

LATE COLONIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

A final colonial pattern remains to be delineated: change over time. After the 1500s, the century of the Encounter, indigenous populations gradually recovered, and African slaves arrived in ever-larger numbers. During the 1600s, the basic social outlines of Spanish America and Brazil became well established as the descendants of conquerors and conquered found a *modus vivendi*. Contact with Europe was fairly limited, New World societies were fairly autonomous, and local political control was fairly stable. In the 1700s, economic forces, such as the Brazilian gold rush, gradually expanded the areas of Iberian settlement, and new viceroyalties were added, as has already been described. Around 1750, a further sort of transformation occurred, one that, in the long run, would spell trouble for Spanish and Portuguese dominance.

The transformation began when royal administrators in both Spain and Portugal planned to tighten their control over their New World possessions and extract more revenues from them. This new attitude was associated with the Bourbon dynasty that now ruled Spain and with a particularly powerful royal minister in Portugal, the Marquis de Pombal, and so the transformations are called Bourbon or Pombaline reforms, respectively. These reforms intended to rationalize and modernize the governance of overseas dominions by making them act more like colonies. The descendants of the conquerors liked to think that their heroic forefathers had carved out rich New World kingdoms for their monarchs,



kingdoms equal in importance and dignity to Old World kingdoms. But the Bourbon and Pombaline reformers regarded that as an old-fashioned idea. Modern European nations, they believed, should have *colonies* that served the economic interests of the mother countries. Among themselves, the reformers spoke of New World “colonies,” rather than “kingdoms,” but even if they avoided using the offensive term *colonial* in public discourse, their actual reforms were offensive enough.

The reformers’ chief concern was increasing the profitability of the colonies for Spain and Portugal. Therefore, they raised taxes across the board and introduced all sorts of provisions to insure better collection of existing taxes, especially by revamping the framework of colonial administration. A frequent technique was the creation of state-controlled monopoly enterprises to oversee trade or production and sale of basic commodities, such as tobacco or alcohol, in order to maximize the revenue that they produced for the state. Mining, the single most lucrative sector of the colonial economy, received special attention in both Spanish America and Brazil, both to promote technical improvement and to stifle smuggling of untaxed gold and silver. To insure that colonial economies would serve Spain and Portugal better, the reformers also tightened limitations on production of certain goods, such as cloth or wine, in the Americas. They wanted colonials to buy cloth and wine from Spanish and Portuguese producers, not compete with them. To facilitate transatlantic economic integration beneficial to the mother countries, the reformers loosened restrictions on shipping, as long as the colonies traded exclusively with Spain and Portugal.

By tightening colonial control to serve European interests, the Bourbon and Pombaline reforms naturally injured the interests of people living in Spanish America and Brazil. Tax increases fell directly on some, such as indigenous people, who were little able to pay. The limitations on various sorts of trade and production put people out of work, and the new monopoly enterprises resulted in rising prices. No wonder the period after 1750 saw widespread revolts and protests with economic motivations, a relatively new form of unrest. The people with the most at stake in this

situation were the native-born Spanish American and Brazilian ruling classes, who lost influence in all sorts of ways. The Bourbon and Pombaline reformers reasoned, logically enough, that colonial officials would have European interests most at heart when they were themselves Europeans, while the native-born elite was much more likely to defend its own local interests. Because European-born Spaniards and Portuguese were regarded as superior agents of imperial control, they received systematic preferment throughout the civil and ecclesiastical power structures. The proud heirs of the conquerors began to lose the judgeships and administrative positions that they had previously enjoyed, a tremendous blow to their pride and to their opportunities for social advancement. And native-born elites suffered in other ways from the reformers' tightening of colonial control, too, particularly when the reformers expelled the Jesuit order from both Brazil (1759) and Spanish America (1767). The Jesuits had offered a prestigious career path to capable young men of the New World, and they had provided rare educational opportunities to the ruling class. But the Jesuits had a habit of resisting royal authority, something that the reformers would not tolerate.

Young men of haughty elite families were bumping up against a glass ceiling just as socially climbing young men of more humble families crowded them from below. The late colonial period saw a marked rise in the portion of the population that was not white, not indigenous, and not African, but culturally and racially mixed. Mixed people were people-in-between. They occupied the middle rungs on the social ladder, with whites above them and Africans and indigenous people farther down. They were products of centuries of transculturation, speaking a variety of languages, well able to negotiate the various social worlds of the colonial environment, superbly adapted to succeed in their diverse social milieu.

Transculturation usually occurred along with some sort of race mixing. Obviously, transculturation can happen without any mixing of genes, and vice versa. Nevertheless, in Latin American history, transcultural mixing and race mixing go together.

Race mixing could mean several things here. It could mean social interaction and shared experience—rarely on a basis of equality, of course, but still meaningful in human terms—as when apprentice artisans of various colors labored and caroused together, or when white rural families spent their whole lives—their childhood, their workaday routine, their moments of deep personal significance—surrounded by slaves, indigenous people, or free people of mixed race. On the other hand, race mixing often meant sex as well. Inter-marriage among poor whites, blacks, and indigenous people was common, as were consensual partnerships. Often *not* consensual, or only superficially so, were the sexual encounters between social unequals of different race, as when “gentlemen” hired prostitutes or forced themselves on enslaved women.

The story of Xica da Silva is extreme rather than typical, memorable rather than anonymous. Xica became celebrated, and also notorious, in the diamond fields of Brazil. Her mother was African and her father was Portuguese. The riches of the diamond fields flowed into the pocket of the king’s royal diamond contractor. He could buy whatever he wanted. What he wanted was Xica da Silva for his mistress, but she did not come cheap. For her he had to provide rich clothing, a place of honor at church, a dozen maids-in-waiting, a park with artificial waterfalls, even an artificial lake with a miniature sailing ship. (Xica had always wanted to see the ocean.) Now she wore a powdered wig, and people came to her seeking access to her lover, the diamond contractor. One of her sons—not the diamond contractor’s—studied at European universities. Her disdainful reference to certain Portuguese visitors rang in people’s memories. “Butler,” she famously said, “take care of the *sailor boys*,” using the scornful Brazilian slang for Portuguese immigrants just off the boat. When she called the Portuguese “sailor boys,” Xica da Silva, a Brazilian woman of mixed race, was daring to look down on European men—flying in the face of the caste system.

To exercise control over colonial Latin American societies, the Iberian Crowns sorted people into fixed categories called *castes*, as in India. The caste system was all about pedigree, so it more or less corresponded to what people today call “race.” In practice, the



CASTE PAINTING from eighteenth-century Mexico. Caste paintings tried to systematize an unruly reality of race mixing. The painting's original caption reads, "Mestizo plus Indian equals Coyote." *De Agostini/G. Dagli Orti/Getty Images.*

caste system also factored in other characteristics, such as education, clothing, and especially wealth. "Money whitens," according to a famous phrase expressing the importance of wealth in the Latin American caste system. A person's caste classification was noted in the baptismal register at the time of baptism, and people of low caste were legally prevented from becoming priests, attending the university, wearing silk, owning weapons, and many other things. A person wholly of European descent occupied one category in the system, and a person entirely of African descent occupied another. That much is quite familiar from US race relations. But the child of a European and an African belonged to a third category—half European, half African, logically enough. There was a fourth category for a child with a European father and an indigenous mother, and a fifth for a child whose parents were indigenous and African. Indigenous

people had a category to themselves, making six. And this was just the beginning.

Members of these six categories continued to produce babies with each other, despite official rules against this, creating new people-in-between who confounded the categories and strained the system. At least in theory, caste categories proliferated geometrically—to sixteen or more, including some with animal names, *Lobo* and *Coyote*—during the last century of colonial rule. These names are from the 1700s in Mexico, where many series of paintings were commissioned to illustrate the caste system. Such caste paintings were titled, for example, *An Español and a Mulata make a Morisco*, with father, mother, and child shown in a domestic setting, each with the appropriate clothing, demeanor, and skin color. Caste paintings were sent to Spain, where imperial officials viewed them much as species classifications in natural history. Above all, these strange works were intended to help impose order on the unruly reality of race mixing. The dozen or so new caste names never really gained everyday currency, and they should be viewed mostly as a symptom of the strain that progressive race mixing was putting on the caste system by the late 1700s.

Also in these years, successful people of low caste (prosperous mule drivers or artisans, for example) presented a different challenge to the caste system. Perpetually in need of money, the Spanish Crown sometimes allowed such people to buy an official exemption that made them legally white and eligible to occupy positions of distinction and authority. This exemption was called *gracias al sacar*. Whites with little else going for them except for caste privilege complained bitterly about the sale of legal whiteness, saying it undermined the whole caste system. The sale of *gracias al sacar* also exemplified the Latin American tendency to think of race as a negotiable spectrum, a ladder that families might ascend. Families could climb the ladder, even without legal exemptions, when daughters and sons were able to marry “up”—which is to say, find partners lighter than themselves. Note, however, that moving “up” by marrying for skin color also meant buying into the logic of the caste system, with its premise of white superiority. Therefore, race mixing provides a tracer of transculturation (and cultural hegemony) in action.