
COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

MATERIAL LIFE, CONTINUITIES, AND PERIODIZATION: A Comment

Murdo J. MacLeod
University of Arizona

Professor Carmagnani's essay consists of two parts. In the first three-quarters of the essay, he rapidly reviews historical writing on colonial Mexico from about 1970 until 1981, identifying major topics, tendencies, and prospects for the future. In the second part of the essay, Carmagnani turns to some of what he believes to be the shortcomings of this decade or more of writing, especially what he views as its failure to establish a new periodization for the Mexican colonial centuries. In discussing this "inertia" in the new generation of social historians, he proposes a periodization that he believes more accurately "fits" the general findings of this recent historical corpus.

Much of what Carmagnani has to say is unexceptionable, at least to me. There is an obvious bibliographic command, appropriate bibliographic categories, and judicious and often perceptive judgments and comments. The following suggestions, then, should be considered as little more than additions, shadings toward less fixed positions.

Carmagnani notices a decisive break from the institutional history of the past in the decade of the 1960s. Others would find their pioneers of the new social history a decade earlier, no doubt, and still others would question whether such a decisive shift did in fact take place. The question is perhaps worthy of a separate, if minor, debate of its own.¹

Yet one must agree with Carmagnani that the shift from the study of institutions as formative factors in socioeconomic history toward an emphasis on material factors, which he explains as the ties between resources, population, and production, is a stimulating and worthwhile one—if the baby does not disappear with the bathwater. Brading and Wu and a whole generation of European demographic historians have pointed out, for example, that the relationship between famine years and epidemics is sometimes close, but at other times obscure at best.² In the same vein, we cannot assume that the relationship between resources and population, or more specifically between crop failures and famine, is always a close one, or even that it exists at all in some cases. Many famines are the results of particular systems of equity and distribution,³ which, of course, brings us back to a role for politics and institutions, and their relationship to socioeconomic life. Carmagnani is not blind to such a role; in fact, he calls for it. Since his cutoff date of 1981, there have been signs of a new interest in rethinking colonial institutional and political history.⁴ Such studies may nudge historians away from an overly deterministic view of the ties between resources, population, and production.

Carmagnani throughout his essay calls for more studies of continuities and less emphasis on the discontinuities brought forth by the conquest and the colonial experience. Certainly, studies of the ties between the pre-conquest and post-conquest years are needed, both in Mexico and in Spain, but there may be certain dangers in such an emphasis, just as there undoubtedly are in studies of change or discontinuity. One thinks of the romanticism of some anthropologists, forever hunting for pre-Columbian traits and survivals, with little or no interest in the intervening centuries. Such synchronic approaches essentially deny Indians and other subordinate groups their history. Carmagnani states that the conquest brought little change. He might have got an argument from the inhabitants of Tenochtitlán, but even if one accepts this proposition, the sequelae of the European invasion certainly did bring upheaval. Some Mexican populations vanished; others declined by 60 to 90 percent, depending on which study one uses; hierarchies were overthrown; a new religion was imposed; people were forced into large migrations and resettlements; land tenure and local governmental institutions were altered. To claim that such blows brought little change is, in a paradoxical kind of way, to return to the image of the “passive” Indian that so many social historians, including Carmagnani, rightly reject. Of course, the argument will be made that persistence in former patterns, that retention of old ways, is itself a response of adaptation and is therefore an active confrontation with a turbulent outside world. Nevertheless, the one constant in history is change, and the studies proposed by Professor Carmagnani should perhaps be conceived not so much as a

dialectical contrast between continuities and discontinuities, but rather as studies along a continuum of change, where such matters as the pace of change, or lack of it, years of disruption and years of relative calm, the longevity or ephemerality of certain institutions, languages, or forms of behavior would all be viewed within an overall framework of social change.

Part two of Carmagnani's essay complains that the new social history of colonial Mexico has remained entrapped in a traditional periodization of the three colonial centuries. To rectify this inertia, he proposes a new periodization based on their work. Parts of his chronology are new, some are quite traditional. Some of it, as he is aware, varies with the region or ethnic group under discussion and depends on the historical emphasis brought to bear. I, and no doubt others, would apply different formulations. The years of the 1570s or perhaps the early 1580s seem to me to have brought institutional changes and changes in the relationship between the various ethnic groups, which mark them as a significant divide. The 1630s, when the tie to Spain began to unravel, brought in what some have referred to as the "real" seventeenth century, and these years, running up until the 1680s, remain largely unknown in spite of Simpson's exhortation over thirty years ago.⁵ Another period, perhaps even more unknown, would extend until the second decade of the eighteenth century. Carmagnani's interpretation of the eighteenth century as a period of expansion seems to me to be a traditional one. There may have been a period of expansion from about 1715 until the pandemic of 1735–37. This expansion may even have lasted, with one or two major interruptions, as late as the 1760s, although this interpretation is increasingly doubtful. Thereafter, recent scholarship paints a much gloomier picture, especially with regard to the relative demographic and economic position of the Indians.⁶

It remains to add the somewhat obvious. It is far easier to comment on essays of reevaluation than to write them. Writing them is one of the most professionally useful and daring tasks that an historian can accomplish. It forces one's audience to rethink, or at least to bolster, its prejudices with evidence. Professor Carmagnani is to be congratulated for taking on this helpful risk.

NOTES

1. Some scholars, for example, might perceive a new emphasis on socioeconomic and demographic history appearing in the following syntheses from the 1950s: Woodrow Borah, *New Spain's Century of Depression*, Ibero-Americana 35 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951); Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Exploitation of Land in Central Mexico in the Sixteenth Century*, Ibero-Americana 36 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956); and Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959). Other scholars, thinking of the

- pioneering work of José Miranda on the *encomendero* class or of Silvio Zavala's contribution on the origins of peonage, might push the beginnings of the age of enlightenment back into the primeval mists of the 1940s.
2. David A. Brading and Celia Wu, "Population Growth and Crisis: León, 1720–1860," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 5, no. 1 (May 1973):1–36, especially pp. 27–29.
 3. A point effectively and, for me, definitively made by Amartya Sen in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 154–66.
 4. See for example *Essays in the Political, Economic, and Social History of Colonial Latin America*, edited by Kenneth Ackerman (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware, Latin American Studies Program, 1982), and especially in this context, the introduction by Karen Spalding and the essay by John N. Coatsworth. See also Richard Boyer, "Absolutism versus Corporation in New Spain: The Administration of the Marqués of Gelves, 1621–1624," *The International History Review* 4, no. 4 (Nov. 1982):475–503; and Woodrow Borah, *Justice by Insurance: The General Indian Court of Colonial Mexico and the Legal Aides of the Half-Real* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).
 5. Lesley Byrd Simpson, "Mexico's Forgotten Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 22 (1953):113–21.
 6. For example, David A. Brading, *Haciendas and Ranchos in the Mexican Bajío: León, 1700–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 175–77, 186–89.