

SOCIETY IN THE SPANISH AMERICAN COLONIES

MEXICO UNDER SPAIN, 1521–1556: SOCIETY AND THE ORIGINS OF NATIONALITY.

By PEGGY K. LISS. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975. Pp. 229. \$12.50.)

LETTERS AND PEOPLE OF THE SPANISH INDIES: THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY. JAMES LOCKHART and ENRIQUE OTTE, trans. and eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Latin American Studies No. 22, 1976. Pp. 267.)

PEDRO DE LA TORRE: DOCTOR TO CONQUERORS. By JOHN TATE LANNING. (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1974. Pp. 145. \$7.50.)

The current popularity of social history among Latin Americanists has proven a mixed blessing. Some works labeled "social history" stretch the reasonable boundaries of the term; others, more justly categorized, receive perhaps unjustifiable praise from reviewers who recognize the general poverty of the field. Rigorous reexamination both of purpose and of methodology is particularly to be sought in the new social history of precensus Hispanic populations, in which scholarly output is still largely limited to reproduction of primary material, general interpretive essays, and unsystematic discussions of selected groups or individuals. The works of Peggy K. Liss, James Lockhart and Enrique Otte, and John Tate Lanning reviewed here reveal the strengths and the weaknesses of this historiographical tradition in studies of the sixteenth-century Hispanic American populace.

Of the three works, scholars will probably find Liss's *Mexico under Spain* of greatest interest even if it is overambitious and unstructured. Liss has attempted a work of sociointellectual history, examining the "interplay of events and attitudes" that produced a "sense of Mexican-ness" in sixteenth-century New Spain. Her previous study of the eighteenth-century origins of Independence suggests the source of questions rarely asked of the early colony. She relates her quest to a concern with the state of Mexican nationalism in the twentieth century and further broadens her study by recognizing the need to delve into the political and intellectual Iberian past. Using only published primary and secondary works, Liss produces a loosely connected series of essays that synthesize and occasionally reinterpret current scholarship concerning royal political and social policy, the goals and reactions of colonists and clergy, the Hispanicization of the Indians, the "struggle for justice," and the evolution of a multiracial society.

Through these essays, Liss's central argument appears to link New World regional sentiment with traditional peninsular regionalism: Ferdinand and Isabella consciously created a sense of Spanish identity previously lacking in the peninsula by building upon their own selective interpretation of the Spanish past. In their reign, traditional Iberian regional loyalties were bridged but by no means eradicated by shared allegiance to the mystical notion of a greater Spanish

homeland, the concept of supreme temporal authority vested in a remote but powerful king, carefully fostered notions of Christian universalism, a sense of honor, xenophobia, and racial purity. This dual heritage of *patria chica* and *patria grande* was transmitted to the New World during initial exploration and conquest. Thus colonists in New Spain came to see themselves as Spaniards and as Mexicans just as they had earlier been Spaniards and Andalusians, Extremadurans, and so on. Recognition of Mexico's Indian past, of the transformation of Spanish culture in the New World, of racial mixture, and of growing *criollismo* all served to strengthen the new regionalism, which Liss sees as the progenitor of Mexican nationalism. Thus, the Mexican example shows that "national particularism can, and did, develop within an imperial situation, and—although regionalism was manifest in power struggles within the monarchy—with no initial conflict between concepts of nation and empire" (p. 156).

Liss's thesis and supporting arguments will arouse some controversy: her treatment of the Iberian background depends heavily upon a stereotypical "New Monarchy," attributing too much prescience and achievement to the Catholic kings; throughout the work she tends to obscure legal and perceived distinctions between Castile, Aragon, and "Spain"; she never really defines the "sense of Mexican-ness" she postulates, and fails to explain how this "sense" differed from and yet gave birth to Mexican nationalism; she does not apparently recognize the difficulty of proving popular sentiment by reference mainly to elite sources; she virtually ignores statements indicating identification with Spain in New Spain, even though such evidence would support her central thesis and might seem to scholars of the period to surface far more frequently than expressions of Mexican-ness; and she tends to fall into the trap common to students of nationalism of concluding that nearly every aspect of life in New Spain "caused" national sentiment to develop. Further, Liss might have profitably applied content analysis to her sources, to yield "harder" results.

Despite flaws of content and of style, *Mexico under Spain* clearly shows wide reading and much thought. Liss's selections from printed primary sources in particular reveal careful and fruitful culling of document collections. Although Liss does not achieve her stated goal of providing "an ordering device, giving shape to the rather amorphous mass of previous research" (p. xii), she succeeds better in her attempt to indicate new areas for exploration and to provoke thought among her readers. Sociointellectual questions such as the nature of sixteenth-century Spanish American attitudes toward work, the family, and social status, too often assumed and too little studied, should be inspired by works such as this one, if early Latin American social history is to keep pace with scholarship in other fields.

The public and private letters published in Lockhart and Otte's *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies* will already be familiar to scholars of the colonial period. In its twenty-second volume, the Cambridge Latin American Studies series collects forty previously published documents in English translation from thirty-nine authors, apparently for the benefit of undergraduates and others new to the field. In general the selection of the letters is excellent. Authors are fairly evenly balanced between elite and nonelite, each chosen to represent a

“social type,” from governor, bishop, and nobleman to *conquistador* (successful and unsuccessful), merchant, miner and farmer, friar, parish priest, Hispanicized Indian, and Indian *pueblo*. Among the more famous are Pedrarias Dávila, Francisco and Hernando Pizarro, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Luis de Velasco, and Motolinía. Balance also has been achieved according to geographic provenance, between viceregal center and periphery, with seventeen letters from New Spain, twelve from Peru, and the rest from such places as Cuba and Tierra Firme. There is chronological balance too: all but the first two decades of the sixteenth century are represented, although about two-thirds of the letters were written in the period 1520–60. The documents are grouped in three sections, “Conquest,” “The Variety of Life in the Indies” (a miscellany), and “Officials and Clerics.” A more meaningful ordering might have suggested change over time rather than treating the century as a homogeneous unit, or contrasted elite and nonelite letters, private and public, those written in central areas and those from the periphery.

Each letter or group is prefaced by a sometimes lengthy introduction emphasizing themes revealed by the source and providing some essential background information. Students might wish for rather more extensive identification of unfamiliar names, places, and events. Specialists may also question generalizations not yet—or here—substantiated, such as the claim that most expeditions set out with no Spanish women among the company (p. 14), that neither conquistadores nor merchants cared anything for precious metals in themselves (p. 19), that “Spaniards loved names of two elements” (p. 40), that the vast majority of first conquistadores who did not return immediately to Spain received *encomiendas* (pp. 43–44), and that “very few first conquistadors or their sons had *encomiendas* taken away from them” (p. 71). Occasional lapses also occur, as in the authors’ introduction to letter 1, which states that the letter shows the overwhelming military superiority of the Spaniards in Peru, which allowed them to “forget about the Indians much of the time,” when the letter itself seems to show just the opposite (p. 5). The authors’ puzzlement at Bernal Díaz’s failure to secure a lucrative *encomienda* near Mexico City, and their conclusion that his distant relationship to Diego Velázquez must have been responsible, suggest a lack of familiarity with the history of *encomienda* grants in New Spain. In particular, their conclusion that Díaz was Cortés’s social equal and their highly speculative musings about Díaz’s possible merchant background—based on the fact that he came from a commercial center in Spain—seem to represent social history at its least convincing. One may also regret occasional condescension to the reader, such as warning him not to be annoyed by bragging (p. 43).

Despite such weaknesses in the introductory matter, the letters themselves provide great “human interest,” one of the compilers’ major concerns. Of particular interest to students of women’s history is letter 3, in which Isabel de Guevara records the superiority of the female contingent of the Mendoza expedition to La Plata. Letter 1 provides insight into the effect of migration on family ties, as Gaspar de Garate sends greetings to “all the rest of my relatives, because I’ve already forgotten many of their names” (p. 6). The administrative aspects of

the migration process are excellently revealed in letter 18. Several of the letters provide rare glimpses of nonelite views of world events, such as the account in letter 5 of the Cortés expedition by a nonparticipant Cuban merchant, and the gossip in letter 14 about the English succession, Mary Tudor, and Philip II's matrimonial plans. Letter 29 gives a fascinating glimpse into the private machinations of imperial servants as Lic. Vaca de Castro, governor of Peru, cautions his wife in Valladolid to maintain good relations with his court patrons and to pretend poverty and conceal whatever he sends her from the New World. Other letters yield miscellaneous observations on wages, prices, market conditions, migrants' views of the New World, commercial practices, and above all, the frustrations of irregular, long-distance communication. With some direction, the rather expensive paperback edition might prove useful for survey classes or courses in colonial social history. Still, it is a poignant comment on the state of sixteenth-century social history that a prestigious monograph series can find no worthier publication than previously published documents—however admirable the selection.

The late John Tate Lanning's last monograph, *Pedro de la Torre: Doctor to Conquistadors*, an acknowledged digression from his study of the medical profession in the Spanish empire, records "three biographical flashes" in the career of a self-styled physician in post-Conquest New Spain. De la Torre arrived in the New World in the 1530s, after a youth spent in European travel, in which he later claimed to have served as page to Erasmus and to have earned a degree in medicine from the University of Padua. These claims figured in secular and ecclesiastical court proceedings in 1545 and 1551, which produced two of the three major sources Lanning draws upon for his biography. Surviving charges of heresy, bigamy, and forging a license, De la Torre appears next in the investigation of the 1554 wounding of the poet Gutierre de Cetina by the young Pueblan encomendero Hernando de Nava, his (presumed) rival for the affections of De la Torre's young wife. Despite public humiliation as cuckold and quack, De la Torre crowned his New World career with appointment as *proto-médico* of Mexico City in 1568. Lanning concludes that the "doctor's" success story "displays the straits and the status of medicine in America more cleanly than any statistical table or any 'social science' method we can now revel in" (p. 5).

Although De la Torre may perhaps have been typical of individuals who claimed higher status or greater skills in the New World than they could have justified in the Old, his biographer's bias against quantitative history is all the more regrettable given the importance of his topics, New World social mobility and the medical profession in the Spanish empire. For it is the very question of De la Torre's typicality—a typicality which Lanning appears to assume but which the very scarcity of physicians in New Spain and the attempt by authorities to restrict De la Torre's advancement call into question—that might best be answered through simple quantitative analysis.

On a more particular level, more detailed examination of the communities in which the wily doctor operated—Veracruz, Puebla, and Mexico City—might have enhanced Lanning's tale. For example, certain omissions and confusions mar discussion of De la Torre's role in the Cetina case in Puebla: in

explaining relationships between the principals in the case, Lanning mistakenly asserts that Puebla contained only a small, isolated European population (pp. 51, 54), when in fact the city had the second largest Hispanic population in New Spain; Lanning also fails to note that Nava's two sisters were married to nephews of the bishop of Tlaxcala, which goes far to explain the prelate's intervention in the affair; he ignores Nava's mother's bribes to De la Torre and (probably) to the chief investigator in the matter, Oidor Mexia; he denies Francisco Rodríguez Marín's assertion that Mexia used violence to enter Puebla's Dominican monastery where Nava took refuge, when this episode is clearly recorded in Lanning's source (AGI, México, p. 95); he confuses the wealthy merchant Diego Cortés with the *curandero* whom Cortés brought to heal Cetina; he accepts the testimony of Nava's slave extracted under torture as truth but fails even to mention the boy's later recantation, also under torture; he fails to mention the discovery of a white powdery drug in Nava's prison cell after his arrest, which might explain his seemingly irrational behavior, a behavior which greatly puzzles Lanning; and, finally, he fails to recognize the importance of Nava's support among Puebla's elite—a support which verged on rebellion in one of the "safest" cities in New Spain and which forced considerable compromise from the Audiencia.

The events Lanning recounts have yet to receive their fullest examination, and the typicality of his subject must await fuller social analysis. However, *Pedro de la Torre* does provide an entertaining introduction to medical practice in the early New World colonies and to the homelier aspects of secular and ecclesiastical judicial procedure.

In contributing to a neglected field, the works of Liss, Lockhart and Otte, and Lanning also reveal the wide gap between early Spanish colonial social history and the study of other societies—notably colonial North America and France. Each of these three works suffers to some extent from the failure to explain or to examine methodological assumptions, the lack of explicit definition of terms, and the willingness to generalize from impressions or "representative" examples. These are flaws with which social historians in other fields are becoming increasingly concerned, flaws that students of sixteenth-century Hispanic American society should confront more directly. Quantification and social science models, if not the panacea some have claimed, can nonetheless provide a useful means of testing assumptions and of making comparisons overtly.

In 1975 John TePaske noted the dearth of quantitative or social science methodology in the colonial Latin American field: for sixteenth-century Hispanic society his observation remains accurate today.¹ As TePaske noted then, Stephanie Blank's work on Caracas is still a rare exception, exploring the uses of anthropological concepts and statistical measurements of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century social relationships.² Students of later colonial centuries are recognizing the benefits of methodological borrowing from other disciplines: surely the sixteenth century is ripe for similar treatment. The inherent importance of the formative period, plus the wealth of conflicting contemporary and second-hand comments about social phenomena, and the now widely recognized availability of detailed social information in notarial, inquisition, and other records all indicate a fruitful field for innovation.

Although the preoccupation of sixteenth-century social historians with the more dramatic alternative of Indian demographic disaster has probably diverted attention from early European settlement, the imaginative works on Indian society should also serve to inspire innovation in studies of the Hispanic populace. Before the pioneering reconstructions of Borah, Cook, and Simpson, early Indian studies also seemed doomed to depend upon the limited and conflicting generalizations of contemporary observers. In the same way, the lack of easily utilized census data and of unbroken runs of parish records has presented obstacles to those who would apply quantitative demographic techniques to the European settlers. Nonetheless, it has already proven possible to reconstruct individual biographical information from colonial petitions, local records, and published indices of document collections—viz the works of Lockhart, Blank, Góngora, and Boyd-Bowman.³ It now remains for social historians to utilize such data more widely and more systematically in order to reexamine such topics as colonial status denominators, social mobility, characteristics of migrant populations, marriage patterns, the development of social networks through marriage and *compadrazgo*, the process of *mestizaje*, and the formation of a new colonial elite, and to determine whether current truths prove as reliable as they are colorful.

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NOTES

1. John TePaske, "Quantification in Latin American Colonial History," in Val R. Lorwin and Jacob Price, eds., *The Dimensions of the Past: Materials, Problems and Opportunities for Quantitative Work in History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 431–501.
2. Stephanie Blank, "Patrons, Clients, and Kin in Seventeenth-Century Caracas: A Methodological Essay in Colonial Spanish American Social History," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54, no. 2 (May 1974):260–83; and "Patrons, Brokers, and Clients within a Colonial Spanish American Elite: Caracas, 1595–1627," *Historical Methods Newsletter* 8, no. 4 (Sept. 1975):132–36.
3. James Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquerors of Peru* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1972); Mario Góngora, *Los Grupos de conquistadores en Tierra Firme (1509–1530): fisonomía histórico-social de un tipo de conquista* (Santiago de Chile: Universidad de Chile, Centro de Historia Colonial, 1962); Peter Boyd-Bowman, *Índice geobiográfico de cuarenta mil pobladores españoles en América en el siglo XVI, Vol. 1: 1493–1519* (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1964), Vol. 2: 1520–1539 (México, D.F.: Editorial Jus, 1968); and "Regional Origins of the Spanish Colonists of America: 1540–1559," *Buffalo Studies* 4, no. 3 (Aug. 1968):3–26.