Introduction

“The sixteenth century lives in terror of the tramp.”

—R. H. TAWNEY

Taking the measure of Latin American history from Christopher Columbus’s voyages to the movements for national independence in the early nineteenth century has mainly meant attending to Europe’s conquests and what took shape thereafter. To Hugh Thomas, in four thick volumes, it meant Spain’s rise to greatness as a world power in the sixteenth century—re点赞hs exploration, conquest, and mastery of territory and peoples. This is history with direction, guided by outsize history makers riding a cresting wave of riches in American gold and silver—not just conquistadores, but also sixteenth-century monarchs Charles V and Philip II and their agents, who went about building the first global empire “by the sword and the compass, more and more and more and more,” as a Spanish chronicler put it in 1599. Late in his long reign, Philip II was tasked with beating back freebooters and rival European states from Spain’s colonial shores as expansion gave way to consolidation and defense in what Thomas called “the age of administration,” a subject he left to others.
But as Sean McEnroe writes, “Despite the arrogance of colonial maps and flags, it is far from easy to describe how empires were built, controlled, and bounded.” In a less triumphant spirit than Thomas, other historians surveying the first centuries of Latin America have looked more closely at what was being built and lost, and found more protagonists, victims, rebels, resilience, structures, and ambiguous processes. Institutions and systems of empire were taking shape, with an outpouring of new law and an elaborate bureaucracy of governors, councils, judges, tax collectors, constables, and clergymen. Merchant capital on a global scale was beginning to shape the colonial economy, and great wealth was being extracted and spent by the state and classes of privileged colonists, while millions of indigenous subjects died of epidemic diseases and abuse. African slaves and new forms of coerced labor were substituted where they were needed to keep production of lucrative exports flowing. Slaves, peasants, and debt laborers suffered horribly, yet sometimes succeeded in subverting their masters’ plans for them. Cities developed (often beginning as administrative centers), as did mining operations and landed estates. Colonial society became a labyrinth of ethnicities, family trees, wealth, royal favor, talent, and convenience: Old Christian Spaniards (Iberians whose ancestors had been Christians since “beyond living memory”) and those who claimed Spanish ancestry, nobles, merchants, landlords, priests, governors, bureaucrats, landed pueblos de indios, mestizos, mulatos, and others who did not fit comfortably into the recognized racial groupings of Spaniards, Indians, and Blacks. Men and women of all social backgrounds who were not so obviously looped into positions of power and public life made history, too, however inconspicuously. Historians have arranged the development of all these groups and structures.
together along lines of demographic change, race, class, inequality, gender, violence, struggle, alliance, accommodation, acquiescence, and survival that describe what Latin America was becoming and why the Spanish and Portuguese empires lasted as long as they did. They turn out to be less closed regimes of a ruling elite than was once supposed—less ruled by force, less smooth running, and often more pragmatic.⁵

Whether the teller orders this story as a pageant of conquest and global empire or a mosaic of contingent power and scattered agency, surveys of the three centuries of colonial history tend to emphasize the sixteenth century as the formative period, when Hapsburg political power over the Iberian kingdoms was consolidated and the institutions and cultural habits of early Latin America seemed to stabilize, even crystallize.⁶ Muffled by these great themes are the widespread, long-term disruptions, displacements, and impoverishment in the midst of plenty that contemporary commentators recognized as threats to public order and to Spain’s predominance in Europe and overseas.

It is easy to forget that a sense of things coming apart was rooted in this history from the beginning, and that colonization of even the wealthiest New World territories was unfinished, limited by resources and means of communication, at risk from within as much as from foreign threats.⁷ How would the many kinds of people physically displaced or unfamiliar and under suspicion—now strangers in their land—be managed and absorbed into Iberian colonial societies? And how could those societies meet the perpetual clamor of descendants of the conquistadores and other impatient Spaniards in the Americas who expected to live off government appointments, sinecures, and the labor and resources of native retainers and debtors? There were new policies and efforts at
enforcement, but colonial rule remained a work in progress right to the end. *Fugitive Freedom* tells of two restless, self-centered young men from the ragged edges of polite society shortly before Mexican independence who, in making their way, disturbed everyday life around them and alarmed colonial officials with their deceptions and lies.

**Strangers in the Land: Prosperity, Poverty, Expansion, and Displacement in Spain and New Spain**

Spain and the rest of Christian Europe in the sixteenth century were engulfed by the rupture of a single Christian church of the West centered in Rome, as the rise of Protestant denominations attached to rival states and regions splintered communities, states, and the Holy Roman Empire. The Roman Catholic Church looked especially to Spain for financial and political support as it reformed and eventually went on the offensive in the seventeenth century, often with members of the Jesuit order in the lead. The merging of smaller states into incipient nations and the flow of edicts, broadsides, forms, pamphlets, religious texts, and books of all sorts printed from movable type made for an administrative revolution, with new institutions and an elaborate bureaucracy to oversee far-flung territories and many subjects. Rome increasingly found itself attempting to orchestrate a collection of provincial and proto-national churches, themselves undergoing their own substantial institutional and liturgical reforms, guided by the decrees of the Council of Trent. As in the state reforms, the accent was on order, hierarchy, competence, and direction from above—seminaries and missals for the priesthood, catechism and confession for the laity. American wealth and millions of unconverted or new Christian
subjects added to the challenges and opportunities for Spain as an imperial power and standard-bearer of the Catholic Church in this time of division, reconstruction, and expansion.

For many Spaniards, there was a steep social cost in the dramatic developments of the sixteenth century: state building and union of kingdoms, strengthening of ties to the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, incessant warfare, the halting rise of merchant capitalism and the fortunes made by privileged families, headlong expansion in and beyond Europe, and inflowing wealth of precious metals and high-value spices, dyestuffs, silk, sugar, chocolate, and tobacco from new overseas possessions. One measure of the cost was widespread displacement of people, social orphanhood, and often impoverishment and early death. Despite the population growth of the early sixteenth century, Spain began to experience labor shortages and turned increasingly to penal servitude at home and slavery and labor drafts in the colonies. Several hundred thousand Castilian and Aragonese men out of a population of about eight million volunteered or were pressed into service in Spain’s foreign wars during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, not to mention the expulsion of tens of thousands of Jews in the 1490s and the departure after 1609 of Spain’s remaining Muslims. Many Spanish citizen soldiers who survived the battles in Italy, central Europe, the Low Countries, and the Indies returned to join the floating population of destitute country folk moving to cities that were ill prepared to accommodate them all. And many wanderers, without gainful employment or the support of nearby relatives, found lives on the road as peddlers, prostitutes, beggars, itinerant laborers, thieves, or worse. Several hundred thousand more left for Spanish colonies in the Americas and Asia. Droughts and an epidemic in the 1590s that swept away close to
half a million Castilians drove others off the land, as did the Mesta, the powerful organization of sheepmen running their herds through village farmlands and orchards, and retarding the textile industry in the cities of Spain’s tableland by exporting their wool.9

How to hold together and manage this churning, emergent Spanish nation-state and vast empire of strangers in an age of sail, draft animals, quill pens, and scarce, costly paper? How to establish order in places swelling with people speaking different languages and practicing different religions? How to deal with all the vagabonds and other people adrift without a home or a certain identity? In political and social terms, unification meant putting people in their place, within a Catholic state and social categories, and enforcing royal decrees through constabularies and courts. Jews and Muslims had to convert or leave Spain. Likewise in the empire, to qualify as the king’s subjects rather than enemies, “pagans” had to become at least nominal Christians. Segregation laws followed, meant to restrict most marriages to couples of the same ethnic designation—español, Indian, or Black—and to keep non-Indians out of colonial pueblos de indios. Religion was a fundamental instrument of unification, but the lingering suspicion that converts were weak and tepid Christians who would revert to old ways and undermine the True Faith led directly to new distinctions and barriers. Old Christians were favored for royal preferments and access to professional careers. Since the dubious new Christians were descendants of Jews, North African Muslims, indigenous peoples of the colonies, and sub-Saharan African slaves—people of “impure blood”—their progeny were tainted by their new Christian ancestry as well as by the suspicion that they, or their near ancestors, were born out of wedlock.

Judging by the number of royal and municipal edicts, theological treatises, and other political and religious commentaries in
Spain and Spanish America about people out of place, vagabonds and paupers from elsewhere emerged as a social type and were seen as an especially serious challenge to social and moral order, alongside witches, gypsies, and madmen. One commentator at the turn of the seventeenth century estimated one hundred and fifty thousand vagabundos in Spain; another in the 1690s guessed that twenty thousand more turned up every year, many of them from foreign countries. These numbers are crude estimates, but a chorus of political commentators across three centuries sounded the alarm that vagabonds were a serious threat. The distinguished mid-seventeenth-century jurist Juan de Solórzano y Pereira, who had a foot in America as well as one in Spain, claimed that “swarms of beggars are to be found everywhere in this Kingdom. In no other part of the world will one find so many legions of beggars as in Spain,” a sentiment echoed in the late eighteenth century by Bernardo Ward.

That there were large and growing numbers of displaced people is clear, but can we take at face value contemporary officials’ claim that there was a plague of undeserving poor and demented on the loose in the cities and on the roads, undermining peace and good order? Poverty was not new, and in the past it had seemed intractable, inevitable. It was more visible and disruptive now partly because there were more outcasts, but also because they clustered in the larger cities and along commercial routes. The new attention to poverty and vagrancy also reflected the interests and aspirations of ambitious state builders in Spain determined to impose order on a larger scale. Policy makers at court and in the provinces, in their optimism and newfound power, thought that the solution to both the old and the (apparently) new problem lay in administrative action—new laws and enforcement.
The Spanish kingdoms in Iberia and beyond were not the only places where vagabonds and beggars attracted official attention, charitable and otherwise. Every European state and affiliated church moved to provide for the deserving poor and contain and punish those who were seen as outside idlers and paupers, presumed to be troublemakers. The measures taken by authorities at the municipal level and above were as much or more about control and alarm as they were about charity. England is especially well known for its Poor Laws and Vagabond Acts from 1497 through the eighteenth century. As Henry VIII saw it, idleness was the mother and root of all vices. At first, English vagabonds and idlers were required to spend three nights in the stocks for a first offense and then sent back to their former homes. By the 1530s and 1540s, the truly needy and helpless had to be licensed in order to beg, and could do so only in a designated part of town. Vagabonds could be whipped, given two years of penal servitude, and branded with a V for a first offense, and executed if arrested a second time. By the 1570s, these penalties for “sturdy beggars” were accompanied by royal laws to reduce begging and provide relief for the deserving local poor by imposing a new tax on parish residents and proposing to establish houses of correction and workhouses to put the poor to work, especially in spinning and weaving.14

Early Spanish Poor Laws in 1540 and 1565 may have been less severe in their prescribed punishments—calling for exile and occasionally short periods of forced labor and floggings for repeat offenders—but they were similar in intent and spirit to the English laws in seeking to identify the truly needy local paupers and clamp down on all others—aiming to remove poor and idle strangers, especially from cities, by registering the deserving poor and licensing them to beg only in their hometowns. The laws placed beggars
and vagabonds in the same class as mortal sinners—gamblers, prostitutes, and others requiring firm correction and improvement. Ascribed ravenous appetites for rich food and drink, and boundless greed for money, they lived “like barbarians” and did not attend Mass, confess, or take communion. Accordingly, from 1565 into the eighteenth century, Spanish reforms and regulations centered on hospitals, sanctuaries, hospital orders such as the Order of San Juan de Dios, charitable confraternities, alms, and other private contributions, as well as on more punishment and organized policing with new *alguaciles de vagabundos* (constables in charge of vagabonds) to enforce the exile and penal laws.

This attention to jobless vagabonds on the roads and moving to cities and towns was echoed in correspondence and edicts of vice-regal officials in Mexico throughout the colonial period. As early as 1565 a judge on the high court in Mexico City advised Philip II that vagabonds “are as many as the weeds and grow in number every day.” Fifteen years later, Viceroy Martín Enríquez lamented the many “vagabonds without occupation, who serve no one” and needed to be kept out of Indian villages. Initially, it was wandering Spanish immigrants without government preferments who were regarded as the dangerous thieves, highway robbers, exploiters of Indian villagers in remote places, and generally lowlife (*mala vida*) characters. As time passed, the main concern became other kinds of rootless strangers: vagrants, peddlers, and impostors whom officials often took to be *mestizos* and *mulatos*, people who doubly did not belong since they were neither Spaniards, nor Indians, nor Blacks. Perhaps to an even greater degree than in Spain, colonial governors and judges emphasized punishment of vagrants more than an organized program of removal and charity, which was left largely to the Church and lay brotherhoods.
With the growth of regional cities, hospicios de pobres (asylums for the needy and helpless), hospitals, and other charitable institutions, colonial authorities writing about the idle poor sounded more like their peninsular counterparts, attending to urban beggars as well as vagabundos. In the eighteenth century, rural policing became a priority and again vagabundos were singled out for attention. In the words of the royal instruction to the viceroy of New Spain in 1739, it was time to “cleanse the republic of vagabonds and lowlife people . . . since such people only serve to corrupt good customs, introduce wicked ways, and commit crimes.” Corporal punishment and forced labor were the accepted remedies. Most late-colonial convicted vagabundos were sentenced to textile sweatshops, coastal fortifications, and public works, while service on sugar plantations or in bakeries or tanneries was sometimes ordered for negros and mulatos. Especially harsh sentences were meted out to armed vagabundos, and highway robbers convicted of murder could expect a death sentence. But even with all the official attention to vagabundos and paupers, it is hard to say who they were, beyond where they were found and what they were accused of. Contemporary commentators in Spain tended to focus on seven types of disreputable idlers and vagrants from away: vagamundos, those who “wandered the world,” masterless and not known locally; medical quacks, who also sometimes posed as priests and told tall tales about having escaped captivity by some miraculous means; wandering priests, whether ordained or impostors; gypsies; deserters from the military; those who faked illness; and men who impersonated fathers and exploited their “children” for personal gain. But these are types, not particular cases. It is mainly in the literary figure of the insouciant picaro that shifty vagrants and hustlers emerge from the