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**Lessons from the Struggle for Rights of Slaves and Indigenous Peoples in Colonial
Hispanic America**

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Recently Peru has been struck by vast social movements that differed from one another in their very fundamentals, although in all cases Indians and major enterprises are involved. On May 8, 2009 the Peruvian government established a special military regime for large parts of the Amazon basin where natives struggle against the activities of oil companies in their territories seeing in this intromission a new and more powerful step in an already long history of aggressions leading to terrible changes in their way of life and, now, to their destruction. On the other hand, throughout recent decades, but especially in the last few years, several Andean highland indigenous communities (pueblos) have demonstrated their opposition to corporative pretensions to exploit mineral resources in their territories from which they receive no benefits but rather harm. In addition, Peru has witnessed the irruption of new associations of Afro-Peruvians intended to preserve and develop Black cultural heritage and social rights in the country. However, such institutions lack major influence due to their dispersion and, at times, even hegemonic tendencies among them.

While native Amazonians from different ethnic groups have joined efforts to force the government to change the actual norms that permit the exploitation of the human and material resources in the zone by big business, which they correctly call the “ley de la selva” (law of the jungle), Andean Indians and Afro-Peruvians experience significant difficulties in reaching unity.

The history of peoples’ struggles is an important source of lessons that help explain the different attitudes and actual actions of Andean and Amazonian natives and Peruvian Blacks in search of their fundamental social and human rights. This paper deals with these differing historical experiences from the European Conquest through the late colonial period in three main ethnic realms. For this purpose, as variables I will present the political, social, economic, and religious conditions under which colonialism was implanted for each one of them in order to specify the ways each group resisted colonial and social domination. Since timing is important, I will take into account change over time.

1. Indians under colonial rule

First, I want to address what I see as the two-fold legacy of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas in shaping the image of Native Americans. On the one hand, while arguing about the necessity to take care of the Indians, as a non-intentional result Las Casas created the image of them as noble but passive persons, helpless victims of European colonial domination, who must live under the protection of a reformed colonial administration and of the Catholic Church in order to be saved. Both the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church followed these ideas in designing their policies toward the Indians. Moreover, through the Black Legend — to which, again unintentionally, Las Casas contributed enormously with his writings and, especially, with his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*—this same idea of the

Indians as half-persons shaped the way other European powers saw the Native Americans when they started their own colonial enterprises in the Americas. This objectification of American Indians has molded the basis of interpretations of attitudes toward colonial (and post-colonial) political, social, and economic domination.

On the other hand, however, Las Casas' writings gave the Indians powerful validating arguments for resistance and struggle. His accounts of the cruelties of an unjust conquest, his concern for the mistreatment of indigenous peoples, and his references to the right of "restitution" of native sovereignty over the New World influenced later writers such as the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega who, in turn, had an impressive impact on the programs of both the Creole- and Mestizo-led eighteenth-century rebellions and the "underground" indigenous movements manifested spontaneously within those elitist rebellions. Las Casas and Garcilaso have been major sources of the ideologies of indianismo and indigenism throughout the Americas from the eighteenth century to the present.

1.1. Central and peripheral areas

To understand historical attitudes we must approach them as an intricate complex of ethnic, social, and political elements. Spanish colonialism used Las Casas' arguments to justify the establishment of an exploitative regime that involved local Indian authorities (caciques or curacas and, later, alcaldes de indios), formally attributing specific characteristics to the ethnic groups distributed in two special "republics" or legal regimes. This scheme worked very well for Spanish colonialism applied in the territories of the defeated pre-colonial state formations of present-day Mexico and the Central Andes due to their complex social, political, and economic vertical organization. While, in collaborating with the colonial system, native authorities sought their own goals as persons and as a group,

they exposed ordinary Indians to severe exploitation by Spanish settlers in mines, haciendas, obrajes (textile shops), and other enterprises, using their authority as local rulers legitimized by traditional norms and by the Spanish Crown and viceroys.

However, Spanish rule faced quite serious difficulties in establishing itself where previous social and political systems had not developed into societies with profound internal social and political conflicts. In such cases, the collaboration of local rulers was mostly impossible to obtain and, hence, the imposition of a colonial rule was done through simple and direct violence (including the enslavement of native peoples). Moreover, despite the violence vast territories were never conquered by Europeans due to the resistance displayed by their native inhabitants.

1.2. The way to consolidation of a colonial order

Spanish colonial administration was astute enough to adapt pre-colonial forms of exploitation to its needs. The Crown banned the enslavement of Indians and turned to carefully adapted pre-colonial means to recruit and retain an indigenous workforce that followed patterns that were acceptable by native peoples and their leaders. To abolish Indian slavery meant the elimination of one of most important sources of Indian resentment and rebelliousness due to the fact that slavery was unknown before the conquest at least in the ways and levels the Spaniards sought to establish it in their recently acquired colonies. Instead, the Spaniards found more effective ways to put vast peoples to work using pre-colonial social and labor institutions to obtain the workforce required by the Crown and the settlers: tribute exacted in kind and in labor through the repartimiento (mita). Maintaining almost untouched native communal organizations and their leaders permitted, in addition,

advances in gaining their political loyalty. The Indian communities became the institutions that were central to the functioning and preservation of the whole colonial order.

1.3. Mature colonialism

In this way, resistance notwithstanding, Spanish colonialism could consolidate itself according to the terms that favored both the metropolis and the settlers. Once consolidated by the end of the sixteenth century, however, Spanish colonialism had to make important changes to match the economic growth based on mining in a context of a sharp fall of the indigenous population and a severe metropolitan financial crisis. Since the system required a higher level of exploitation, again pre-colonial networks became the center of attention.

To begin with, the Indian population was re-organized in special towns (*reducciones*) and its local leaders were legitimized by the colonial administration; tribute was ordered to be paid in cash and the *repartimiento* or *mita* (compulsory rotational labor drafts) was extended to a large part of Mexico, Central Andes, and New Granada. Somewhat later, in the seventeenth century, colonial commercial interests and local proprietors established a system of the compulsory “sale” of goods to Indians (*reparto de mercaderías*). Indian communities were jointly liable for the payment of tribute, the exact fulfillment of labor drafts, and the payment of any other requirement. All of these demands were possible because they were established as communal obligations and linked to the authority of legitimized communal leaders (*caciques* or *curacas*).

On the other hand, peonage (*yanacización*) of Indians and Mestizo peasants, although a massive phenomenon, was established on an individual basis and thus it dealt with those unattached from community and, hence, highly vulnerable peasants. In addition, Indian communities regularly sent some of their members to cities, mines, haciendas, and *obrajes* to

work for wages that were collected directly by caciques and corregidores for the payment of communal obligations.

Thus, Spanish colonialism implanted labor regimes to fulfill the requirements of the proprietors avoiding the risks of massive protests and revolts. In actuality, revolts and uprisings did happen during the first two centuries of colonialism, but none reached dimensions sufficient to become a real challenge to the system. Until the late eighteenth century, social movements were limited in their geographical magnitude, in their social extent, and in their political and ideological scope. Hence, the colonial system could deal relatively easily with these manifestations. Ethnic and racial diversity played a role in this since free Blacks, Mulattos, Zambos, Mestizos and Whites were usually sent to “pacify” insubordinate Indians.

1.4. Bourbons and rebellions

Things changed by the second part of the eighteenth century. Bourbon reformism established actual controls over tax recollection, as well as over some economic activities (namely, internal commerce and industrial production) affecting interests of local proprietors. Local hacendados, obreros, miners, and traders, in turn, tried to lean on their workers and clients and, as a result, long lasting living and working conditions changed very radically. This is the context in which during the 1770s and 1780s several riots and uprisings developed in the Andes from New Granada to Upper Peru: especially the Túpac Amaru-Túpac Catari rebellion in Peru and the Comunero Uprising in New Granada early in the 1780s. Andean Indians, Mestizos, and Blacks participated independently in those movements organized mostly by Creole and Mestizo local elites. They had their own relationships to the Crown but, more importantly, all manifested their protests against social and economic exploitation.

In all cases, differing and even antagonistic class interests and ethnic objectives of the Creole elites and of the common Indians, Mestizos, and Blacks proved to be negative factors in reaching agreements. After those great rebellions and well beyond the wars of Independence early in the nineteenth century, mutual mistrust, suspicion, and fear prevailed in interracial relations.

2. Black Spanish America

Another factor was the historical fate of Africans in Spanish America. The Spaniards brought Africans to America with no specific major economic activity in mind. Indeed, the Spaniards had no plans to establish a plantation economy since they found large and well organized indigenous populations sufficient to exploit the rich mines of the vast territory. For a long time, African slaves fulfilled secondary roles as supervisors and domestic servants of large households of encomenderos and colonial officials. By the end of the sixteenth century—the same time when large groups of Indians were transformed into peons or yanaconas—African slaves were put to work in economic enterprises both in cities and the countryside. In fact, Mexico and Peru were the main destinations of the Atlantic slave trade until approximately the middle of the seventeenth century, when Brazil and, then, the Anglo-Caribbean developed slave-based plantation economies.

Black slavery spread mainly throughout the tropical lowlands of the Caribbean basin and the Peruvian coast where landowners used them to produce sugar, wine, indigo, tobacco, and cacao. Due to their reliability and capacity for work, slaves proved to be useful agricultural workers in the lowlands, but not on highland estates or in mines. Generally, however, until the late seventeenth century cane and grape plantations were limited in their extent, production levels, and use of slave labor. Moreover, unlike the plantation economies

of other countries, Spanish American plantations used a mixed labor force rather than intensive slave labor. Indeed, different formally free labor regimes coexisted with slavery competing with each other and even complementing each other. In fact, in a non-slave economy and society such as colonial Spanish America, slavery was tainted by the extent of servile labor. A good portion of slaves and free Blacks lived and worked in cities where, again, Black slaves worked in urban crafts, and as vendors and carters who meshed with free persons of all colors.

Spanish American slavery was far from being mild. Generally, hard work and cruel treatment corresponded was endemic on rural estates and in large urban shops where substantial numbers of slaves worked at regular rhythms under the whip of foremen. But large concentrations of slaves on estates or shops were exceptions in Spanish America. Most of them worked on medium- and small-sized rural units and, in cities, in self-employment arrangements or they belonged to a slaveholder who owned just one, two, or three slaves.

The multiple origins of Africans, the multiethnic world in which they lived and worked, and their relatively limited numbers led to partial Black assimilation to other cultures. Hispano-American Blacks used Spanish to communicate both with one another and with persons of other ethnic origins, they worked primarily in European-oriented urban and rural enterprises, and they were part of the racial mixing that resulted in the intricate mestizaje that has characterized Latin America from the very beginning of the European conquest.

With the miscegenation of the three principal races (Indian, White, and Black), *Mestizo*, *Mulatto*, and *Zambo* (mixture of Blacks and Indians), colonial Spanish America was populated by new ethnic categories called *castas*. Since manumission concerned more

generally *castas*, over time this term became increasingly a synonym for a free Black who had no slave origins and, correspondingly, to be Black was related almost always with slavery. Certainly, the majority of free Blacks in Spanish America were Mulattoes, *Zambos*, and persons of mixed race, which in a caste society had substantial implications for their social and cultural status for, it was said, *castas* inherited the worst of all races. The *Casta* situation was reversible, however. Persons with just a small part of African or Indian blood and their descendants could be considered White. Economic success played a role in this ethnic transformation since money whitened people with dark skin.

Although never easy to achieve, freedom was always a potential goal for African slaves in Spanish America. Slavery, as it was practiced in Spanish America, permitted manumission through several ways, especially by birth from a free mother, by donation, by will, and by self-purchase. There was in force the ancient Roman-originated right of *peculium*, which enabled slaves to keep part of the results of their labor if they worked under specific arrangements made with their masters consisting of self-employment with the obligation of paying a constant rent to the masters. Such a possibility led most slaves to see slavery more as a temporary situation rather than as a permanent evil against which they must fight until its complete elimination. Accordingly, individual efforts to free oneself or a relative predominated over collective and massive actions against slavery as a system.

Slave rebellions were an exception rather than a common reaction against exploitation. Where living and labor conditions were hard (plantations, urban shops and, especially, in bakeries), generally slaves responded to cruelties by running away rather than revolting in an organized manner. Rural runaway slaves created sanctuaries (*palenques*) in zones of difficult access to protect themselves from repression. However, *palenques* were no

more than a short-term solution because slave owners staged raids to recapture and punish them.

3. Resisting from the periphery

Peoples of peripheral zones resisted more effectively being incorporated into the Spanish colonial system. Instead of seeking to accommodate or adapt themselves to a regime led by others, they succeeded in joining efforts to reject attempts to conquer them by metropolitan and colonial forces. Lack of fundamental conflicts among ethnic groups allowed unity when it was perceived that all of them were equally jeopardized by a common threat. Native peoples of frontier zones withstood successfully the efforts to conquer them because conquerors were unable to use discord or dissension among them. A good example may be the unending and especially cruel war that Chilean Araucanians mounted to oppose Spanish settlements in their territories from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century when colonial authorities had to recognize their rights to live apart.

It is true that geography played a role in protecting peripheral peoples from colonial aggressions. However, it is also true that geographically severe conditions did nothing to impede the conquest of peoples in the highlands or in the desert.

The alternative to arms was the cross. In effect, missionary efforts made by some religious orders tried to convert peoples along the imperial periphery and in doing so, they opened the doors to some colonial elements, including goods and exploitation. When native peoples considered that western penetration went too far, they protested and, eventually, expelled the friars from their territories or even killed them. There are numerous martyrs among monks who penetrated the rain forests to incorporate their inhabitants into

Christianity. Nonetheless, the indigenous peoples preferred flight from Europeans in order to resume their free way of life.¹

4. Religions and rebelliousness

Indians and Blacks in Mexico and Peru, as well as in many other parts of Spanish America, generally saw no real threat in Christian evangelization. Their polytheistic religions permitted the incorporation of the new faith and, on the other hand, evangelization as it was actually established did not eliminate completely prior religions. It was simply impossible for the Catholic Church to absolutely eradicate American and African religions because of the fierce resistance it faced to the campaigns to extirpate pre-colonial idolatries. In fact, these campaigns come to an end in the seventeenth century. The emerging syncretic Christian-native religions satisfied perfectly the religious requirements of vast parts of the Indian populations and their local authorities (alcaldes, caciques or curacas), who found a new way to acquire or even increase their power by being loyal to both the Europeans and their Indian peoples. Similarly, colonial African-Spanish Americans found in lay brotherhoods a spot to practice their own devotions behind the facade of Christian saints.

Hence, religion was rarely a source of rebelliousness in colonial Spanish America.² Moreover, colonial Christianity was rather a unifying factor and, in this sense, it is understandable that during Independence all political tendencies shared the conviction that Catholicism would continue being the official religion of the new order, and it cannot be surprising that parish priests were as active and influential as caciques in those wars, especially in Mexico where caciques lost their power earlier than in the Andes.

¹ Nonetheless, overt rebellions did occur in missions. Perhaps, the most important was the rebellion led by the Mestizo Juan Santos Atahualpa in the central Andes from 1742 to the 1760s, against the recently established Franciscan convent in Ocopa, Mantaro River Valley.

² One exception was the Taki Onkoy movement of central Andes in the 1560s.

Clearly social and ethnic status is important to evaluate the ways in which local peoples responded to colonialism and economic exploitation in Spanish America. Nonetheless, we must add the historical development of their complex relationships with each other and with other ethnic and social groups as another factor of analysis. History shows that independent of concrete conditions, peoples reacted differently to colonialism and exploitation. Spanish American history, thus, may help us understand the complexities and contradictions of contemporary struggles for the fundamental rights of peoples due to insights contributed by an analysis of the historical continuum in the forms of claiming collective liberties.

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