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## THE POPULATION OF COLONIAL SPANISH AMERICA\*

The New World was abundantly peopled when it was first invaded by the Spaniards. Population distribution was, however, uneven, with the heaviest concentrations of people in Mesoamerica and the central Andes, where native American societies had reached the highest levels of economic, social, political and cultural organization. According to circumstances, this distribution of population either helped or hindered the Spanish conquest of America, as it likewise affected Spanish colonization. The presence of a large native American population determined the shape both of the conquest itself and of the colonial structures. They, in their turn, were to influence the process of demographic change. This interaction between population and colonization is the central theme of this chapter, in which the three centuries of Spanish domination have been divided into two. The first part of the chapter deals with the initial sudden and violent clash between invaders and invaded, which was followed by a serious decline in the native American population. The intensity of the demographic catastrophe, and the reasons for it, are discussed. Consideration is also given to the impact of European and African immigration to the New World in the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries. The second part examines the way the Indian population slowly recovered, from midway through the colonial period, and the white and mestizo population expanded rapidly, especially in the eighteenth century. The chapter concludes by examining the population of Spanish America, region by region, at the end of the colonial period.

\* Translated from the original Spanish by Dr Richard Boulind; translation revised by the editor.

## THE NATIVE AMERICANS: DEMOGRAPHIC COLLAPSE

Argument about the size of the native American population on the eve of the European invasion has gone on for decades and shows no signs of abating. Important in itself, it has a wider significance because of the implications for any interpretation of the Spanish conquest and colonization of America, its characteristics and effects. The higher the population on the eve of the invasion, the more steeply it must have fallen during the first century of Spanish colonialism. Nowadays historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and ecologists seem to be agreed that the pre-Columbian population was higher than their colleagues of a generation ago used to believe, and certainly that it was higher than at any time during the colonial period, although for Central Mexico at least there is a tendency in the most recent studies to cut back somewhat the highest figures so far proposed. Even so, no one suggests a return to the old low figures.<sup>1</sup>

Of the 25 million estimated by S. F. Cook and W. Borah to have been the population of central Mexico, the area lying between the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the frontier with the Chichimecas, in 1519, only 17 million native Americans survived four years after the European invasion; in 1548, according to the same authors, only six million; twenty years later, three million; about 1580, two million; and in the early seventeenth century, around 1630, according to their most recent estimates the Indians of central Mexico scarcely reached 750,000, that is, only 3 per cent of the population before the conquest. The decrease did not occur at the same rate everywhere: the low-lying lands along the Gulf and the Pacific coasts witnessed the virtual disappearance of the indigenous population earlier, and more suddenly; the highlands retained their Indian population longer, and in a higher proportion. Cook and Borah have also reconstructed the demographic history of north-west Mexico and Yucatán, observing that population decline in these areas was comparable with that experienced in central Mexico. Even if the estimated pre-Hispanic native American population of central Mexico is reduced by half, as William T. Sanders has suggested it should be, the effect of the conquest still has to be considered catastrophic. The decline would be from 12 million to 750,000; a fall

<sup>1</sup> See the Note on the native American population on the eve of the European invasions, *CHLA* 1, 145–6, and, for the most important contributions to the literature on the demographic collapse which followed the conquest, see *CHLA* 11, Bibliographical Essay 1.

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of 90 per cent. For every sixteen Indians living there when Cortés landed there would scarcely be one a century later. (The Berkeley school's calculations suggest a collapse in the proportion of 33:1.)

The highest figures proposed for the pre-conquest population of the Antilles and Circum-Caribbean are by no means generally accepted, but there is no disagreement over the fact of the rapid destruction of the Indians in the region, only over its scale. Whether the island of Hispaniola (the most systematically studied) had a population of eight million or 100,000 in 1492, certainly there were only a few hundred survivors in 1570. Central America also experienced a major demographic disaster. Here however it seems that it stopped just in time for the native population to avoid the near extinction it had suffered in the Antilles. Ironically, economic stagnation came to this region so early that it relieved the pressure on the Indian population and thus saved many lives.<sup>2</sup>

The demographic history of Andean South America is better documented than that of the Antilles or the Isthmus. Native American society was more complex. It had already conducted its own censuses, and it was therefore easier for the Spanish to assess the population. Moreover, the dryness of the climate has helped to preserve the source materials for the colonial population. Even so, information on Andean demography is not as abundant as it is for Mexico.

In what is now Colombia, the native population shrank by more or less a quarter of its former size in the first three decades after the conquest. Tunja's population diminished from 232,407 in 1537 to 168,444 in 1564, according to the successive tribute counts analysed first by Juan Friede and later by G. Colmenares. In 1636, after a century of Spanish occupation, only 44,691 remained – less than a fifth of the original number.<sup>3</sup> Other highland areas in the eastern region of the country, like Santa Fe, Vélez, and Pamplona, lost comparable proportions.<sup>4</sup>

The Incas used to take a comprehensive census of those of their subjects who were liable for the payment of tribute. Knots tied

<sup>2</sup> See Murdo J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America. A socioeconomic history 1520–1720* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), parts 1 and 2 *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Germán Colmenares, *La provincia de Tunja en el Nuevo Reino de Granada: ensayo de historia social (1539–1800)* (Bogotá, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Darío Fajardo, *El régimen de la encomienda en la provincia de Vélez (población indígena y economía)* (Bogotá, 1969); Germán Colmenares, *Encomienda y población en la provincia de Pamplona (1549–1630)* (Bogotá, 1969).

according to set conventions along cords that made up the *quipu* denoted individual figures. Plenty of *quipus* are preserved in museums, but knowledge of what they used to signify has been lost, in the same way that finding a single punched computer card nowadays would tell us nothing if the code book were lost. Luckily, Spanish treasury officials undertaking visitations sometimes asked the caciques to read off the *quipus* in the presence of a notary public. In these cases, the information was transferred to paper and so preserved. Because of this, for instance, we know how many Aymara and Uro tributaries the Inca had in Chucuito, district by district. Before the northern campaigns of Huascar, Chucuito contained 20,280 tribute-paying males between 30 and 60 years of age, equivalent to some 170,000 people in all. In his 1567 visitation, Díaz de San Miguel found a population of 63,012 there, showing that in 40 years it had fallen to only just over a third of its former size.<sup>5</sup> The visitation of Chucuito was one of several ordered by the marqués de Cañete as viceroy. Some of those ordered by Cañete's predecessor have survived. In the case of Peru, historical sources have by no means been exhausted. However, for the purpose of estimating the original native American population of Peru and tracing its development in the early colonial period the documentary base is still slender. N. David Cook in his most recent work has estimated that the population of what is today Peru stood at nine million at the time of the conquest, which suggests a relatively dense occupation of the land (although less dense than central Mexico), and fell to 1.3 million by 1570. From 1570 the margin of uncertainty that affects our demographic information is reduced. After the resettlement of the Indians, Viceroy Toledo counted them, in order to determine how much tribute each community should pay. As the native population fell, it was necessary to adjust the payments accordingly. From time to time, in a particular area, a fresh count was undertaken, and bore witness to the local decline in population. However, no second general census was undertaken until 1683. As far as Peru is concerned, Cook has reconstructed the general evolution of the population from 1570 to 1620 on the basis of these re-counts: he concludes that the Indian population of the highland region fell from 1.045 million to 585,000 and the coastal population collapsed from 250,000 to 87,000.

Those Indians who were *originarios*, that is who belonged to the

<sup>5</sup> Waldemar Espinoza Soriano (ed.), *Vista hecha a la provincia de Chucuito por García Diez de San Miguel en el año 1567* (Lima, 1964).

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communities founded by Viceroy Toledo, were liable to pay tribute, whereas *forasteros*, that is, migrants and their descendants, were exempt. The 1683 general census was the first to differentiate between them, and the distinction it draws can be used to trace movements of population and to gauge internal migration. By the late seventeenth century, *originarios* were only a bare majority in the male population. No less than 45 per cent of male Indians were recorded as *forasteros*. In part, they compensated for the loss of tribute-paying Indians, though initially they represented a loss to their communities of origin. For this reason, censuses that enumerate tribute-paying Indians alone do not serve as measures for the development of the population in general. In the section of present-day Bolivia that has been studied, tribute-paying Indians decreased by 57 per cent. But if migrant Indians are taken into account, it turns out that the adult male population declined by only 22 per cent, and the population as a whole, that is, with women, children, and old people included, by 42 per cent. The presence of migrants, however, did not wholly compensate for demographic setbacks. Because they were migrants, they distorted the demographic structure as to sex and age. However, reproduction was not as rapid as it normally would have been in a stable community.

The population decline took longer in Peru than it did in Mexico. It did not end till after the great epidemic of 1719. Thus Peru reached its minimum population for the colonial period in the first decades of the eighteenth century, compared with the late sixteenth century in the case of Central America and the middle of the seventeenth in the highlands of New Spain and in New Granada. From the Amazon basin, from the *pampas* of southern South America, from the valleys of Chile as well, scattered but unquestionable evidence survives of a decline in population during the first century or so of Spanish colonial rule. It was not uniform all over Spanish America either in intensity or in duration, but there is no doubt that every region was affected.

In its extent this phenomenon is without parallel in the modern history of the world's population. Europeans colonized other continents – Africa and Asia – in the nineteenth century, but contact with the inhabitants there never brought any decrease in the indigenous population nearly so disastrous as it had in America. Only in the European occupation of the islands of the Pacific do we find analogies. What then caused this demographic disaster?

A privileged witness of events in the New World was the Dominican

friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, writer of the impassioned indictment *Breve relación de la destrucción de las Indias*,<sup>6</sup> later translated into several other languages. It is in this book that we find the view – one which has prevailed down the centuries – that the population collapse can be explained by the violence that the conquerors inflicted on the native population. This allegation subsumes in one argument several sets of facts, ranging from purely warlike interventions and their usual corollary – the confiscation of food, plunder, rape, etc. – to others that were much more of an economic nature – the public or private exaction of tribute, enslavement, and the cruel overworking of the labour force in agricultural or mining enterprises.

Although no doubt all of them were destructive, the wars of conquest were not equally long, however, nor did they affect every section of the population and every area to the same extent. Moreover, it was the men who suffered the greatest losses in the wars, but their numbers had the least influence on the rate of reproduction of the population. War, then, caused short-term havoc, limited in extent and of short duration. War alone could not have set off so long and so deep a population decline as was seen in the American continent in the sixteenth century. If it had been the only cause, the native population would have recovered after quite a short time, as has happened in the case of modern populations that have been much worse hit by warfare. The specific effects of war need to be demonstrated in detail. If we study the age-pyramids for representative communities we can identify the victims of military conquest by age and by sex. By the same token, we can distinguish short-term effects from those of more extended significance.

Among the slaughters of warfare one has to include as well those that resulted from conflict among the American natives. Through the early colonial period, rebellious or nomadic Indians waged war on the settlements of those who had already been subdued or settled. Of these attacks there are plenty of examples, all equally deadly, from Guatemala, from the Mexican north-west, from New Granada, and from other frontier areas of the continent.

The oppressions visited by the conquerors upon those Indians who showed reluctance to hand over foodstuffs produced another batch of victims at the outset of colonization. This direct assault, however, was less serious than the harm caused by the confiscation of food reserves. The precarious nutritional balance that existed in what was a strictly

<sup>6</sup> *Obras escogidas de Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Madrid, 1958), v, 134–81.

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subsistence economy broke down under these exactions. Hunger took over. It impaired the physiques of the native Americans and left them a prey to various ills which eventually cost a greater or smaller number of individuals their lives.

Mobilization of the Indians to carry weapons or baggage, or as auxiliaries in the fighting, cost them more in labouring capacity than in reproductive potential. Labour was harder to replace. In an agrarian economy, a smaller workforce meant less production for community use. On the other hand, the shortage of husbands could always be compensated for by polygamy, as long as the shortage was not excessive. Colonial censuses exist for Peru in which, for every married Indian male, there are numerous 'widows' and 'spinsters', and the population of infants bears no relation to the number of recorded married couples. The terms 'widow' and 'spinster' in the censuses actually concealed relationships which did not conform with the monogamous ideal of the Iberian family.

An extreme case of the requisitioning of labour is to be seen in Nicaragua. There the Indians were constrained to carry timber from the forest to the coast for the building of the fleet which was to carry the conquering expedition to Peru. Later on, other Nicaraguan Indians were coerced into slavery, and carried off to South America. It has been estimated that as many as 448,000 slaves could have been taken to Peru in the 1,280 ships which sailed from Nicaraguan ports between 1527 and 1536.<sup>7</sup> Because of this massive forced migration the population of the Isthmus fell not just temporarily, but over the long term. Enslavement of Indians was not peculiar to Nicaragua. It happened in Yucatán and in Honduras, too, in order to supply Cuba with labour.

Labour was also requisitioned locally to furnish services to individuals and to the colonial authorities. The overall effect of such onslaughts was equally disastrous. Fr. Toribio de Motolinía called the rebuilding of Tenochtitlán 'the seventh plague', in view of the lives it cost. The grandiose construction programmes on which the religious orders embarked in Mexico between 1530 and 1570 took a heavy toll in human life, so much so that the authorities had to restrain the friars' enthusiasm for building.

It is frequently claimed that work in the mines caused the deaths of

<sup>7</sup> David R. Radell, 'The Indian slave trade and population of Nicaragua during the sixteenth century', in W. M. Denevan (ed.), *The native population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, 1976), 67–76.

multitudes of Indians. It has been successfully demonstrated from census records, for example, how mining depopulated the area of Muzo (in present-day Colombia) in the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> However, it has also been pointed out that at the time when the mines went into large-scale operation and needed labour in abundance, the population had already shrunk by over a half. Large-scale mining aggravated population decline; it did not cause it.

The conquerors abused the native Americans time and again, without considering the consequences of what they were doing. The Indian population seemed so abundant that it looked as though the labour force would never be exhausted. However, faced with loss of life on such a scale, some officials were quick to raise their voices in alarm, and the crown responded. Laws were enacted which, for example, forbade native forced labour in the mines. Some abuses were mitigated, but the native population did not cease to diminish. By then, however, the cause was not so much the ill-treatment they were undergoing as the socio-economic regime to which they were subjected.

The conquest brought about a change of diet as well as a change in the methods of food production. The Spaniards brought to the Indies Mediterranean eating habits based on wheat, wine, olive oil, the meat of sheep and cattle, and sweeteners such as honey and sugar. Livestock and sugar-cane found in America optimal conditions in which to flourish; wheat was less favoured. In the hotter areas, the Antilles for example, the sugar plantations occupied the land that had been left vacant by the disappearance of the Indians. In densely peopled areas like those in New Spain, herds of cattle established themselves on land that had previously been inhabited. Both the livestock in these herds and the animals that ran wild (which were equally abundant) continually invaded the areas cultivated by the Indians of the neighbouring villages, destroying their crops and driving them off the land. The vacuum caused thereby tempted the landowners into expanding their estates and creating new ones. European agriculture and stock raising thus spread at the expense of the native Americans: the more European crops and livestock there were, the fewer Indians. Only in one case did the new livestock really bring the Indians any benefit. Both in the north of Mexico and in the pampas of the Río de la Plata, horses and cattle reproduced at a remarkable rate. The Indian hunters turned themselves

<sup>8</sup> Juan Friede, 'Demographic changes in the mining community of Muzo after the plague of 1629', *Hispanic American Historical Review* [HAHR], 47 (1967), 338–43.



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into nomadic horsemen, became better fed, and enjoyed a mobility which made them feared.

The introduction of wheat caused fresh distortion, by obliging the Indians to change the crops they grew. Their best land had to be used to grow this cereal in order to pay the tribute and to supply the cities with food. Forced by this imposition, lacking experience in wheat cultivation, and disliking it as a food, the Indians grew it with great reluctance, and when they did, they derived lower yields from it than from their traditional grains, like maize. Consequently, the conquerors chose to take over the arable lands themselves – at the expense of native property rights, of course.

The initial depopulation made it easier to take land over in order to produce staples for colonial society, or for export to the mother country. The cacao and indigo of Guatemala furnish examples of these new cash crops. The deficiency in the native subsistence economy that this inflicted deepened the demographic decline still further. War and violence caused the initial contraction; social and economic change precipitated collapse.

Physical causes were reinforced by psychological factors. ‘The surrender that those who have been conquered have to make to the victor of self-esteem, wealth, prosperity, and comfort inevitably has repercussions on the raising of children, whom they can no longer afford to support’, the viceroy of Peru, the Marqués de Castelfuerte, wrote many years after the conquest, with reference to the depopulation of the province of Santa.<sup>9</sup> Pauperization, combined with the loss of their own culture, thus constricted the Indians’ capacity to reproduce themselves. The population decline was thus due not only to the rise in mortality caused by violence and malnutrition, but also to a fall in the fertility rate resulting not so much from biological factors, though they probably also existed, as from individual decisions.

The size of the native American family began to fall early on. The *repartimiento* of Indians on the royal estates in Santo Domingo in 1514 shows less than one child per family, except in the households of polygamous caciques. Las Casas had noted, however, that at the time the Spaniards arrived, the Indians usually had from three to five children per family. In Huánuco, in the central Andes, it has been calculated that the average family shrank from about six members in Inca days to 2.5

<sup>9</sup> *Memorias de los virreyes que han gobernado el Perú durante el tiempo del coloniaje español*, III (Lima, 1859), 132.

in 1562.<sup>10</sup> The decrease stemmed in part from the breakup of marriages, but pre-eminently from the lower rate of child-bearing. In early seventeenth-century New Granada, half of the Indian families were childless. In the half that did have children, two was the most usual number, and a couple with as many as four was exceptional. The native family shrank apace. Abortion and infanticide were frequent, as Fr. Pedro de Córdoba attests. 'The women', he wrote from Santo Domingo,

worn out with labouring, have given up conceiving and bearing children, so that they will not expose themselves to the work piled upon work that is the lot of expectant or newly delivered mothers; their fear of the fatigue of child-bearing is so great that many of them, on finding themselves pregnant, have taken drugs so they will lose their babies, and have aborted them. And others, who have already given birth, kill their children with their own hands.<sup>11</sup>

Their despair did not merely limit the Indians' desire to have children. In extreme cases it provoked them into attempts on their own lives. Suicide because of ill-treatment, or in order to escape paying tribute, was relatively common. One witch-doctor even managed to induce a whole crowd of Indians to commit mass suicide.

Self-inflicted death or constricting one's own fertility were acts conditioned by the social context, but were nonetheless determined by human free will. On the other hand, epidemics provided a totally involuntary cause of population decline. These diseases, above all smallpox, malaria, measles, typhus, and influenza, which already regularly afflicted Europe, were transferred to the New World at an early date. They arrived with the conquerors, and found hosts who had no immunity against them. In contrast, the three Old World continents shared the same spectrum of diseases. Black Africa and the Far East had been exchanging disease-bearing agents with Europe for centuries along the trade routes which traversed the Sahara and the deserts of central Asia.

On the other hand America, and also Australasia, had stayed on the sidelines in this lethal interchange. The native Americans were isolated, living in relatively healthy conditions. When the Europeans invaded, carrying their endemic diseases with them, the native populations were

<sup>10</sup> Elda R. González and Rolando Mellafe, 'La función de la familia en la historia social hispanoamericana colonial', *Anuario del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas*, 8 (Rosario, 1965), 57–71.

<sup>11</sup> *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas*, XI (Madrid, 1869), 219.