

EXAMEN DE LIBROS

DECONSTRUCTING THE CENTER, CENTERING THE MARGINS:

REVISITING EUROCREOLE NARRATIVES
ON THE HISTORY OF COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA

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The 1492-1992 Quincentennial of Europe's colonization of the New World pitted supporters and detractors of the so-called "Columbian Encounter." Throughout Latin America governments sponsored countless exhibits, parades, conferences, and books to commemorate the "discovery" of America. Progressive scholars and community activists also took the opportunity to point out the negative repercussions of European expansionism on non-western peoples across the globe. Since 1992, an increasing number of insightful studies have revisited Eurocreole constructions of national and regional identities and histories in Latin America. This appeal stems partly from the convergence of several inter-related factors: widespread dissatisfaction with institutional histories written by and about the European and Creole elites; the concomitant search for the submerged voices of subaltern groups who have been marginalized in the canonical narratives; the growing interest in the significance of Trans-Atlantic and global exchanges and the ongoing recasting of early Latin American history that stresses developments in the colonial periphery. This essay reviews three works, written within the past few years, which typify these trends. Despite differences in methodologies and scope, these works confirm the links between history-making and the European colonization of Latin America.

Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's study, *How to Write the History of the New World: Historiographies, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (2001), is perhaps the most ambitious and comprehensive of the three. This profusely annotated book canvasses a vast cross-section of studies focusing on Spanish America appearing in both sides of the Atlantic during the course of the eighteenth century. Cañizares traces much of the modern treatment of the origins and settlement of the New World to a paradigmatic shift in Enlightenment historiographical circles. According to the author, the rise and wide dissemination of the modern social and natural sciences contributed to the emergence of a new breed of "philosophical travelers" in northern Europe. They included naturalists, mathematicians, philosophers and academicians outfitted with the latest European theories of human development. These arm-chair scholars sought to overturn what they considered to be the spurious claims put forth by Spanish Renaissance writers concerning the history of the New World and its people.

From about the middle of the eighteenth century, scholars mainly in Great Britain and France grew increasingly skeptical about Spanish representations of the New World that stressed the highly evolved state of development of the Aztec, Maya and Inca civilizations. Charles-Marie de la Condamine, Adam Smith, the Abbé Raynal, Cornelius de Pauw, and William Robertson, among others, struggled with reconciling the impoverished condition of eighteenth-century Amerindian masses with their supposedly prosperous, enlightened and technologically savvy forebears. They brought to bear the considerable weight of the latest scientific breakthroughs in an attempt to sort out "facts" from fiction. By subjecting the Spanish tracts on Amerindian societies to rigorous scrutiny, they concluded that their authors must have either exaggerated, misinterpreted or made up a good part of what they reported.

Philosophical travelers argued that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish accounts of the New World were riddled with serious methodological and documentary flaws. For instance, they rejected classical analogies which presented the Aztec, Maya and Inca polities as the New World equivalent of the Greek,

Roman and Egyptian civilizations. Some questioned the appropriateness of drawing parallels between Europe and the Americas. Such facile comparisons, they maintained, were at odds with the crude writing methods, rudimentary agriculture, and lack of a monetary system found among the Amerindians. They also doubted the objectivity of Amerindian informants and dismissed the historical worthiness of hieroglyphic-type sources, such as Inca quipus and Aztec codices. In short, enlightenment writers in northern Europe came to view the foundational classics of Latin American history—written by the likes of Juan de Torquemada, Bernardino de Sahagún, Toribio de Benavente Motolonia, José de Acosta, Pedro Cieza de León, Martire d’Anghiera, Francisco López de Gómara, Antonio de Herrera y Tordecillas, and Garcilaso de la Vega—as little more than fables fabricated by untrained observers using untrustworthy sources and overcome by perceptual distortions and national/religious prejudices.

Having discredited the bulk of early colonial Spanish historiography of the New World, philosophical travelers next turned their criticism on its inhabitants. As Cañizares carefully documents, here again they relied heavily on scientific tools of analysis. Northern European scientists insisted that evidence from geology, zoology and botany hinted at the recent formation and settlement of the New World. Therefore, they portrayed the Amerindians as evolutionary “late starters” and “early humans, literally frozen in time” (p. 50). This suggested to them that Amerindians had attained at best an elementary knowledge of their environment. They pointed to the Amerindians’ “undeveloped” mind, whose limited powers of abstraction allegedly did not extend beyond the conceptualization of child-like pictures, incoherent signs and other “primitive” types of non-alphabetic symbols. Such ethnocentric assertions went hand-in-hand with the elaboration of racial typologies that ranked humans according to arbitrary scales of socio-cultural development. Thus, for Georges-Louis-Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, the New World inhabitants—Amerindians, creoles and mixed-bloods—were degenerate, lazy, and effeminate.

By tapping unpublished and under-utilized Spanish archival materials, Cañizares demonstrates that Enlightenment scholars

across Spain responded vigorously, but ambiguously, to the charges leveled by the philosophical travelers. From their perspective, there was much more at stake than the integrity of Spanish Renaissance authors. England and France had wrested significant portions of the New World from Spain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consequently, Cañizares notes, "the realization that colonial empires were lost or won by those who controlled the description of lands and people moved authors to place urgent calls for the renewal of Spanish historiography, cartography, and botanical studies" (p.134). Historiographical reform in Spain took on a peculiar patriotic zeal, leading to exhausting, protracted deliberations on how best to redeem the nation's vilified reputation. The Count of Campomanes, the powerful head of the Academy of History, favored bringing Spain in line with modern historical standards. Juan Bautista Muñoz, who filled the posts of Royal Cosmographer and Chronicler of the Indies, advocated the use of primary sources and a revival of Spanish humanist scholarship.

Cañizares shows that patriotic Spanish historians tried to turn the table on their critics by deploying the same writing techniques and Eurocentric arguments that the philosophical travelers had marshaled against Spain. Pedro de la Estala, for example, argued that sensory deprivation, not deception, caused the Spaniards, who had previously lived in the relatively "primitive" Caribbean, to overstate the achievements of the Aztecs and Incas. Juan Nuix, a Jesuit exiled in Italy, traced the charges of Spanish barbarity against the Amerindians to Las Casas, whom he rejected as a biased and unreliable witness. He also attributed the demographic collapse of the Amerindians the "infantile susceptibility of the natives" to European diseases. Another Jesuit, Ramón Diosdado Caballero, excused Cortés's brutality in Mexico as justifiable retaliation by Spaniards threatened by bands of cannibalistic savages.

The controversy surrounding the history of the New World also moved clerical-Creole writers in Spanish America, mainly in Mexico and Peru, to join the growing international debate. According to Cañizares, these writers were no intellectual copycats. Quite the contrary, they creatively sought to tear down

the conclusions reached by the philosophical travelers on the grounds that few had ever set foot on the New World or had lived there long enough to delve deeply into the history and culture of the Amerindian societies. Boasting their lettered status, they assigned very little weight to information that the northern Europeans had acquired from Amerindian plebeians, the *castas* and lay Spaniards. Like Spanish scholars who exalted the achievements of their Arab precursors to bolster their nation's maligned image, clerical-Creole patriots drew inspiration and ideas from the pre-colonial and early colonial Amerindian nobility, with whom they became closely identified. Consequently, they embraced historiographical reform to prop up the negative portrayal of their imaginary "kingdoms" and to further their aristocratic political aspirations.

Judging by Cañizares' findings, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that philosophical travelers derived their understanding of the history of the New World from developments taking place chiefly in Mesoamerica and the Andean world. With the glaring exception of Alexander von Humboldt, the northern Europeans seldom brought up the history of the Spanish American colonial periphery, except in broad discussions about the evolution of the New World and its "backward" dwellers. In this they followed Spanish Renaissance writers, who also favored the study of the mineral enclaves. With little to go on beyond the impressionistic and biased accounts of a handful of conquistadores, Enlightenment scholars had relatively little to say regarding the history of such places as the northern provinces of New Spain, Central America, the Hispanic Caribbean, New Granada, and the Río de la Plata.

This theme is precisely the driving force behind Gustavo Verdesio's innovative book, *Forgotten Conquests: Rereading New World History from the Margins* (2001). The author supplements Cañizares' work by documenting how Europeans and Creoles contrived a history of the northern shores of the River Plate region, where modern-day Uruguay now rests. Verdesio reminds us that this area differed markedly from Mexico and Peru in that it lacked mineral wealth and was inhabited by a nomadic or highly mobile Amerindian population. Although no permanent European

settlement was established in this part of South America until 1680, European visitors and colonizers left us their impressions of its land and people. These lesser-known texts, the author adds, have been either overlooked, misread, or excluded from the mainstream study of colonial Latin America. He attributes this historiographical omission to the preferential treatment enjoyed by Mesoamerican and Andean themes when compared to other regions where "Amerindian peoples... did not organize their social lives around a state or an empire..." Moreover, "These other forms (tribal, nomadic...) are precisely the ones practiced by the majority of indigenous groups that populated the Americas at the time of the colonial encounter" (p. ix).

At the outset Verdesio debunks the notion that Uruguay was "discovered," as official national histories too often maintain. Rather, the region which Europeans eventually called Uruguay entered into Western "historical time" following Juan Díaz de Solís's 1516 reconnaissance of the River Plate region. The prejudiced and subjective reports of European travelers and colonizers such as Solís, Diego García, Sebastian Cabot, Pedro de Mendoza and Juan Ortíz de Zárate, among others, became the raw material from which Eurocentric depictions of the River Plate were fashioned. By reading these texts against the grain, Verdesio adds his name to the growing postcolonial critique of traditional Latin American history that seeks to reclaim the suppressed voices of Amerindians, Africans, Gauchos and other subaltern groups.

The author dissects published accounts of the doomed Solís expedition to show how Europeans concocted the figure of a "savage" Amerindian. There's broad agreement among historians that Amerindians killed Solís soon after disembarking in the River Plate region. Just who these natives were, how the alleged killing took place, and what triggered it have never been clearly determined because there were no credible eyewitnesses. In fact, the remainder of Solís's crew refused to land in fear of meeting a similar fate. Nevertheless, Martire d'Anghiera or Peter Martyr, who was not a party to the events, confidently wrote in 1516 that Solís had encountered the "ominous" and "anthropophagic" Caribs. According to Martyr, the Indians "drooled" in expect-

tation of their next human meal and subsequently "savagely" consumed Solís and companions in a "horrendous" and "cruel" way. Verdesio observes that this Columbian paradigm would be repeated, with slight modifications, by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1535-47), López de Gómara (1552), Cabot (1544), Las Casas (1559), Herrera (1601-15), Martín del Barco Centenera (1602), and Pedro Francisco Javier de Charlevoix (1756). He points out that none of these chroniclers raised the possibility that the indigenous inhabitants had a right to defend their territory from the European invaders.

Many of these same writers also set the foundation for a Eurocentric social construction of Uruguay by consciously substituting the act of describing with the art of interpreting. When confronted with unfamiliar plants, animals or people, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century eyewitnesses looked for comparisons with Europe or invented names and explanations to make the conflictual situations conform to their European worldview. As Verdesio puts it, this assimilationist mental operation aimed at "harmonizing the new and the already existing, the known and the unknown, the American reality and the ideological context upon which European society's perceptive and cognitive mechanisms were founded" (p. 45). This would also explain why some of the myths circulating in the classical and medieval world about the people and creatures believed to inhabit faraway lands (e.g., giants, mermaids, savages).

After failing to find mineral wealth, European colonizers wrote off the River Plate region as a remote, dangerous wasteland. Governor Hernando Arias de Saavedra, or Hernandarias as he is popularly known, tried to change this image during his administration in the early years of the seventeenth century. Hernandarias envisioned a transformation of the River Plate to complement the Spanish exploitation of Peru and to ward off "foreign" (that is, rival European) encroachments. To this end, he laid out a plan to settle and fortify the region. He called for the introduction of livestock, agricultural exploitation, and the establishment of missions to "reduce the aborigines to the rules of European culture and society" (p. 65). His scheme did not sit well with Portugal, which disputed Spanish claims through

diplomatic and military action. At the peak of the Spanish-Portuguese contest, which spanned the period 1680-1776, the two colonial powers elaborated "official" historical accounts of the region to back up their "legitimate" claims to the disputed area. "The land is now represented not only as an object of desire, but also as an entity with a past—a past provided by the Portuguese and Spanish narratives that attempt to possess it" (p. 75). The inter-imperial struggle helped to solidify Uruguay's European-imposed historical identity both on a regional (the Southern Cone) and an international level (the Americas).

Echoing Cañizares's work, Verdesio shows how eighteenth-century texts, principally those crafted by the clergymen Pedro Lozano, José Guevara, Gaetano Cattaneo and Antoine Joseph Pernety, combined science and an imperial gaze to remap the landscape and people of Uruguay. Methodologically, these writers privileged research over personal testimony and writing over orality. Like Renaissance writers, they too sought to "translate" Uruguay's environment to European nomenclature, "in a way that makes the New World understandable to the European public" (p.95). However, in stark contrast with their predecessors they ventured deep into the interior in an attempt to convert, in words if not in deeds, Uruguay's flora, fauna and inhabitants into valuable natural and human resources. They griped about Uruguay's impoverished society and economy, which they attributed largely to the alleged lazy, nomadic, and troublesome Gauchos and Amerindians. Lozano, for example, characterized their libertarian lifestyle as an effort by "indians...Mestizos, blacks and even some Spaniards... to live without social constraints... in a fashion that is worse than the pagans" (p.98).

Reading between the lines of this Eurocentric discourse, Verdesio draws out "traces" of the Amerindians' eclectic agency. Far from being deceitful cannibals or passive pushovers, Amerindians actively resisted European attempts to enslave them or to take over their land. They also eluded, sought alliances with, and traded with the Europeans as conditions dictated. After achieving independence from Spain, Uruguayan elites would blot out or distort these submerged voices as they strove to keep gauchos and Amerindians in a subordinate social and economic

position. These narratives, Verdesio concludes, "mark the start of the process that culminated in the opposition of city and countryside, a crucial dichotomy in the construction of alterity through the ultimate, and most often used, logocentric pair: civilization-barbarism" (p. 142).

The collection of essays edited by archeologists Peter R. Schmidt and Thomas C. Patterson, *Making Alternative Histories: The Practice of Archeology and History in Non-Western Settings* (1995), examines how colonial paradigms continue to mold the national historiographies of many other parts of the Third World. The book also challenges the prevailing orthodox, neocolonial Western approach to archeology which privileges scientific over anthropological and ethno-historical research. It advocates an inclusive reconceptualization of the field "as a historical social science that relates the study of past societies to the present and incorporates the historical value of oral accounts, folklore and folk life, and written documents that reflect the voices of groups whose views of history are commonly ignored or erased" (p. 3). Eleven contributors, balanced for ethnic, racial and gender representation, systematically reevaluate the "analytical concepts and frameworks that organize interpretations in the colonial library—the historiography that grew up as part of the colonial domination of non-Western peoples" (p. 5). Due to space limitations, I will limit my discussion to two essays on the Hispanic Caribbean and Venezuela as they relate to the concerns raised by previous authors.

Jalil Sued Badillo's tract, "The Theme of the Indigenous in the National Projects of the Hispanic Caribbean," focuses attention on the troubling gaps and unresolved questions that linger on the historiography of the Hispanic Caribbean. Certainly, there is no shortage of substantive questions surrounding the islands' indigenous past, which the colonial library has suppressed or misrepresented. How many Amerindians dwelled in the archipelago in 1492? Who were they? When and how did they come to inhabit the islands? How did the Spanish colonization of the islands impact the Amerindians? In this essay, the author explores the fate of Amerindians and their racially mixed descendants in the early colonial history of the Hispanic Caribbean.

Sued Badillo argues that, contrary to popular belief, not all the Amerindians of Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico were wiped out during the Caribbean phase of the Spanish colonization of the New World. This story line, which has been uncritically repeated in the colonial literature since Las Casas, has been a staple of modern historiography. It has also distorted the islands' ethno-racial evolution, enabling Hispanophiles to assert the cultural primacy of Iberians over that of Amerindians and other non-whites. As the author notes, sweeping generalizations about the extinction of the Amerindians fail to take notice of natives who either survived the Spanish conquest or whom the Europeans imported to the islands throughout the colonial period from such places as Florida, the Bahamas, Dominica, Margarita, Yucatán and Brazil. He identifies sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Indocuban communities in Guanabacoa, Bayamo, Puerto Principe, Macuriges, Baracoa, and Santiago. Dispersed groups held out in the Hispaniola regions of Bahoruco, La Vega, and in other remote parts of the island where Spanish colonial control was practically non-existent. Others also braved the colonial tide in the outskirts of the Puerto Rican capital of San Juan and on the island of Mona, off Puerto Rico's western coast. Several thousand Amerindians even managed to retain their "Indian" identity in the villa of San Germán until the start of the nineteenth-century.

Although these hamlets kept as much of their original culture as conditions allowed, they frequently included African, free-black, mestizo and cimarrón members as well. Because many of them sprung out on the periphery of the Spanish colonial state, they were loosely organized or resisted Spanish control, their populations have been under-reported in the official counts. In addition, the Spaniards likely reclassified Amerindians as mestizos to get away from their legal obligations to protect and provide special opportunities for them. These multiethnic/multiracial Antilleans, which official or Eurocentric historiography has all but silenced, had a major role in the economic, social, and cultural development of the Spanish Caribbean. They carved out and settled the interior of the islands, herded livestock, tilled the land, partook actively in legal and clandestine

trade, and fought courageously to keep both outsiders and Spain's European rivals at bay. According to Sued Badillo, they gave rise to a mestizo way of life which creoles, many of whom were white only in name, later appropriated to bolster their own claims to cultural distinctiveness and political independence.

The Venezuelan archeologist Iraida Vargas Arenas discusses the state's flagrant manipulation of Latin America's past in her essay, "The Perception of History and Archeology in Latin America: A Theoretical Approach." She observes that government-sponsored official history promotes a functionalist view of society that neglects past and present efforts by individuals to alter their social and working conditions. These accounts are saturated with the all too familiar negative images: "the savagery and laziness of the Indian, the slave heritage and vulgarity of the Negro, or the untrustworthiness of the Spaniard" (p.49). Moreover, official history fragments the past of the various countries or regions into more or less stand alone intervals, such as the pre-Columbian, colonial, republican and modern eras. These unidimensional, compartmentalized snap shots are subsequently disseminated for mass consumption in state festivals, museums, and public learning facilities, where they are used to (mis)educate the future generations.

The author documents how Latin American political power-holders affect the writing of history in other insidious ways as well. Public cultural and educational institutions in the region seldom fund research and publication of proposals that challenge official history. In their quest to compete in the global economy, the governments of dependent countries such as Venezuela emphasize the study of the hard sciences. Simultaneously, they downplay the social sciences, which are sorely needed to solve the myriad of problems generated by dependent capitalism, oligarchic political regimes, and the unequal distribution of income. Latin American social scientists, who have weak institutional support in the first place, often end up joining Western scholars and emulating their research interests. However, social sciences such as history, as Vargas Arenas insightfully comments, cannot be imported from the West but must be fashioned from the particularities of each country. She proposes the develop-

ment of a “theoretically informed understanding of the social changes underlying the formation of the nation itself and setting in motion those historically contingent, uniquely national processes that have affected Venezuela in one way and Mexico and Peru in another” (pp. 50-1).

Arenas Vargas insists that historians alone are not to blame for the persisting inaccuracies that continue to surface in official representations of Latin America. Conservative archeologists, anthropologists and folklorists who subscribe to the tenets of official history and Western paradigms must also be held accountable. They frequently fall short of connecting the present-day plight of subaltern groups to the past. For many of them, the pre-Hispanic era “has become a relic: a dead body that can be partly recovered but never completely revived... a golden age whose existence is only hinted at in those lifeless museum displays of archeological objects used to present chronologies or demonstrate cultural diversity” (p. 58). Amerindian traditions are presented as “fossilized behaviors of dead societies... rather than living forms of popular creativity that manifest themselves as the phenomenal or material components of ethnicity or of the culture of given social classes, which, in the present situation, include peasants, urban workers, and marginal people as well as sectors of the middle class who assert their feelings of otherness through ethnic cultural expressions” (pp. 58-9).

The author favors the adoption of social archeology to counter “the distortions that have been introduced for the convenience of a single dominant social class against the interests of the majority with whom they are inextricably linked by a shared but contested history” (p. 62). She envisions social archeology as a transformative endeavor that recognizes that “daily life is the space where history develops, where routines are repeated and reiterated, and where monotonous routines are also transformed and the spontaneous is created” (p. 64). It requires its practitioners to abandon science that caters only to academicians, and to build meaningful ties with under-represented communities. She cites the creation of regionally— and community-based integrated museums in Venezuela, where social archeologists have been able to bring out in the open “the contributions of

popular knowledge to the wider society—for instance, local alternatives to ‘Western’ technologies and the destruction of myths that contrast ‘etruer,’ ‘formal,’ or ‘scientific’ knowledge with ‘local’ or ‘popular’ knowledge” (p. 65).

The three works reviewed above highlight the enduring influence which colonial and neocolonial paradigms have had in shaping the history of Latin America. As Jeremy Adelman recently suggested in his edited anthology, *Colonial Legacies: The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History* (1999), Euro-creole representations of the region and its people—whether written by Renaissance or Enlightenment writers—have contributed to the perpetuation of limiting colonial legacies. The Black Legend which Spain’s European rivals identified with Las Casas, for example, has been at the center, in one form or another, of many a discussion regarding the political culture of the region since the sixteenth century. It has been used to explain not only the violent nature of the conquest, but also the rise of caudillismo, the floundering of democratic aspirations, the feudal character of the economy, and the slow pace of modernization (Adelman, 1999, 3-9).

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