

THE BIRTH OF SPANISH AMERICA

Even before the dust of imperial collapse had settled in Mexico and Peru, the Spanish began to parcel out the plunder of conquest. Some was treasure captured from indigenous royalty, but most took a form called *encomienda*, whereby the conquerors were rewarded with people. In this system, indigenous people were “entrusted” (the meaning of the word *encomienda*) to each conqueror, who had the responsibility

of Christianizing them and the privilege of making them work for him. Encomiendas of conquered Moors had been awarded aplenty during the Christian reconquest of Iberia, so it was a familiar system to the Spaniards. Conquerors who received encomiendas became much like European nobles, able to live from the labor of serflike farmers who delivered part of their crops as regular tribute. For indigenous farmers accustomed to paying tribute to imperial masters, the situation was familiar, too. Most often, the same city-states, villages, and clans that had once paid tribute to the Aztecs or Incas now paid tribute to the new Spanish overlords instead. Calamitous, repeated epidemics during the 1500s, comparable in severity to the Black Death of medieval Europe, reduced native populations to a fraction of their former size. But, unlike what occurred in the Caribbean or along the Brazilian coast, indigenous villages did not disappear from Mexico and Peru.

Whereas Tupi society was swept away by disease and replaced by Brazilian sugar plantations, the sedentary farming societies of central Mexico and the Andes survived, shaken but intact, for the Spanish to take over. The Spanish normally created encomiendas out of already existing communities with their own indigenous nobles, whom the Spanish called *caciques*.^{*} The Spanish conquerors cultivated relations with these nobles, sometimes marrying into their families. Gradually, however, Spanish conquest undercut the defeated warrior nobility of Aztec and Inca days, and indigenous people adopted Spanish-style village governments. In Mexico, village officials with Spanish titles conducted their business and kept written records in Nahuatl. Hundreds of Spanish words came into Nahuatl, of course, indicating the powerful impact of conquest, but the basic structure of the language survived, preserving a distinctly indigenous worldview.

Mexico officially became “New Spain,” but it was really two societies being grafted together, mostly by Spanish men and indigenous women. Spanish women, like Portuguese women in Brazil, were

^{*}*Cacique* is actually an Arawak word that the Spanish adopted in the Caribbean and later applied elsewhere.

few. In the early years of the Encounter, Spanish men in America outnumbered Spanish women roughly nine to one. So, within a few years, indigenous women and Spanish men became the parents of a legion of mestizo children, exactly as anticipated by Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter from Brazil. Malinche had Cortés's baby soon after the fall of Tenochtitlan.

What an intriguing figure is Malinche, a Spanish deformation of her indigenous name, Malintzin. She was one of twenty female slaves given to Cortés as he sailed up the Mexican coast seeking the Aztec Empire in 1519. She already spoke Maya and Nahuatl, and she learned Spanish in months. This astoundingly quick-witted and self-possessed sixteen-year-old girl became inseparable from Cortés and was instrumental in the capture of Moctezuma. Understandably, her life has been read as a romantic novel, but also as a betrayal of Mexico. It was neither. As for romance, Cortés summoned his Spanish wife, who was waiting in Cuba, then gave Malinche a bit of property and turned her away. As for betraying Mexico, that country did not yet exist, unless one refers to the Aztec Empire, and Malinche had good reason to hate the Aztecs. Although Nahuatl was her first language, her own family had sold her into slavery to the Mayas, which is how she learned that language. Malinche was more betrayed than betrayer. Cortés married her to one of his men, with whom she had a second child. She died, not yet twenty-five, only a few years later.

The Aztec princess Techichpotzín, baptized Isabel, was the daughter of Moctezuma. She became "Isabel Moctezuma," exemplifying the woman of indigenous nobility who could attract a Spanish husband because of her wealth. As the legitimate heiress of Moctezuma's personal fortune and the recipient of a desirable encomienda, Isabel attracted more than her share of husbands. Before her three Spanish husbands, she was married to two different leaders of the Aztec resistance in the last days of Tenochtitlan. She outlived four of her spouses, bore seven mestizo children, adapted to her new life, and became a model of Catholic devotion and a benefactor of religious charities. She lived to the respectable age of forty.

As the Aztec and Inca nobility declined and the number of Spanish women increased, fewer and fewer Spanish men married

indigenous women. Although Spanish men continued fathering unnumbered mestizo children, most were illegitimate and inherited little or nothing from their Spanish fathers. These children were “people-in-between”: not Europeans or Africans or indigenous Americans. Mestizo children were second-class people in the Spanish world, poor relations, if recognized at all. Malinche’s son by Cortés, Martín, became virtually a servant of his half-brother, also named Martín, Cortés’s son by his second Spanish wife.

Favorable marriages outweighed even extraordinary ability in the lives of women. The marriage contract was a pillar of the Spanish social structure, crucial to the distribution of property. Marriage was a religious sacrament, and religious conformity was serious business in the Spanish Empire.

Spanish conquest had meant an earthly and a spiritual conquest, the defeat of the old gods. Spanish churchmen arrived to

teach Catholic doctrine. They searched insistently for sacred objects that the indigenous people still preserved, hidden away, from their old religions—“idols,” in Catholic eyes. The priest and the holder of the *encomienda* stood side by side in many areas, as the only two representatives of Spanish authority. As had occurred during the Christianization of Europe centuries earlier, the conversion of kings (or, in America, caciques) brought whole communities into the church at once. In their haste to baptize, missionaries perfunctorily sprinkled holy water on indigenous people in mass ceremonies that did little to teach them Christianity. Still, the baptized could remember the imposition of other imperial state religions, for that was a pattern familiar from before the Encounter. Among sedentary peoples, the Spanish made a habit of erecting churches on sites already sacred to indigenous deities. The people of Tenochtitlan cannot have been surprised to see Spanish conquerors level the Aztec Great Temple and construct their cathedral on practically the same spot.

The fully sedentary people of central Mexico and Peru survived the Encounter infinitely better than did semisedentary people such as the Tupi. Still, the Encounter had a dire impact on settled agricultural societies, too. The Spanish often demanded more tribute than had indigenous overlords. For example, Andean villages had provided a labor draft called the *mita* to their Inca rulers, but after the conquest *mita* laborers were forced to do something new—toil in the shafts of deep silver mines, sometimes locked down for days. In addition, epidemic European diseases continued to decimate the indigenous population.

By the end of the 1500s, the basic contours of Latin American ethnicities were established. American, European, and African genes and cultures had begun to mix, creating rich potential for human diversity, but the violent and exploitative nature of the Encounter would sour the mix for centuries to come. In Brazil and the Caribbean region, Europeans and Africans took the place of the indigenous populations that were virtually wiped out. In Mexico and Peru, by contrast, Nahuatl- and Quechua-speaking societies survived to be gradually transformed. One way or the other, the original sin of Latin American

history—the festering social injustice at the core—had done its durable damage. How would more equitable, more inclusive communities ever emerge from the smoking ruins of conquest? The next step, systematic colonization, the creation of entire social systems geared to serve the interests of distant masters in Europe, only made matters worse.