a center of exchange and administration in his effort to downplay its stimulation of agrarian production. Any consideration of the excellent books on colonial Mexican mining communities that mark the scholarship of the 1970s is missing from the article. These works document the way in which the area around important mining towns developed in response to the need for commodities by the mining industry and its population. Other cities—Mexico City, Puebla, and Querétaro among them—were sites where craft shops, mills, and processing plants flourished, producing goods for sale well into the hinterland. As a consequence of all the urban economic activity, large parts of the population in such cities were employed within the larger colonial market economy (rather than in a locally oriented subsistence system). This consuming public combined with the numerous small industries in the cities to constitute a major market for agricultural commodities. The increases in urban population, productive capacity, and market orientation together spurred the expansion and shift in commodity production that occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and in much of the eighteenth as well. The books by Brading (1978) and Van Young (1981) and sections from the 1976 collection edited by Ida Altman and James Lockhart, *Provinces of Early Mexico*, illuminate this process in its many dimensions. The terrible famine of 1785–86 does not bespeak the lack of penetration of market forces into the countryside. Rather, it denotes just how generalized the calamity was and how specialized agriculture had become in many parts of the colony, with estates seeking to address themselves to certain specific market demands, both inside and outside the colony, instead of merely growing basic grains for the lowliest consumers, those still outside of the cash market economy.

Carmagnani's unexplained reliance on an outdated and misleading "estate" model of social analysis for colonial Mexico sidesteps one of the most fruitful fields of inquiry in recent colonial Mexican historiography, namely the growth and modification of social and ethnic hierarchies in urban areas and the concurrent interplay between them. The estate model presented is static and simplistic by its nature, never examining the internal structure of urban society (or rural society, for that matter) nor exploring what dynamics brought about change in the organization

and values of the larger colonial society or of any particular entity or region within it.

The avoidance of this topic is hard to understand in view of the considerable material on it that appears in the article's bibliography. Most germane are the works by Chance (1978), Brading (1971), Ladd (1976), Hoberman (1977), Boyer (1977), Israel (1975), Archer (1977), Frost et al. (1979), Moreno Toscano (1978), and the Seminario de Historia Urbana (1974–76). This literature shows the inadequacy of generalizing about the existence of propertied and popular estates. It argues instead for an appreciation of the elaborate social differentiation that developed quite early in the colonial era and that changed considerably over time as new economic interests emerged, new groups appeared, and new principles of organization and patterns of identification developed. Additional social elaboration was contributed by the growing mixed-blood population that was spreading into ever more occupational groups by the eighteenth century. By that time, mixed bloods were seeking positions in high-ranking professions that previously had been regarded as the exclusive preserves of Spaniards. Further, individuals of mixed racial background who had risen rapidly in the world sought to pass themselves off as being of Spanish extraction, sometimes with considerable success, given the fluidity of ethnic classification that was customary in the colonial period. Overall, then, increasing social differentiation characterized colonial Mexico, accompanied by a certain level of social and ethnic mobility. What institutions and practices cut across these disparate groupings and strata to provide some social integration and linkage? Here, kinship—so broadly defined in that era—acted as a powerful bond and provided an identity that could cut across social and occupational boundaries. It was joined by the organization of business concerns, which could provide both common interests and paths of mobility to otherwise distinct groups. Ritual godparenthood and religious brotherhoods could link members of other, yet more distinct segments of the society, just as they could also foster group identity.

Perhaps the article's best section is its discussion of how the ethnohistory of the 1970s has moved beyond studying the Indian community as a formal institution and its responses to external pressures to appreciating the groupings, values, and tensions that persisted within the community itself and the ways in which distinct ethnic categories predating Spanish colonization endured throughout the colonial period. But Carmagnani's carefully considered discussion of continuity in Mexican ethnohistory, the character of the forces that acted upon indigenous societies at different times, and the creative manner in which these peoples responded all contrast sharply with his insistence that some distinctive, transforming "crisis" transpired in the early to mid-

seventeenth century. He notes that Borah's original projection of the effects of demographic collapse on the colonial economy has been greatly modified and that the very issue of economic decline in that period has been called into question. The author then insists that what occurred was some sort of "reequilibrium" and "social restructuring." He cannot show, however, that any massive transformation or retrenchment took place at that time, certainly nothing inherently greater in scale than the other processes and shifts that characterized urban and rural society or the Spanish and Indian spheres at various times throughout the colonial period. Finally, even if some such social re-ordering did occur in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, its origins and nature remain untreated. Carmagnani's persistent reluctance to discuss the dynamics at play in the different eras of the colonial period prevents any comparative examination of the reasons for change and continuity and thus any construction of a meaningful periodization scheme to replace that put forth by earlier institutional studies.