

## *Introduction*

In recent years politicians, economists, government planners, and revolutionaries have debated extensively the nature of Mexico's economy and society. Both critics and defenders of the status quo agree that Mexico's colonial heritage was negative and that many of the country's ills originated in that epoch. They maintain that New Spain's legacy continues to burden the nation with rigid values and inflexible institutions. Studies emphasizing the exploitive aspects of relations between Spaniards and Indians and of the institutions of empire such as the Church, the administrative system, and trade regulations have seemed to support the notion of an oppressive, semifeudal colonial heritage. However, our own archival research, as well as recent investigations of other scholars, have convinced us that there is an alternative, positive view of Mexico's colonial history.

This book reevaluates Mexico's colonial past in light of the new findings. We contend that New Spain was neither feudal nor pre-capitalist, as some neo-Marxist authors have argued. Instead, colonial Mexico functioned as an emerging capitalist society within the worldwide economic system that developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although geographically New Spain was on the periphery of the world system, we maintain that it was neither a dependent nor an underdeveloped region. Rather, colonial Mexico forged a complex, balanced, and integrated economy that transformed the area into the most important and dynamic part of the Spanish empire.

The conquest of Mexico and the subsequent incorporation of the region into the world system constituted one of the major events in modern world history. It definitively ended the relative isolation of Europe and, as Woodrow W. Borah noted, also termi-

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nated Mesoamerica's physical and cultural isolation, integrating the area into the new global culture. These events affected the Old World and the New in a variety of ways. American silver engendered a price revolution that transformed first the European and then the world economy. The Spanish silver *peso*, or "piece of eight," became the standard medium of exchange for merchants not only in Europe but throughout the world. The introduction of New World plants and foods revolutionized world diet and agriculture. Old World flora and fauna not only changed American agriculture but also wrought devastating ecological transformations. But perhaps the most significant impact was, as Edmundo O'Gorman has said, "the invention of America." For Europeans the new lands opened vistas and opportunities undreamed of in the old medieval world. These possibilities, the "invention of America," gave vitality and dynamism not only to the expansion and development of Europe, but also to the formation of a new society in America.

Cultural integration in Mexico was not accomplished primarily through violence, although the immediate cost proved high. The Spaniards unavoidably brought with them Old World epidemic diseases that decimated the native population. This demographic tragedy and the miscegenation that occurred from the beginning facilitated the formation of a hybrid, or *mestizo*, people in a biological as well as a cultural sense. The few conquerors who arrived in Mexico could not overwhelm the strong and vibrant Indian culture. No such futile undertaking was necessary, however, because significant aspects of native culture blended easily with Spanish traditions and provided the foundations for the new colonial society. The numerous and important settled Indian communities valued disciplined, sustained work habits; they had a sense of social restraint necessary for a complex society; they appreciated technological and cultural progress; and they understood the importance of an orderly political and social system. The Indian city-states had realized the advantages of economic interdependence. They did not rely solely on local resources and food supplies, but exchanged raw materials and finished products over long distances. Indeed, Mesoamerican commerce was so active that native merchants traveled on Spanish ships even before the conquest ended. Indian society also possessed features that did not correspond to accepted

European values, such as human sacrifice, which the Spaniards rejected. But these differences were minor compared to the larger and more important body of shared cultural norms that became the basis of the new Mexican society.

It is our contention that the mestizo society and culture that emerged in New Spain, while not homogeneous, was neither Indian nor European. The few isolated and rather unintegrated Indian communities remained at one end of the spectrum, while the new immigrants—white, black, and yellow—were at the other. Both groups were small and in a process of acculturation toward the hybrid mestizo culture that rapidly became dominant. This view differs from that of most accounts, in which the process of acculturation is portrayed as moving from the Indian side to the European, and the dominant society is called *Spanish*. We do not subscribe to such an interpretation. Therefore we have called the dominant society *Mexican*, to indicate its mestizo nature. Throughout this work when we speak of Mexican society, Mexican towns, etc., we are referring to the new hybrid mestizo culture that was neither Indian nor Spanish.

The creation of a new society in a populous land with an ancient and highly civilized culture required monumental adjustments. The accommodation, historically one of the major challenges of modern Western civilization, succeeded only in New Spain. There the cultural and biological intermingling of Indians, Europeans, Africans, and Asians created a new people and a new society. In part this success may be attributable to the great economic opportunities that emerged in Mexico after the conquest. Although certain aspects of a racial and caste system appeared initially, New Spain rapidly developed a class structure consonant with an emerging capitalist society. Materialism, competition, and the realization that status and social position rested on economic success engendered great stress as well as opportunity. The dynamics of a formative society produced negative reactions, including exploitation, violence, and racism. But these aspects were eclipsed by New Spain's positive characteristics, such as an expanding economy, upward social mobility, and ethnic and cultural integration. No other part of the Spanish empire attained a comparable integration of peoples and cultures. And no similar achievement can be found in other regions of the world where

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different races and cultures met. The blending of four races in Mexico created a new people—a “cosmic race,” to use José Vasconcelos’ evocative phrase.

Governing Mexico’s complex society presented a great challenge to authorities. The establishment of an institutional structure sufficiently flexible, yet strong enough to permit the evolution of an orderly society, represented a major achievement. Although Mexicans still fondly recall certain astute colonial administrators, the political structure itself deserves credit both for producing effective officials and for surviving the incompetent. New Spain accommodated varied and often antagonistic interests, which sometimes resorted to violence, without endangering either the continuity or the legitimacy of colonial government.

This study focuses on New Spain itself rather than on the area as part of the Spanish empire. It is concerned principally with central Mexico, the most populous region of Mesoamerica. To demonstrate the area’s complexity and dynamic heritage, we have examined those pre-Columbian societies which had the greatest influence on the formation of central Mexico’s mestizo culture. And we have concentrated on the Kingdom of New Spain, the most important part of the larger Viceroyalty of New Spain.