

LOCAL HISTORY IN THE COLONIAL ERA

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TOWN IN THE EMPIRE: GOVERNMENT, POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY POPAYÁN. By PETER MARZAHL. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978. Pp. 218. \$14.95.)

RACE AND CLASS IN COLONIAL OAXACA. By JOHN K. CHANCE. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978. Pp. 250. \$14.00.)

These two very different books are worth reviewing together to answer at least the following questions. As local history is fast becoming a major focus for historians of Latin America, how useful and successful are the models and methods used by Chance and Marzahl? Can these studies serve as guides for future historians? As local historians often justify their endeavors by claiming that only this focus can verify, refine, or refute more general assumptions and also that local studies uncover important areas of historical experience which more general approaches often ignore, how do these two studies enhance our understanding of Spanish American colonial history?

Marzahl's aim is to "investigate the functioning of government and politics in Popayán as they affected Spanish settlers and their descendants" before 1700. He has used town council minutes and notarial records as his principal sources combining them with the sparse available material on relations between the province and higher levels of Church and state. Popayán at this time was a small "open" town, the home of a group of *encomenderos*, itinerant and resident merchants on the Cartagena-Quito route, dealing in gold and European and Quiteño goods, a scattering of Crown officials and ecclesiastics, generally recruited locally, their servants and slaves, a handful of artisans and a small community of *yanacona* Indians from the South. The intermediate class appears to have been very small, as the town was a service and an administrative more than a productive center. The town council held jurisdiction over a large rural area containing several gold placer mines, a few haciendas, and several Indian hamlets kept in *encomienda*. The governor and bishop of Popayán were responsible for a much larger, partly unexplored and unconquered province stretching from the Pacific to the Amazon, under the ill-defined jurisdiction of the Audiencia of Quito and the archbishopric of Santa Fe de Bogotá. Spaniards settled in the area for the gold and remained there as gold continued to be found

after a boom in the late sixteenth century and as *encomiendas* were permitted to be renewed. Marzahl's sources have lead him to focus almost exclusively on the upper levels of society, the lower levels being both demographically and culturally much weaker than in Oaxaca.

Marzahl does not state the methods he uses to analyze settler society and politics and a few paragraphs would not have gone amiss here. His peers are clearly John L. Phelan for the political realm (theory and practice of Spanish colonial government on the provincial level) and James Lockhart for the ordering of society (group biographical analysis without, mercifully, quantification).¹ He selects examples of individual behavior regarded as sufficiently representative and illustrative to support general propositions about the socioeconomic order and political culture.

The social order of Popayán was not a complicated one. The *raison d'être* was the extraction of a surplus from a diminishing Indian population and from the application of slave labor to gold mining to ensure a staple export earner permitting the small elite to import luxuries and necessities. Sugar production supplemented gold mining, but there appears to have been no manufacturing and little mixed farming carried out by Creole settlers. The few families who controlled the sources of wealth, after a jostling for position in the late sixteenth century, when there is evidence of rapid mobility from commerce into mining and then to *encomendero* status reflected in an active town council, became linked increasingly through ties of economic interest and marriage as the seventeenth century proceeded. The *cabildo* gradually fell into disuse as the oligarchy became consolidated and disputes were handled informally. Only when disputes became feuds did the *cabildo* revive and perform a function. Generally, however, this oligarchy remained united, at least in their treatment of outsiders, be it an agent of a *residencia*, a *visita*, or a bishop on an overinquisitive pastoral tour.

The picture Marzahl draws is skillfully executed, rich and interesting. Only in the last chapter on the "Church and the Settlers" has he stretched his evidence too far. He asserts that the Church was the central element of stability, solidarity, and routine giving cohesion and spiritual unification to a provincial society otherwise lacking these things. The examples he provides could almost be used to draw the opposite conclusions. The low moral tone of the clergy, the scarcity of benefices, the high concentration of unemployed clergy in the town, their unwillingness to serve in rural areas and the scarcity of priests there, the scandalous behavior of the leading lights in society, the use of a nunnery as a center of gambling and fornication, all these examples reveal a society in which the Church has fallen all too comfortably into the rhythms of the secular realm, itself a long way, as Marzahl shows, from either the

imperial administrative ideal or the ethical prescriptions of Spanish justice. The coming of the Jesuits in the 1630s merely brought greater literacy and learning (before then governors had found it difficult to recruit local *letrados* to serve as deputies), not, apparently, greater piety.

This then is a warning to local researchers; the temptation to make up in time and thematic breadth for what is lacking in space can easily lead the historian to become overstretched. In this case Marzahl has taken as "given" a whole body of assumptions about the "normal" role of the Church in society, and has assumed that they would be present in this town. "By responding to the settlers' needs, giving them direction and shape, the Church filled a social function in the town's life as, obviously, it had done in Europe for centuries. It did so by fusing spiritual, ritual and material elements to serve divine and human purposes" (p. 151). This reads nicely, but it stands as an opaque and general statement not backed by adequate evidence even to show that it was true for settler society, let alone for the town as a whole or for the province. It should be the task and the merit of a local study to take one beyond the general and the opaque.

Chance, perhaps because he is covering a much longer time span and also because his principal aim is itself an elusive one, falls into this kind of weakly supported generalization, owing more to accepted orthodoxy than to local empirical analysis, rather too often. He states that his purpose is to analyze "the development and functioning of the 'sistema de castas'" in the city of Antequera, and, "rather than delineate distinct strata, to observe the principles or determinants of stratification at work and how they changed over the entire colonial period." Antequera was the administrative capital of the province of Oaxaca and practically the sole focus of European settlement within a predominantly sedentary Indian province. Chance draws heavily on William Taylor's work to place the city in its rural surroundings.² For his analysis of social stratification and mobility he uses tribute rolls, parish marriage registers, and census returns. He pays less attention than Marzahl to the upper levels of society, focusing on the castes and the Indian population. His task is a daunting one, and the sociological models and historical methods he brings to bear are rough and inadequate tools to achieve such an ambitious end. Can the "principles and determinants of social stratification" really be discussed without at first having an idea of the economic and social structure within which mobility is taking place?

The absence of a satisfactory analysis of social and economic structure combined with a focus on subjective factors in stratification imperils Chance's analysis at several points, a few of which I will mention here. He uses marriage records as the principal source for analyzing perceptions of racial and social hierarchy. Yet perhaps more needs to be known about the social significance of marriage within intermediate and

lower levels of society before it can serve as such an important index. Chance states that "Many black and mulatto slaves who did marry (most apparently did not) were upwardly mobile, over 80% of them taking free wives." One cannot deduce upward social mobility from these two facts alone. It could as easily be deduced that marriage to slaves meant downward mobility for slave wives. If it could be shown that manumission was more common among slaves who took wives, then we could speak more confidently about social mobility accompanying slave marriages.

Similarly, more must first be known about the economic interrelationships between the occupational categories listed in censuses, before such data can be used in any general socioeconomic analysis. When seeking to illustrate how certain Creoles ranked with non-whites in the occupational hierarchy, Chance selects the example of the muleteer as a "menial" profession held by a significant number of whites, when other evidence, certainly from the valley of Puebla and from Marzahl, shows muleteers very often to have been men of substance.³ Chance's weak sense of the economic structure behind the society he is describing can also be found at the end of the book when he makes the following conclusions: "Two and a half centuries of Spanish rule had transformed a highly differentiated colonized population into a relatively homogeneous mass of urban workers who identified more with the city than with their Zapotec and Mixtec neighbors," and, "the process of proletarianization among Antequera's Indians had reached its final stage by the late eighteenth century." He provides little evidence for either statement. Apart from the decline in the use of Nahuatl *sobrenombres* and language among a small group of Indians in what he admits is an unrepresentative quarter, Jalatlaco, he gives practically no evidence of "proletarianization" beyond crude occupational data which suggest diversity rather than uniformity of economic status. Was the Indian population of Antequera really so culturally homogeneous and uniformly exploited by 1790? Gibson has shown that Mexico City's Indians were reaching this stage by this time but Chance has failed to prove that the same was true for Oaxaca's Indians and Taylor's conclusions for Oaxaca's rural areas suggest that Chance may be wrong. The criticism is not that models should be discarded by local historians, or that conclusions for other regions should not be brought to bear, but that neither should become a substitute for a lack of clear evidence or make up for failure to find clear watersheds or convincing arguments from local material.

The description of the evolution of the quarter of Jalatlaco I found the most interesting part of the book and where Chance is at his best. Established as a service and artisanal barrio for the Spanish core, populated by Nahuatl-speaking Indians from the valleys of Puebla and

Mexico, this quarter developed a clear economic identity and function of its own. The pre-Conquest political seniority of the Mexican settlement on this site combined with the superior manual dexterity of the Indians from the central Mexican valleys afforded to the Nahuatl speakers a higher political and economic status than their Mixtec and Zapotec neighbors; "among the Naborias, the Nahuas occupied a dominant position of power and prestige, integration into colonial urban society, and overall skill in trades and services required by the city." Until well into the eighteenth century a man had to be of Nahua descent to hold office in the barrio. Chance shows how there was a much higher degree of endogamy in this barrio, a higher proportion of mestizos, free mulattoes, and negros than in the other Indian barrios. The barrio grew steadily during the seventeenth century, gaining village status in 1680, until the early eighteenth century when its population turned back, to drop precipitously after 1748. Accompanying this demographic decline was a deculturation, as Nahuatl language and sobrenombres ceased to be used. This was despite the generally improving economic conditions from the mid-century with the growth of cochineal exports, a healthy urban manufacturing sector, and the steady recovery of urban Indian population in the other barrios. Apart from the loss of water rights, Chance finds no reason for the decline of Jalatlaco. Was its population gradually absorbed into the central core of the city? His evidence on the upward mobility of the castes would suggest this. Was the loss of Nahua political leadership, and their special relationship with the Spanish, a significant factor in the dissolution of the barrio? I cannot help feeling that a more thorough analysis of the history of Jalatlaco over three centuries, a Nahua tributary to a Spanish city in a Zapotec and Mixtec valley, would have made a more significant contribution to the understanding of the complexity of the colonial social order, than the approach adopted by Chance.

How do these two local histories add to our understanding of the more general processes of Latin American colonial history? Marzahl's Popayán will be welcomed to a still minute historiography of the seventeenth century. His evidence of the functioning of the provincial and municipal levels of colonial government confirm already established understandings, but his book greatly enriches and adds depth to them. During the seventeenth century, the *residencia*, the principal means by which the Crown might control provincial and local levels of administration in America, served as little more than a reminder of the existence of a larger Spanish state. It failed altogether to remedy the abuses of royal administrators fully in the clutches of local, generally corrupt and venal, officeholders and private citizens. It provided some opportunity for circulation within the elite at a local level, with the uncovering of abuses after the event and the punishment of offenders, but it failed to remedy

these abuses. It probably helped to maintain a credibility for Hispanic institutions and ideas of justice and royal authority. Marzahl's analysis of the institution of the governorship provides a most vivid example of the contradictions within the Spanish imperial system. Generally charged with carrying out the *residencia* before taking office, the governor could choose either to rule from the law book, immediately to come up against local intransigence and find it impossible to get anything done, or, to fall in with the game of local politics; "In either case they were unable to fulfill the roles assigned to them, even if they were disinterested and energetic." The chief function of the institution was to provide a single focus for vaguely conceived ideas of Spanish monarchy held among Creoles of a distant and neglected province, and to combine in one person the formal, though in practice ephemeral, authority both to administer the ordinances of the Crown and to carry out justice. The real power to decide in matters of legal authority and justice lay elsewhere, beyond formal institutions.

The *cabildo* was never anything more than a creature of local and oligarchical interests. Its immaturity and slight importance in Popayán, though certainly not exceptional in Spanish America, is not typical for a province of such size. Had there been a more dynamic middle class or tyrannical *audiencia*, the *cabildo* might have come more into its own, as it no doubt did during the eighteenth century. But during the seventeenth century its redundancy reflected the unanimity of economic interests (for the reduction in gold dues and perpetuation of the *encomienda*) and the family-tied cohesion of the social elite. The survival of the *encomienda* was, of course, not typical, placing Popayán alongside southern Chile, Paraguay, and the Yucatán in a rating of colonial institutional and political maturity. A comparison of Popayán and Mérida (Yucatán) in the seventeenth century would undoubtedly be an interesting one.⁴ The state of the Popayán economy over the period supports the conventional view of seventeenth-century economic decline rather than the revisionist view of a weak metropolis and healthy colonies. The rise of the overland Cartagena-Quito route reflected the decline in international and long distance interregional exchange while, over the century, Popayán, along with Quito, was drawn into more local and autarchic market systems. Marzahl's book will be very useful for students of colonial Spanish American history.

Because of Chance's failure to tackle certain basic methodological problems, it is unlikely that his book will serve to refine or revise our existing general understanding of colonial Mexican society. To be fair, it must be said that from the beginning he is faced with an impossibly contradictory task, which he attacks with skill and bravado. But the history of social stratification must first await an adequate analysis of the economic structure. Still, the book contains many points of interest,

pointers and caveats for future historians, and its usefulness lies in understanding its failure. The book illustrates the dangers of sociological induction in local history and of uncritically applying conventional wisdoms and conclusions from studies of other regions to the particular and peculiar local case.

The study confirms the conclusions of Taylor as to the strength of indigenous communities and culture in rural Oaxaca but Chance seems to exaggerate, at least does not prove, the degree of "proletarianization" of the "urban Indian." Recent anthropology has tended more to stress similarities rather than differences in the structure of rural and urban communities. Chance accepts implicitly but never convincingly proves the existence of a "rural-urban continuum" in colonial Oaxaca. But the study enriches our understanding of the peculiarities of the province of Oaxaca, particularly the intriguing case of Jalatlaco, exemplifying the complexity of cultural and political adaptation and continuity following the Conquest. Chance supports the conventional view of seventeenth-century economic decline and stagnation through to the beginnings of the cochineal and cotton weaving booms of the eighteenth century, and so adds local substance to still vague understandings of general economic trends in New Spain. The conclusions of Chance's principal concern, the place of racial factors in social stratification, serve to confirm, both for the present day as for the past, the importance of subjective racial factors in social ordering. He shows how in Antequera there was fairly free intermarriage and marriage between racial groups, that a rise in economic status facilitated "passing," that this was easier for mestizos than for mulattoes, and that the racial factor in stratification differed in its impact at different times over the three hundred years. Well before the end of the seventeenth century, the *regimen de castas*, as a rigid prescription for social stratification, in society hierarchically, had broken down, a century earlier than has been presumed hitherto. But during the eighteenth century race remained an important, and in the case of the Indian and the Peninsular white, a dominant factor in social stratification. For the intermediate ethnic categories it had become simply one of many factors, and of diminishing importance, in the allocation of status. "A man regarded his racial identity not so much as an indicator of group membership or even as a badge of self-definition within a static and rigid social system, but rather as one component of his personal identity that could be manipulated and often changed."

Chance thus himself shows that an analysis of racial factors alone is insufficient as a satisfactory guide for understanding social structure or the principal factors determining social mobility. And he is unable, because of the sheer enormity of the task, to establish a body of criteria beyond that of race which served as "principles and determinants of stratification" among this intermediate sector, once race was no longer

the most important factor. Chance's predicament is at its most uncomfortable when he is analyzing social stratification in the late colony. Whereas he recognizes the existence of a large mestizo and mulatto intermediate social category, which lacked the ethnic identity and the "classlike" behavior of the Indian and white groups, he is unable to satisfactorily describe this category's position in colonial urban society apart from it containing many upwardly mobile individuals. This conclusion seems to admit to the limited usefulness of a primary focus on race and on mobility as keys to explaining and understanding colonial Mexican urban society.

NOTES

1. John L. Phelan, *The Kingdom of Quito in the Seventeenth Century: Bureaucratic Politics in the Spanish Empire* (Madison, 1967), and James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560: A Colonial Society* (Madison, 1968).
2. William Taylor, *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, 1972).
3. Peter Marzahl, *Popayán*, p. 41, and G. Thomson, "Economy and Society in Puebla de los Angeles, 1800–1850" (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford, 1978), p. 478.
4. Marta Espejo Ponce Hunt, "The Process of Development of Yucatan, 1600–1700," in Ida Altman and James Lockhart, *Provinces of Early Mexico. Variants of Spanish American Regional Evolution* (Stanford, 1976).