THE DYNAMICS OF CLIO:

Periodization in the Social History of Colonial Mexico

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Professor Carmagnani has identified major themes and tendencies that have characterized recent studies on the social history of colonial Mexico. He correctly observes that historians have paid closer attention to the connections between population and resources, to the differences among regions, and to the internal development of Indian society. Moreover, he explains how advances in demography, economic history, and ethnohistory have all contributed toward a continued shift in emphasis away from political or "institutional" perspectives.

Despite these achievements, Professor Carmagnani believes that social historians, stifled by "inertia," have not abandoned chronologies imposed long ago by "institutional" studies. In particular, according to Carmagnani, social historians are still overly prone to emphasize the ruptures in society that followed the Spanish Conquest. Yet he himself offers convincing evidence that they have begun to acknowledge, albeit with considerable prompting from anthropologists and ethnohistorians, the continuities between the pre- and postconquest periods. Indeed, the best recent work recognizes continuity without minimizing the enormous biological, social, and yes, "institutional" changes introduced by the conquest.

Further belying his assumption that social historians have been the victims of intellectual inertia, Carmagnani outlines a new periodization that has emerged from demographic studies published in the last two decades. Indigenous population recovery began about 1650 and continued (with a major interruption during the hungry and disease-ridden 1690s) until an epidemic of *matlazáhuatl*¹ swept central Mexico between 1736 and 1739. Had he discussed more fully the social readjustments that followed this epidemic, the validity of this new periodization might have been more apparent.

Historians' preoccupation with the agricultural and demographic catastrophe of 1785–86 has perhaps distracted attention from the importance of this earlier crisis. Like other outbreaks of matlazáhuatl, the epidemic of the 1730s took an especially heavy toll among Indians, in

many places causing a permanent decline in the proportion of Indians in the total population—certainly a benchmark in the social history of Mexico. Resulting labor shortages combined with bad weather to trigger a series of poor harvests in the early 1740s. Moreover, considerable migration occurred during the years immediately following the epidemic, producing important social effects in areas that contributed or received heavy migration.² The epidemic even brought significant developments in the religious life of colonial Mexico. In 1737 Archbishop Juan Antonio de Vizarrón y Equiarreta proclaimed the Virgin of Guadalupe as patroness of Mexico City; a decade later, she became protector of all New Spain.³

This epidemic also inaugurated a new period in the epidemiological history of Mexico. Although smallpox and measles had been relatively mild in their effects during the first third of the eighteenth century, from the 1740s forward they recurred with more deadly force, nearly always taking more lives among Indians than among *gente de razón*. The outlines of the social history of the late colonial period, including the numerical decline of the Indian population and the renewed severity of epidemic disease and agricultural crisis, are clearly discernible in the wake of the epidemic of 1736–39. Thus Carmagnani is on solid ground in identifying the 1730s as a watershed in many ways more significant than the introduction of major "institutional" changes after 1763.

In addition to outlining a new scheme of periodization evident in recent work, Professor Carmagnani attempts to define the social processes that characterized each period. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, colonial society experienced a "restructuring." To understand better this process, Carmagnani suggests, social historians must reexamine the relationships between the monetary and natural economies, between cities and the countryside, and among ethnic groups. Here he has proposed fruitful lines of future research, even though his discussion speaks perhaps too readily of "crisis," a word that evokes "institutional" history's preoccupation with the fiscal and political disasters of the seventeenth century.

Unfortunately, Carmagnani's descriptions for later periods are far less satisfactory. Indeed, they mask some of the advances achieved by social historians in recent years. He never really specifies what, exactly, was "consolidated" between 1650 and 1730. The term implies far more social stability than in fact occurred during this period. The angry mob that stormed the viceregal palace in 1692 was hardly the product of a society in a process of "consolidation." We know, of course, that the Indian population grew during much of this period and that the first half of the eighteenth century witnessed bankruptcy, disruption in ownership, and subdivision of great estates in many parts of Mexico,

including Guadalajara, Oaxaca, and Morelos.⁵ Therefore it is perhaps most appropriate to describe the period 1650–1740 as one of major adjustments in patterns of settlement and resource use.

After 1740, according to Carmagnani, colonial society entered a phase of "expansion." Again, he fails to explain his label. Many things—mining output, commerce, racial mixture, the governmental bureaucracy, the fortunes of a lucky few, the magnitude of agricultural crises, the frequency of land disputes—expanded in the late eighteenth century. Even the territorial extent of what would soon become the Republic of Mexico grew with the settling of California. But the social history of the era is far too complex to permit such a facile and imprecise characterization. This period was, in fact, one of trial and appreciable disruption for the colonial social order. Growing mestizaje further blurred the already fuzzy divisions between the "república de españoles" and the "república de indios." Secularization of parishes and innovations in community finance altered life at the grass-roots levels, while landholding villages faced mounting pressures posed by the expansion of commercial haciendas. The famous ano de hambre of 1785-86 exposed the brutal inequalities of the colonial system. At the same time, economic and demographic growth evidently triggered important changes in labor relations, most obviously in the deteriorating conditions of mine workers.

In his essay, Carmagnani implicitly accepts the decade of 1810–20 as a turning point in the social history of Mexico. Here, ironically, he may be justified in what at first might seem to be an uncritical adoption of a periodization derived from "institutional" history. Although conventional wisdom has repeatedly emphasized that the social hierarchy of the colonial period survived the transition to independence largely intact, the enormous challenges to the colonial social order in the years leading up to 1810 are sufficient to warrant the conclusion that independence occurred during a period of significant social change. What is less clear is the degree to which the political adjustments brought by independence reflected those changes already underway and generated further alterations in Mexican society.

Practical considerations, more than intellectual inertia, have prevented social historians from reaching a more precise understanding of the degree of continuity between the late colonial and early national periods. The disruption in recordkeeping that accompanied independence has governed the choice of 1810 or 1821 as end dates for many a study. Then, too, historians lack studies focusing directly on the nineteenth century, a situation that, at least in the field of social history, can easily challenge the seventeenth century's once-uncontested title of "Mexico's forgotten century."

Despite these obstacles, scholars are beginning to find the means

to bridge the documentary chasm of independence. David Brading's work on the Bajío and the Borah-Cook study of the Mixteca Alta show that hacienda records, parish registers, and census materials can permit the historian to span the independence years. Then, too, Richard Lindley has effectively used notarial records to demonstrate that although the same families dominated economic and social life in Guadalajara both before and after independence, "money came more and more to replace kinship and community connections as a determinant of power and privilege."

A challenging, but particularly intriguing, topic for future study is that of the relationships between social and political changes at the local level in the early national period. We know that after independence, "Indians" no longer existed; with their Spanish, mestizo, and mulatto compatriots they simply became citizens of the Mexican republic. Meanwhile, the creation of *municipios* legally abolished hundreds of Indian communities that failed to meet the population quotas set by state legislatures.⁷ Just as important, in major "Indian" towns that qualified for municipio status, political power evidently passed to non-Indians who had become influential *vecinos* of these communities but who had hitherto lacked formal instruments through which to articulate their concerns.⁸ To examine these and other changes in the early national period, however, social historians must be willing to embrace a perspective that is at least in part "institutional."

On the whole, the recent study of the social history of colonial Mexico has been far more dynamic than the title of Professor Carmagnani's essay implies. Social historians have developed a new chronology, based largely on population changes, leaving only 1810–1821 as a boundary derived from "institutional" history. The next, more difficult step will be a detailed analysis of the social changes that accompanied major shifts in Mexico's demographic history.

NOTES

To save space, full citations will be given only for works not included in Professor Carmagnani's bibliography.

- Probably typhus, although according to Elsa Malvido, an acute form of hepatitis.
- Morin, Michoacán, pp. 48–59; Malvido, "Factores"; Calvo, Acatzingo; Morin, Santa Inés Zacatelco; Cheryl E. Martin, "Demographic Trends in Colonial Morelos," in Unity and Diversity in Colonial Spanish America, edited by Richard E. Greenleaf (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, forthcoming).
- 3. David Brading, "Tridentine Catholicism and Enlightened Despotism in Bourbon Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15 (1983):1–22, see p. 2.
- 4. Cooper, Epidemic Disease; Martin, "Demographic Trends."
- 5. Van Young, Hacienda and Market, p. 117; Taylor, Landlord and Peasant, p. 141; Florescano, Precios del maíz, p. 183; Cheryl E. Martin, Rural Society in Colonial Morelos (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, forthcoming), chap. 4.

COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

- Richard B. Lindley, *Haciendas and Economic Development: Guadalajara, Mexico, at Independence* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), pp. 120–21.
 Peter Gerhard, "La evolución del pueblo rural mexicano: 1519–1975," *Historia Mexicana* 24 (1975):335–52. 6.
- 8. Martin, Rural Society, chap. 8 and conclusion.