CHAPTER TWENTY
EUROPEANS, INDIANS, AND AFRICANS IN THE MAKING OF COLONIAL SOCIETIES

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INTRODUCTION
The origins of modern Iberian societies were rooted in the centuries-long process of Christian reoccupation of territories in the Iberian peninsula that from the early eighth century had been held by Muslims. Although the Reconquista was mostly completed by the mid-thirteenth century, the Iberian monarchies continued to expand southward into North Africa and islands of the Mediterranean and subsequently the Atlantic. Although in North Africa, Iberian initiatives failed to take them beyond fortified strongholds and in sub-Saharan Africa trading posts (feitorias) predominated, the Atlantic Ocean offered many attractive areas that would be occupied by the expanding powers from the early fifteenth century onwards, first in the islands and then in the territories that would come to be known as the Americas.

As in the Middle Ages, Iberian dealings with native societies entailed a complex mix of conflict, cooperation, exchange, exploitation, and adaptation. Iberian Atlantic societies were diverse from the outset, a characteristic that intensified with the growing importance of the transatlantic trade in African slaves. Colonial societies also varied greatly according to location, demographic composition, economic activities, and relationships with other places and the metropolis itself. This diversity and variability were reflected in the urban networks that developed and the nature and role of towns of cities and their relationship to their rural hinterlands. The need to recruit labour for Iberian enterprises had enormous consequences for everything from the sites of European settlement and reliance on coerced labour in several forms to the laws and ideologies that contributed to the ordering of colonial societies.

The occupation of the Atlantic islands in the fifteenth century set patterns that subsequently played an important role in Iberian America. This chapter will begin by emphasising the novel use of enslaved labour and sugar cultivation on the islands and consider settlement and European-indigenous-African interaction in the sixteenth-century Caribbean and Brazilian coast. Although they were foundational in the
formation of American societies, these regions have been neglected in the scholarship that, for the most part, has followed the trajectory of Iberian expansion to focus on the wealthy and populous regions of mainland Spanish America. These areas will be analysed in the next part of the chapter, which explores the development of urban networks and the social transformations that they fostered, with due attention to the differences between Spanish and Portuguese America. Last, it examines the unprecedented mixing of Europeans, indigenous Americans, and Africans in a variety of settings that remade social hierarchies based on multiple criteria of stratification, giving rise to new groups, new elites, and new identities.

**ATLANTIC PRECEDENTS**

The establishment of overseas Iberian colonial societies began in the early fifteenth century with the conquest and settlement of the islands located in the Atlantic and close to the African coast: Madeira, Azores, Cape Verde, São Tomé, and the Canaries (the only one occupied by the Spanish). As there were no native populations in the archipelagos claimed by the Portuguese, it seemed easy to transfer Portuguese society to these new lands. In order to avoid spending the crown’s limited resources, the king turned the islands into private captaincies that would be ruled by a few aristocrats and lower-ranking nobles. In turn, these individuals, entitled *donatários*, would foster migration and invest in the new-born economies. A landowning elite quickly took shape, monopolising the land through intermarriage and creation of entails, even more common in Madeira and the Azores than in the Iberian peninsula. Although many of them were not of noble stock, they all adopted the seigniorial ideal of “living nobly” with servants, horses, and manors, wielding local political power and rendering services to king and crown in war, such as in the many conflicts of North Africa.

Though the Canary Islands had been known to Iberians since the fourteenth century, it was only toward the end of the fifteenth century that the Hispanic occupation started in earnest, after the resolution of a lengthy diplomatic dispute with the Portuguese guaranteed them sovereignty over the archipelago. The fierce resistance of the *guanches*, the original inhabitants of the islands, required protracted wars of conquest, setting precedents that would later play out on a much larger scale in the Americas. Some indigenous groups allied with the Spanish, while others were enslaved. A few were even sold to Madeira and the Iberian peninsula. Most of the rest were coerced into working for their conquerors. Thanks to disease, exploitation and the destruction of native communities, the aboriginal population was almost wiped out in a matter of decades.

Colonists needed to develop economic enterprises to sustain themselves. Wheat was profitably planted, but in the mid-fifteenth century sugar was transplanted to Madeira from Algarve, in southern Portugal, and afterwards to the Canaries from Andalusia. Thanks to European demand, sugar prices were high, and the start of Atlantic slave trade with West Africa at this time allowed planters to buy enslaved Africans for their medium-sized farms. Nevertheless, most of the labour was provided by landless men of European descent, forced to work for wages because elites had already monopolised access to most arable land in the islands.
The tropical climate of Cape Verde and São Tomé and the distance from Portugal did not favor sustained European immigration. The slave trade and sugar production attracted a few men, while *degredados* (convicted exiles) were sent there, including many New Christian boys, recently converted from Judaism. But the overwhelming majority of the population consisted of enslaved Africans and a growing number of freed people, many of them born of Euro-African informal unions and manumitted by their fathers. São Tomé became the first Iberian slave society and the world’s largest sugar exporter in the sixteenth century, setting a template of large-scale production and slave labor that would cross the Atlantic almost immediately. The decline of the slave trade and of the sugar business in the second half of the sixteenth century made the islands even less attractive to Portuguese migrants, opening the door for the consolidation of insular elites known as “whites of the land”—mulattoes descended from Portuguese who willed their wealth to their usually illegitimate mixed-blood progeny (Caldeira 2011).

Aside from providing models that would be adapted to the New World, these islands also functioned as important connections for the extension of commercial and supply networks. Starting with Columbus, the Canaries became an essential steppingstone for ships departing for the Americas, while Madeira and Azores played a similar role in the Portuguese Atlantic; Spanish ships departing the Caribbean commonly stopped in the Azores as well. Cape Verde and São Tomé were instrumental in the beginnings of the Middle Passage, linking them to the Caribbean in the sixteenth century through the slave trade.

**CARIBBEAN AND BRAZILIAN BEGINNINGS**

Columbus’ initial transatlantic voyage of 1492 marked the beginning of a continuing and quickly growing European presence in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean. Columbus and others used Española, and later the other large islands of the northern Caribbean, as bases from which to survey and then occupy other islands and nearby mainland territories—Venezuela and the isthmian region (*Tierra Firme*), then Florida, Yucatan, and Mexico. Columbus returned to Española in 1493 with several ships. They began construction of a walled town on Española’s north coast (Deagan and Cruxent 2002). Although Spaniards subsequently preferred to establish their towns close to, or even at the very site of, native communities, Isabela was built in an area of fairly sparse indigenous settlement, a decision that probably contributed to its failure.

Isabela proved uncharacteristic of settlement and society in the islands or later in the mainland in other ways as well. Although Europeans tried to initiate agriculture nearby and the walled town took shape quickly, the severity of Columbus’ regime and the mercantile model he sought to impose proved unworkable. Influenced by his seafaring experience in the Mediterranean and along the African coast and his expectations of encountering wealthy trading peoples, Columbus designed a town along the lines of a Portuguese *feitoria* to serve as a locus for trade and collection of goods to be shipped back to Spain and afford protection from attack. Almost all the people who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage were his employees, and many were suffering from exhaustion, illness, and hunger and soon returned to Europe or sought refuge elsewhere on the island.
An early “rebel” against Columbus, Francisco Roldán established himself among the indigenous communities in España’s fertile and populous interior, where he and other men forged what they hoped would be advantageous kinship relations. This practice of forming relations with indigenous communities to gain access to their labour quickly took hold and was later reproduced in places as far away as Paraguay. The natives initially might have understood these relationships as a way to form alliances they could use vis-à-vis other Spaniards or indigenous rivals. There also might have been a perceived prestige in marrying one’s daughter to the newcomers. When fray Nicolás de Ovando arrived in 1502 as royal governor he formalised rather than attempted to eliminate the practice. These allocations of labour were called *repartimientos* and their holders *encomenderos*. Only later did the term *encomienda* come into common usage.

The Laws of Burgos (1512) represented the first attempt to regulate Spanish access to indigenous labour and to afford some protections to the Indians. They further institutionalised the *encomienda* and mandated the Christianisation of the Indians. When Spaniards occupied mainland areas where populations and socio-political entities were larger and more complex, the *encomienda* in turn evolved further, entitling the holder to collect tribute as well as to use the labour of a specified group or community. Therefore, pre-existing native structures and practices were of utmost importance in determining many characteristics of these colonial societies in the making.

In the first couple of generations after Spanish occupation of much of Mesoamerica and the Andean region, the *encomienda* was the most important institution for providing indigenous labour for Spanish use and tying the productivity of the indigenous countryside to Spanish towns and cities. Therefore, the *encomenderos* quickly became the elite of these new colonial societies. Many of them were *conquistadores*, while others arrived later but benefited from connections with high-ranking officials. High status and close association with crown officials usually meant one was awarded bigger and more valuable *encomiendas*, reinforcing inequalities that crossed the Atlantic and creating new ones at the same time (Lockhart [1968] 1994, 11–54).

The New Laws promulgated in 1542, however, limited succession to the grants to one generation. Together with increasing competition for access to an ever smaller pool of native labour and the willingness of royal officials to move *encomienda* grants from private control into the royal domain, the New Laws undermined the strength of the *encomendero* group and diminished the *encomienda*’s importance as an institution in central Mexico and Peru, although in more outlying areas such as Paraguay it remained important much longer, especially in the (illegal) form of personal service, for a while enmeshed with indigenous traditions of personal dependence.

Although the Caribbean generally has been overlooked as a significant arena for Spanish activity and seen principally as the launching-grounds for subsequent conquest and colonisation, in fact a number of other precedents were set there as well. Royal officials—treasurers, factors, accountants—appeared on the scene early. Representatives of religious orders built monasteries and churches and established schools for the sons of caciques and Spaniards, while bishops headed clerical establishments centred on cathedrals. The privileges of the Colón family created
problems for the Spanish Crown with respect to the imposition of royal authority, but after some experimentation an audiencia or high court was established in Santo Domingo to act as the highest governing authority in the islands. Audiencias subsequently were created for all the capital cities in Spanish America. The Caribbean experience was, then, foundational, because it was in these islands that the trappings of Iberian society were first refashioned in the New World.

The officials of church and state formed part of the core of elite society in the large islands of Española, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as they would do later on the mainland. Royal and local officials played an active and often leading role in the economic life of the islands, holding encomiendas and involving themselves directly in the principal economic activities of gold mining, pearl fishing, commerce, and commercial agriculture. The full participation of officials in local society and the economic diversification that they and other wealthy individuals practiced subsequently became standard throughout Spanish and Portuguese America.

Initially the lure of gold mines meant that the islands attracted large numbers of mostly single young men. Gold mining and pearl fishing benefited the crown as well as some of the wealthier and better-connected men in the islands, but for the majority the promise of gold proved elusive. Even as they shifted to cattle ranching or commercial agriculture, the economic basis for many residents faltered as the indigenous population declined. By the 1520s officials in the islands were complaining about despoblación, meaning both the departure of many Spaniards for other destinations and the drastic reduction in the indigenous population. Yet the islands did not depopulate. Spaniards imported increasing numbers of Africans to supplement their dwindling labour force as well as Indians captured in slave raids that drew thousands of people from Yucatan, Central America, Venezuela, and as far away as Brazil and emptied out so-called “useless” islands like the Bahamas. Rural estates soon came to depend on mixed labouring forces consisting of encomienda Indians, Indian slaves, and dependents called naborías (usually Indians brought from elsewhere), and African slaves, while Spanish-headed households included Indian and African slaves and servants as well as Spanish and mixed-race retainers. Even where Spanish wives were present, as probably became the dominant pattern for households in the larger cities within a couple of generations, they presided over ethnically and culturally diverse households. As a result, before the mid-sixteenth century island societies already resembled the multi-ethnic societies associated with the Spanish America of a later era.

The Caribbean and circum-Caribbean were notable as well for the internationalism that characterised them from the time that Europeans first arrived. Columbus was Genoese, and the Genoese played an important part in the early economy of the islands, helping to extend commercial networks connecting the Caribbean to Seville and the Canaries as well as to sources of slaves from Cape Verde especially, and sometimes settling in the islands. The Portuguese arrived on the scene early both as traders and settlers. Spanish officials at times actively encouraged Portuguese migration, especially that of married couples and families, perhaps influenced by the example of the Portuguese who had settled in the Canaries. Whether formally recruited or not, the numbers of Portuguese who settled in the islands and circum-Caribbean were substantial and may have helped to account for relatively low levels of Portuguese migration to Brazil in the same period, as Portuguese might have opted
for destinations under Spanish control which they saw as offering better economic opportunities. The internationalisation of the region did not stop there, however. By virtue of their connections to the Habsburgs, the Welsers, a German banking family, received the right to exploit and settle Venezuela. The French were active throughout the Caribbean and along the Atlantic rim of South America, raiding Spanish ports and attacking Spanish shipping and establishing a presence along the Brazilian coast that through much of the sixteenth century rivalled that of the Portuguese and in Florida as well. The English presence was more limited in the early sixteenth century, but they too showed interest in the Atlantic coasts of North America and Brazil as early as the 1530s. The Caribbean islands, and to a lesser extent the Brazilian coast, quickly became diverse, complex, and multinational.

Portuguese beginnings in Brazil were slower, probably because of their involvement in Asia and Africa and because they failed to find in Brazil a commodity as compelling as gold or pearls. Nonetheless, the Portuguese established a lasting presence there in the early sixteenth century, the main economic attraction being a valuable dyewood for which they bartered, offering European trade goods in return to the Amerindians that inhabited the coast. These semi-sedentary indigenous groups collectively known as Tupinambá understood their relationship with the newcomers as gift exchanging, essential to the creation of alliances and friendships.

In the early years there were no towns but rather feitorias along the coast where brazilwood was collected and then loaded on ships. The Portuguese and French were probably equally active in this trade, although the French did not establish forts but rather lived in indigenous communities. Both the Portuguese and French depended on their alliances with indigenous groups to function, as would be the case elsewhere as well. From the Caribbean to Brazil, New Spain, and Peru, such alliances greatly facilitated and indeed enabled Spanish and Portuguese expansion into, and eventual domination, of American territories. Native peoples had their reasons to cooperate with Europeans and understood these relationships on their own terms. Some avoided slavery this way, others enjoyed minor privileges—or at least kept part of their land. Many were moved to ally with Europeans by the prospect of defeating their traditional enemies.

Given a minimal official presence in Brazil in the early sixteenth century, a small number of men who acquired linguistic skills and familiarity with indigenous cultures acted as intermediaries between the Portuguese and indigenous groups, exercising a good deal of influence. Some of these men were degredados exiled from Portugal, while others had survived shipwrecks or voluntarily lived at least part of the time among Brazil’s natives. In the 1530s the Portuguese undertook an ambitious project to colonise all of Brazil, dividing it into 15 captaincies to be settled by private individuals, donatários, at their own cost. It was an expansion of the model that had proved partially successful in the Atlantic islands.

For the most part the scheme failed, but captaincies such as São Vicente and Pernambuco succeeded, thanks to the establishment of alliances with some indigenous groups, which guaranteed the provision of labour and military support. Informal liaisons and sometimes even marriages between Portuguese men and native women were instrumental in cementing these alliances, as was the case of the union between Jerônimo de Albuquerque, cousin of Pernambuco’s donatário, and the
daughter of a principal, baptised as Maria do Espírito Santo Arco Verde, which gave birth to numerous mestiço sons and daughters who perpetuated the Albuquerque surname (Monteiro 1999). Many of their descendants were part of the local elite, and a few even went on to become knights, fidalgos and governors in the king’s service.

These capitancies were also home to the beginnings of the sugar industry in Portuguese America. Sugar planters in both the islands and Brazil faced the challenge of finding a workforce for this labour-intensive enterprise. In the Caribbean islands, where indigenous populations already were sharply reduced (or in São Tomé, where they did not exist), the main response was to expand the importation of African slaves; by the 1530s some estates boasted African slave labour forces of 50 to 100 or more. In Brazil, where substantial indigenous populations still were close at hand, Portuguese planters turned to the enslavement of the Indians who were enemies of their indigenous allies. As time went on, the definition of enmity was stretched to justify the enslavement of an ever-greater number of natives to supply the labour demands of a slowly growing population of colonists. Demographic catastrophe was hastened by the spread of European diseases and the destruction of native communities. At around the same time in post-conquest Mexico sugar cultivation got underway in the area of Cuernavaca and Tuxtla in order to supply the incipient local market. One of the principal forces behind the initiation of sugar production there was renowned conqueror Hernando Cortés. Recipient of vast estates and encomienda grants as the Marqués de Oaxaca, he relied on a mixed labour force of encomienda and enslaved Indians and small numbers of enslaved Africans (Barrett 1970). Sugar cultivation also got underway in northern coastal Peru, where Africans represented an important part of the labour force although they were still far outnumbered by Amerindians.

**URBAN PLACES AND NETWORKS**

Town founding was the hallmark of Spanish settlement in the Americas. The strongly urban orientation of Iberian society meant that economic enterprises, administrative and ecclesiastical institutions, and social and cultural life concentrated in towns and cities. Under the division theoretically established in the mid-sixteenth century between the república de indios and the república de españoles (Indian and Spanish Commonwealths) to protect the natives from overexploitation and avoid an even greater demographic disaster than the one already underway, the rural world would be the preserve of the Indian majority, while Spaniards would reside in their towns; for all practical purposes, though, the separation existed more in principle than reality.

The establishment of cities and urban networks in the Americas did not always proceed smoothly, however. Often it proved difficult to choose optimal sites for towns, whether because of climate and topography, relations with indigenous groups, or economic change over time. The Caribbean offers many such examples. Española’s first town, Isabela, was abandoned, and Santo Domingo, founded on the south coast in 1496, within a decade moved from the right to the left bank of the Ozama River.

Perhaps the most famous town foundation of early Spanish America was that of Veracruz on Mexico’s Gulf Coast, where Cortés’ men created a municipality
before any physical structures existed in order to legitimise Cortés’ plans to move into the interior. Everywhere town founding served as both the symbol and vehicle of Spanish dominion over territory, as a result of which a network of towns on the mainland came into existence with almost astonishing speed, with towns often located at the very centres of indigenous society (Tenochtitlan, Cuzco) or in close proximity to them. Encomenderos and landowners (often one and the same) lived in Spanish-created towns and cities while their employees managed their rural properties, organised labour, and collected tribute. These employees often lived full-time on estates or in nearby Indian towns, creating the basis for a slowly growing Hispanic presence in the countryside. Indigenous towns and communities survived but over time could be transformed by the growing presence of Spaniards, mestizos, or Indians who migrated from other places, the imposition of Spanish municipal structures, Christianisation and clerical influence, tribute demands, and the introduction of Spanish-type commercial enterprises.

Although most of the new towns of the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean (Santo Domingo, San Juan, Havana, and Cartagena) and in Brazil were ports, elsewhere the urban network was oriented toward the centre of political power in the interior. Although ports like Veracruz, Acapulco, or Nombre de Dios were economically important, for much of the colonial period they were unimpressive places with substantial transient populations of mariners and traders, some of whom were foreigners, with more stable populations consisting mostly of people from the non-white, non-elite groups of society. If major towns and the routes that connected them tended to replicate pre-existing indigenous patterns, mining towns, like ports, mainly were innovations in the landscape. Brazil lacked indigenous foundations for its towns, and the decimated Amerindian population did not provide a demographic basis for the creation of full-fledged urban networks.

Although initially Spanish town planning and construction were fairly rudimentary due to lack of specialists (architects, skilled masons) and sometimes the necessary materials, the now-famous grid plan prevailed in most urban foundations, perhaps in part because of the relative ease with which it could be laid out. Mining towns, however, might follow the haphazard layout of the camps, and port cities often were oriented toward the harbour rather than a central plaza. They also featured defensive structures (fortifications, walls) seldom found in other towns. Regardless of morphology, most towns and cities shared in common the basic features associated with Iberian municipalities, that is, churches, town halls, jails, hospitals, and an open plaza around which the wealthiest members of society built their homes.

The wealthier members of colonial urban society maintained large households—casas pobladas—that in addition to immediate family members included other relatives and retainers as well as Indian, African, and mixed-race slaves and servants. Indians, Africans, and people of African or mixed descent performed virtually all the menial and unskilled labour needed to maintain households and urban systems of supply and sanitation as well as much of the semi-skilled and, increasingly, skilled labour of production. Artisans ran workshops and obrajes filled with apprentices, slaves, and servants of all races, thus acting as sites for transmission of technology and skills associated with European culture to people of non-European descent. As a result, towns and cities were home to diverse populations in constant contact, even in the trazas or centres ostensibly reserved for the upper classes. The standard urban
pattern featured a concentration of institutional headquarters and the houses of the wealthy in the centre, surrounded by the more outlying neighbourhoods or *barrios* of Indians who had lived in those places before Europeans arrived or subsequently migrated there permanently or temporarily, either voluntarily or under pressure, from the countryside. In major urban centres like Mexico City not only were indigenous *barrios* extensive, native residents maintained their own quasi-autonomous governing institutions and officials, modified along Spanish lines yet retaining much of their older meaning and function. Even in entirely new urban creations like Puebla de los Angeles in Mexico or Lima in Peru, indigenous *barrios* quickly took shape around the Spanish centre.

Almost inevitably Brazilian towns were smaller and less diverse as Portuguese America was much less populous than its Spanish counterpart: for instance, Potosí had 160,000 inhabitants in 1610 while the Brazilian capital and largest city, Salvador, had no more than 6,000 in the same year. Therefore, Brazil's main urban centre was no more than a small provincial hub in the wider context of the Iberian New World. In fact, at that time around 50% more people lived in Potosí alone than in all areas of the New World under actual Portuguese control.

Even though there was no concept of formal division between two *Repúblicas* as in Spanish America, most of the non-enslaved natives under Portuguese dominion lived in *aldeias* similar to Spanish *reducciones*, under the authority of religious orders (mainly the Jesuits). Indigenous groups sometimes worked for colonists and received meagre wages, being therefore an active part of colonial society, but they likely had to shoulder a lighter burden than their Spanish American counterparts, because a growing number of enslaved Africans and a diminishing pool of enslaved Amerindians performed most of the required labour. As free people of colour were still a very small group, Brazilian towns at the dawn of the seventeenth century were divided between Portuguese (most of them poor) and slaves. Their social structure was not markedly different from the rural world, apart from a somewhat smaller proportion of slaves and a significant number of transient men who came and went with the fleets.

**THE GROWTH OF IBERIAN AMERICAN SOCIETIES**

Europeans, Africans, and indigenous Americans interacted in a range of settings and relationships. Notwithstanding the numerical superiority of indigenous populations, devastating epidemics, conflict, the recruitment of native auxiliaries for military campaigns, dislocation and relocation of native groups, and European labour demands all worked to reduce their numbers, reconfigure geographic, ethnic, and linguistic patterns, and make Native Americans and their communities increasingly vulnerable to external threats and influences. Where Indians lived and worked in closest contact with Iberians or culturally Hispanic people—in households, on estates, in mines—the impact of European-introduced language, religion, and technology was greatest. Indians who continued to reside in their own communities all or much of the time were able to retain older traditions and practices to a much greater extent, although almost invariably the colonial world fostered change. For instance, many natives were forced to move, either to comply with or to escape from
taxation and European demand for labour, a phenomenon that seems to have been specially pronounced in the Andes, perhaps because of the mita (the rotating coerced labour system that lasted much longer in the region than in New Spain) and pre-Hispanic traditions of movement that connected highlands and lowlands.

Movement was obviously central to the European and African experience, but in very different ways. Although some free Africans or African-descended people emigrated from Europe, the vast majority of Africans were forced to cross the Atlantic against their will. Having done so, they occupied a wide range of positions and performed an array of tasks, acting in the earliest years as an extension of the European presence due to their shared familiarity with the technology, livestock, agriculture, and mining techniques of the “Old World”. Although their enslaved status imposed severe constraints on Africans’ mobility and the choices they could exercise, flight, marronage, relatively independent work situations, and manumission all meant that Africans and African-descended peoples in the Americas at times gained some or even a good deal of autonomy.

Their condition, though, varied greatly according to the labour regime under which they worked. In most of Spanish America they were an auxiliary labour force: even though they might have outnumbered the Spaniards in core areas such as Mexico City, their numbers were dwarfed by the indigenous majority. Therefore, they mainly worked in supervisory capacities and specialised tasks, while the most arduous tasks were often delegated to Amerindians. This situation, coupled with the market opportunities available in the dynamic urban centres of Spanish America, gave rise to a significant number of free people of African descent. African women were among the main beneficiaries of manumission thanks to their active participation in urban markets and sometimes their personal relationships with their owners, both male and female. Children also had better prospects for manumission, especially those of mixed parentage who had free relatives to intervene on their behalf or even buy their freedom.

After the formation of the first American slave societies in the Caribbean in the sixteenth century (Wheat 2016), enslaved Africans became the key labour force and the majority of the population in the main centres of Brazil and some coastal regions of Spanish America, such as cacao-producing Venezuela, in the first half of the seventeenth century, largely as a result of the steep demographic decline suffered by the indigenous population and the profits from the exportation of agricultural commodities. In the second decade of the seventeenth century Brazil surpassed Spanish America to become the largest importer of enslaved Africans in the New World. Doing the backbreaking labour required for cane growing and manufacturing it into sugar, they had fewer opportunities to achieve manumission in Brazil than in the Caribbean or the urban centres of Mexico and Peru. Gradually, however, Africans and their descendants filled an increasing number of lower-level occupations in the growing cities and skilled jobs on sugar estates, starting a trend that would boom in the eighteenth century.

With the exception of degredados sent to Brazil and some of the questionable individuals who accompanied Columbus on his early voyages, most Iberian emigrants exercised choice about when, how, and where to move. The Spanish Crown tried to regulate who could travel to the Indies, hoping to prevent the emigration of people considered undesirable and to restrict the long-term absence of men who left behind
wives and children. Although in the earliest years single young men predominated in
the movement of people from Europe to the Americas, over time the participation of
women increased and migrants included a growing number of married couples, with
and without children, attracted by economic opportunities and frequently by the
presence in the Indies of relatives or patrons who had preceded them. The import-
ance of family and kinship in decisions regarding emigration meant that it often was
more a collective than an individual undertaking. Wealthy men and high-ranking
officials of church and state brought large entourages of relatives, retainers, and
protégés, and people often arranged to travel with or follow other family members
or friends. Emigrants represented a broad spectrum of Iberian society, from the
higher echelons to the lower, although the very rich and the truly impoverished were
unlikely to move, the former because they already were well situated and the latter
because they probably lacked the patronage ties that would gain them a place as a
servant (criado) or retainer.

Migration to Brazil might have been less socially representative, though, as the
stream was smaller than the one directed to Spanish America. While estimates of
migrants to the latter run as high as 450,000 people in the first two centuries of
colonisation, migration to Brazil surely amounted to no more than a third of this
number. Nevertheless, assessments are sketchier, as the Portuguese did not regulate
transoceanic migration and therefore kept no records that could be explored by
future historians.

The transatlantic journey might be only one of a series of moves undertaken by
emigrants. After arriving in the Indies people often moved on or returned home to
visit or to remain. Mariners, merchants, and merchants’ factors travelled back and
forth across the Atlantic on a regular basis. Visitors and permanent returnees played
important roles in communicating information about life in the Indies and encour-
aging relatives and acquaintances to emigrate (Altman 1989).

Amerindians, Africans, Iberians, and their descendants, often of mixed blood, thus
formed complex societies in the Americas. These social formations inherited their
basic hierarchies from Europe but all were transformed by the presence of a majority
population of non-European descent and a plethora of new labour regimes. Social
stratification was both quite distinct from the Old World and diversified among the
different regions in the Americas. Inequality was characteristic of all Iberian societies
in the Americas. There were multiple criteria of stratification, based on rank, wealth,
occupation, religion, ethnicity, phenotype, gender, and behaviour. Power and prestige
derived from these criteria were very unevenly distributed, even if we judge them by
European standards at the time. At a higher level, these resources were wielded by a
small number of families and there was a strong tendency for them to cluster around
the same individuals, who fulfilled all criteria at the same time—or at least could
believably pretend to do so (Schwartz 1985, 245–254).

Elite families were rich thanks to their control of land and labour, though their
prosperity varied greatly. Some miners amassed huge fortunes quite quickly, but
they could lose them even faster, making it difficult to establish dynasties or even
coalesce into a coherent group, thanks to the mercurial nature of mining, an activity
where luck played an outsized role. Miners’ dependency on credit also meant they
could easily find themselves bankrupt if their mines were exhausted. Merchants also
could be much better-off than landowners, but they were still under landed elites
in the social pecking order in most places. Therefore, many of the more successful merchants and miners bought land and office and married into established families. There was, then, some integration between the individuals at the top of the different sectors of the economy, and most elite families in Spanish America had diversified economic interests. It was not uncommon for a wealthy clan to have stakes in land, mining, commerce, public office, and even manufacturing (the obrasjes, one of the mainstays of Quito’s elite). The market was an essential arena for the formation, reproduction and fall of colonial elites everywhere. Nevertheless, in less populated and economically integrated areas, such as seventeenth-century Brazil, elites commonly relied on a single product—sugar, for example—for the overwhelming majority of their income.

Wealth was never, though, the only thing that set elites apart. The ideal of a noble life defined by owning land, exercising dominion over others, and above all not working with one’s own hands was a powerful one, although it was only possible to enact it if one had the means to pay for this expensive lifestyle. Powerful families quickly attempted to shore up their standing through intermarriage, selective absorption of outsiders who could boast noble credentials or wealth, land grabbing, and monopolisation of local offices (Fragoso and Krause 2019). After the upheavals of the first century of colonisation, the second half of the seventeenth century was a time of oligarchical consolidation in most areas, such as the sugar-producing Lambayeque valley in northern Peru (Ramírez 1986). Increasingly, many also sought badges of honour characteristic of European elites such as membership in military orders to affirm publicly their (often newfound) noble status, especially in central areas such as Mexico and Bahia. Nevertheless, creole titled aristocrats were exceedingly rare in Spanish America before the eighteenth century, when they became relatively common in Peru and Mexico, while they were non-existent in Brazil until the arrival of the Portuguese Court in 1808.

The existence of a multitude of subordinated natives allowed numerous Iberians to act on this noble ideal, even though many more had their dreams denied by the harsh reality of inequality. Therefore, the making of colonial societies was a moment of accelerated social mobility: the Iberian minority could enjoy their superiority over the majority of non-Europeans, while newly minted elites achieved heights that would be unthinkable if they had stayed in their Old-World hometowns. Even after the conquest there was significant circulation at the top, as American elites had trouble keeping honours and rewards granted to them by the king and their formal privileges frequently eroded. Therefore, few of the first families established during the sixteenth century survived until 1700, and many of their substitutes had more wealth than lineage to back their claims to prominence (Raminelli 2015).

The picture of Iberian overlords exercising dominion over indigenous peoples is a simplification, though, because there was great variation among the positions occupied by Europeans and natives, especially in the core regions of Spanish America, where there were indigenous elites that forged relationships with the Spaniards and accumulated wealth through exploitation of their subjects and participation in the market. Miscegenation represents a further complication. In the first generation there were very few European women in the New World. Therefore, consensual and coerced relationships produced many mixed-blood children in formal and (more commonly) informal unions. Some of them were raised in Iberian society, and
afterwards many elite families took pride in their indigenous ancestors—as long as they were sufficiently removed in time not to be an embarrassment. In the post-conquest generation mixed-blood daughters often were valued in a marriage market with few European women and many suitors who wanted to forge connections with established families.

Most mestizos were not part of the elite, though, and they quickly started to be categorised as a “new kind of people” apart from their parent groups, meriting a specific denomination. The growing number of Europeans gradually downgraded the position of mixed-blood people in Iberian society, making acceptance more difficult and reinforcing prejudices. Nevertheless, their social status was ambiguous and flexible, determined more by their social network than by their genealogies (Rappaport 2014). In peripheral areas with few European settlers and a labour force mainly composed of coerced and enslaved natives, such as Paraguay, Maranhão, and São Paulo, miscegenation was even more widespread and mixed-blood children fit more easily in Ibero-American society.

Social stratification became even more complex because of the presence of African-descended peoples. Prejudice against them was even stronger because of both the stigma of slavery and their greater phenotypical difference from Europeans. Iberian society emphasised genealogy as an important marker of status, even more so because from the mid-fifteenth century onwards “purity of blood” (not having Jewish or Muslim ancestors) gradually became a focal point for Iberian definitions of honour. Those who were deemed “impure” were thought to have an innate inclination to heresy and treason and therefore suffered discrimination. Although New Christians were legally banned from migrating to the New World, they crossed the Atlantic in significant numbers, guaranteeing that this divide would continue to be relevant in the Americas.

As descent and religion were the basis for this prejudice, it could be easily transformed to encompass blacks and mixed-blood people, who would be strongly discriminated against—something facilitated by the physical differences between them and Iberians. Nevertheless, phenotype and genealogy never were the sole criteria for classification, as behaviour, dress, and wealth also determined how someone would be seen by society. These classifications were a process, always in flux, not set in stone but determined by specific circumstances (Martínez 2008). This classification effort started earlier and went further in Spanish America, but it can also be discerned in Brazil, for as the small, free mixed-blood group started to grow in the second half of the seventeenth century, prejudices against mulattos became stronger.

As discriminatory classifications were an unstable process, ethnic status was not determined by government fiat. It was an arena of conflict between various social groups and institutions, and elite definitions did not determine plebeian identity. There was significant social and spatial mobility, and people defined their identities according to their possibilities and needs at any given time. Therefore, the need for classification might appear only when one entered into contact with crown, Church, or local officials. For most of the free population, including some of European descent, poverty was an equalizer, though within certain limits: all groups tended toward endogamy, but there was a significant incidence of interethic relationships (sexual and otherwise), mainly among blacks, mestizos, and mulattos. Social control was not guaranteed by ethnic segregation and repression, but rather by patron-client
relationships that permeated the whole social fabric. Clients depended upon their social superiors for work, housing, or charity, and therefore were forced to acquiesce at their patrons’ demands. Economic constraints and socio-ethnic discrimination acted in tandem to reproduce unequal hierarchies (Cope 1994).

Honour was defined, then, by lifestyle, status and socio-ethnic classification. Nevertheless, it went beyond these criteria, for it was also directly related to gender. Female sexuality should be controlled by men so that it would express itself only in Church-sanctioned relationships. Failure to do so revealed what was thought a shameful inability to control one’s own household. Perhaps even more importantly, women played an essential role in intergenerational transfer of property and prestige through dowries and inheritance, but they could not perform this task if their sexual behaviour was deemed improper, as it would cast doubts about her children’s paternity. Nevertheless, it is prudent not to overemphasise this obsession with female honour as it was a characteristic most salient in the upper classes. For most women of all ethnicities, public participation in the market was essential to their families’ survival. Illegitimacy rates were much higher among the free population in the Americas than in the Iberian peninsula and even higher among slaves, a likely consequence of the extreme economic and socio-ethnic inequalities that facilitated female exploitation and made an expensive church marriage inaccessible to large segments of the population. This situation was especially marked in cities such as Lima, where only half of all baptised children were legitimate (Mannarelli 2007). Many women needed, then, to provide for themselves and their children, and some achieved a significant degree of economic success and financial independence.

In marriage, as in so much else, the Church played an essential role. It was not only an institution but an integral part of people’s daily lives. For Iberians, Catholicism was a central main tenet of their identity. Many elite families sent their sons and daughters into ecclesiastical careers as a strategy to avoid the division of their wealth and because the accumulated social and economic resources of the Church allowed its members to wield a significant amount of power. Nuns and monks managed capital that functioned as one of the main credit sources available for the colonial economy and maintained close relationships with lay society. For some women the cloister could mean liberation from patriarchal authority and a way to assert their personal autonomy, as Kathryn Burns (1999) has emphasised in her study of the great convents of Cuzco. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the Church was far more developed in Spanish than in Portuguese America. For instance, Brazil’s first convent was founded in 1677, at a time when New Spain alone had more than 30 such institutions.

As the Church was so important in colonial societies, it is not surprising that new colonial identities were first clearly articulated within ecclesiastical institutions. In Spanish America at the turn of the seventeenth century, Creoles felt slighted by a monarchy that did not continue to reward those who descended from conquistadores as much as those beneméritos felt was their right. Reacting against Peninsular prejudice, Creole clergies in Mexico and Peru started to picture their elite families (even those that arrived after the Conquest) as a nobility born from the miscegenation of noble Spaniards and noble Amerindians, emphasising indigenous greatness as a way to fight for a more privileged position in the Hispanic monarchy. In this way they constructed an image of themselves as different both from the plebeian masses
and from peninsular Spaniards, being the rightful rulers of the land. Therefore, they viewed the holding of royal and ecclesiastical office as their right. In Brazil, a similar process took shape in the second half of the century after the long struggle against the Dutch (1624–1654) ended with invaders’ expulsion. Brazilian elites emphasised their military service and financial aid to the crown in order to demand honorific rewards and control of local offices. They intended to gain more autonomy and buttress their position as local ruling nobilities by this means. Although there were conflicts within religious orders between peninsular and Ibero-Americans over control of leadership positions, at the close of the seventeenth century New World elites still felt themselves to be part of the same monarchies as their European brethren (Canny and Pagden 1987).

**WORKS CITED**


