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Urban Power and Agrarian Society: Mexico City and its Hinterland during the Colonial Era

The vast majority of Mexicans during the colonial era were rural cultivators whose lives were structured by political and economic powers concentrated in the city. This essay explores the relations between Mexico City and its rural hinterland under Spanish rule.[1] Mexico City was then, as it remains, the largest urban center and the primary concentration of power in Mexico. In the surrounding highland basins lived the colony's most dense concentration of peasant cultivators. Urban, Hispanic power met indigenous peasant society with unique intensity in central Mexico.

Charles Gibson's monumental *Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* began the study of the impact of Spanish power on rural life in central Mexico.[2] Enrique Florescano's *Precios del maíz y crisis agrícolas* introduced new, quantitative perspectives, and other works have followed, the recent appearance of Cheryl Martin's *Rural Society in Colonial Morelos* a notable development.[3] Yet there is no analysis of central Mexico in the colonial era comparable to Eric Van Young's study of the interaction of Guadalajara and its hinterland in the eighteenth century,[4] or to Claude Bataillon's analysis of Mexico City and its domains in the twentieth century.[5] This interpretive essay seeks such an understanding.

Great powers concentrated in colonial Mexico City. There ruled the Viceroy, the Audiencia, and the administrative, fiscal, and judicial bureaucracies that formed the greatest concentration of political power in the northern realms of Spanish America. Also in Mexico City sat the Archbishop of the colony's wealthiest and most populous diocese. There lived the merchants of the Mexico City Consulado who financed silver mining and controlled much of imperial trade. And there resided the great landed families, often distinguished by titles of Castilian nobility, who owned and operated the most valuable estates in the colony. That concentration of the rich and powerful drew to the capital city a large population of artisans, petty traders, laborers, domestic servants, and others. Mexico City was the largest urban center in the New World during the colonial era, its population well over 100,000 during the eighteenth century.[6]

Such a pre-industrial city lived as a parasite upon its rural neighbors. Urban populations could not survive without extracting food and other basic goods from rural peoples, while

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[1]Gisela von Wobeser challenged me to write this interpretive essay, Cheryl Martin offered encouragement and helpful insights as a commentator at the Oaxaca Congress, and Eric Van Young made useful editorialsuggestions. An earlier version was strengthened by the criticisms of Russell Menard and Stuart Schwartz.

[2](Stanford, 1964) and (Mexico City, 1969).

[3](Alburquerque, 1985).

[4]*Hacienda and Market in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Berkeley, 1981).

[5]*La ciudad y el campo en el México central* (Mexico City, 1972).

[6]On colonial government, see D. A. Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763-1810* (Cambridge, 1971), and Mark Burkholder and D. S. Chandler, *From Impotence to Authority* (Columbia, Missouri, 1977). On merchants see Brading, *Miners and Merchants* and John Kicza, *Colonial Entrepreneurs* (Albuquerque, 1983); on the Church, N.M. Farriss, *Crown and Clergy in Colonial Mexico, 1759-1821* (London, 1968); and on landed elites, Doris Ladd, *The Mexican Nobility at Independence, 1780-1826* (Austin, 1976) and John Tutino, "Creole Mexico: Spanish Elites, Haciendas, and Indian Towns, 1750-1810" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1976). On the wider urban population, see Gibson, *Aztecs*; Jorge González Angulo Aguirre, *Artesanado y ciudad a fines del siglo XVIII* (Mexico City 1983); and Donald Cooper, *Epidemic Disease in Mexico City, 1761-1813* (Austin, 1965).

the peasant majority sought and obtained little from the city and its elite powerholders.[7] Ecologically the city depended on the countryside. Socially, however, the concentration of power in the city inverted the relationship, leaving the rural majority subordinated in relations of stark inequality.

At a basic level, then, Mexico City could not survive without extracting from rural producers enough maize, wheat, and other foods to sustain its population. Beyond subsistence, many of the city's more powerful residents demanded comfort and wealth. They claimed food, livestock, and other rural products in great variety and large quantity to maintain luxurious living unknown among the rural poor. For the powerful of Mexico City, the fundamental question was how to extract from the rural poor the goods to sustain the city, and to maintain their own pretension to aristocracy. For the rural poor, the basic problem was how to provide the city and its powerholders as little as possible, or how to obtain maximum compensation for what was provided.

All of the powerholders concentrated in the Mexican capital helped to orient rural production to sustain the city, and to generate profits for the urban elite. The role of the colonial state was pivotal. Like all states, its power was ultimately coercive, in this case based on conquest. Backed by its claim to legitimized coercion, the colonial state focused on two basic powers: the distribution and regulation of property rights and the judicial settlement of disputes. It was the state that between 1550 and 1650 oversaw the colonial re-allocation of lands among Spanish powerholders and peasant villagers, granting the former broad expanses for commercial production while reserving a subsistence minimum for the latter. And once the re-distribution was completed, the state served as judicial mediator, adjudicating disputes over land and water resources.[8]

The Church was another urban-based Spanish institution that worked among the rural populace. Early in the colonial era, the conversion of the indigenous peasantry to Christianity forged institutional and cultural links between city dwellers an the rural majority. Mexican villagers' versions of Christianity often differed from those of the Hispanic urban elite. Yet within the same institutional church they came to share enough of a common religious culture to help moderate conflicts between the urban powerful and the rural poor in the colonial society forged by conquest. And to support its institutional structures that were concentrated in the city, the church–or its secular branch-collected tithes, a tax of about ten percent on the produce of Hispanic agriculture.[9]

The leading merchant-financiers of Mexico City also exerted power in the rural hinterland. Nearly every outlying town and village had a trader or two who depended on Mexico City wholesalers for goods and credit. The local traders sold varied goods not made locally along with the few modest luxuries bought by the more prosperous villagers. The same traders bought small amounts of crops and other goods from peasant families and transferred them to the city for sale. Many village merchants were dependents of urban wholesalers, while also serving as povincial officials or priests, mediating between urban power and the rural poor in multiple ways.[10]

From the early seventeenth century on, however, the urban powerholders most present in the lives of the rural poor were the great landed families. They controlled numerous haciendas that used the work of both estate residents and villagers to produce crops and livestock to sustain the city. They operated their estates to generate the profits that maintained their families as urban aristocrats. Most haciendas in central Mexico belonged to elite families, yet Church orders such as the Jesuits, Dominicans, and others also owned

[7]See Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City* (New York, 1960).

[8]For a general discussion of the colonial state, see C. H. Haring, *The Spanish Empire in America* (New York, 1947); on the mediating role of the colonial courts, see Woodrow Borah, *Justice by Insurance* (Berkeley, 1983).

[9]On the early missionary church, see Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, trans. by Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley, 1966).

[10]On links between city merchants and rural traders,see Tutino, "Creole Mexico," pp. 245-254; Kicza, *Colonial Entrepreneurs*, pp. 77-99; and Martin, *Rural Society*, pp. 177-192.

and operated landed estates to extract from rural areas the resources and profits to support their primarily urban activities. By the late colonial era, relations between Mexico City and is rural hinterland were structured primarily, but not exclusively, by the interaction of great landowners, their estates, and peasant villagers.[11]

How far did the power of Mexico City reach during the colonial era? The commercial domain of the capital was most extensive, including all of modern Mexico and extending into areas that now form parts of the United States, Central America, even Venezuela and Ecuador. The political reach of Mexico City was a bit less, but still extensive, reaching from Texas to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the south. The Archbishop of Mexico City oversaw a rich and populous diocese that extended from Querétaro in the north to the Pacific in the south. And the landed elite of the capital held estates concentrated in the surrounding highland basins, in the Bajío, and extending across the arid plateau country to the north.[12]

Powers based in Mexico City touched the lives of almost everyone in the colony. But within the capital's extensive domain, there was a core hinterland where the powers of Mexico City and its elite were unchallenged. In the valleys of Mexico, Toluca, the Mezquital, and Morelos no other urban center, no competing elite could begin to challenge the dominance of Mexico City: there the viceregal capital ruled administrative, ecclesiastical, and commercial affairs; there the capital's landed elite dominated estate operations; and from these regions the capital drew most of its agricultural produce. This study explores the relations between urban power and agrarian social relations in these central highland basins, the primary hinterland of colonial Mexico City.

During the first decades after the conquest, many indigenous social patterns persisted under Spanish rule. Most obviously, the Aztecs' capital of Tenochtitlán became the Spaniards' capital of Mexico City. More fundamental indigenous structures organizing production and power also endured. Under Aztec rule, production was controlled by millions of peasant families who sustained themselves and also provided the surpluses to support the state, its church, the aristocracy, and the imperial capital through tribute payments in goods and periodic draft labor services. The ability of the Aztec state and urban elite to extract tribute goods and labor services from the Mexican peasantry ultimately depended on military power.[13] The first Spaniards in Mexico followed the Aztecs' leads. The Europeans established their power through military conquest and then used that power to demand tribute goods and periodic labor services from a Mexican peasant majority that retained control of basic production. The Spanish legal instrument of the encomienda allowed the conquerors to profit from the maintenance of indigenous means of peasant production and the Aztecs' system of surplus extraction.[14]

Yet early on the Spaniards began to introduce changes that would later culminate in major transformations. The Spanish missionary endeavor sought a radical change, as Mexican peasants were pressed to accept their conquerors' religious beliefs. But as another attempt to forge a religious link between a conquering elite and the Mexican peasantry, there was much continuity with pre-Hispanic practices.[15] Perhaps the greatest innovation brought to Mexico by the Spaniards was the commercial economy of Europe, with its pressures to create a population of dependent laborers. Before the conquest, few people lived as laborers in central Mexico. The Spaniards who conquered Mexico, however, cherished

[11]Late colonial landed families are discussed in Tutino, "Creole Mexico," pp. 15-192.

[12]*Ibid.*, pp. 15-47.

[13]See Pedro Carrasco, "La economía prehispánica de México", in Enrique Florescano, ed., *Ensayos sobre el desarrollo económico de México y América Latina* (Mexico City, 1979),pp. 15-53; Frederick Hicks, "Dependent Labor in Prehispanic Mexico," *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, 11 (1974), pp. 244-257.

[14]See Silvio Zavala, *La encomienda indiana* (Madrid, 1935); Lesley Byrd Simpson, *The Encomienda in New Spain*, rev. ed.(Berkeley, 1966); José Miranda, *El tributo indígena en la Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1952); and Enrique Semo, *Historia del capitalismo en México: los orígenes, 1521-1763* (Mexico City, 1973).

[15]See Ricard, *Spiritual Conquest;* R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk* (New York, 1970); and Peggy Liss, *Mexico Under Spain, 1521-1556* (Chicago, 1975).

goals that could not be attained with tributes and the periodic labor services of Mexican peasants. Spaniards sought wealth as defined by their European culture, and that meant wealth that was ultimately transferable to Europe. The maize, cotton cloth, and other goods taken as tributes from Mexican peasants might sustain an urban population in Mexico City. With encomienda labor drafts the conquerors could build and maintain palatial residences in that city, as well as churches and public buildings. But the wealth obtained by the Spanish conquerors of Mexico through encomienda tributes and labor drafts could not be repatriated to Spain.

Given the limited capacity and high costs of trans-oceanic transportation in the sixteenth century, only goods of high value (in Europe) and low weight could be exported profitably from the Americas. Precious metals, and secondarily sugar, proved the only products of Mexico that could be sold for gain in Europe. Attuned to such profit, the conquerors quickly learned that there was gold in Mexico, and that sugar could be grown along the Gulf coast as well as in the Morelos basin just south of Mexico City. But large scale mining and sugar production could not be developed within the prevailing structure of peasant production and tribute extraction. Placer gold deposits were found primarily in the lowlands, far from the dense population of peasants in the highlands. And sugar was a crop introduced by Europeans, requiring a complex process of refining not available to the Mexican peasantry. Spaniards thus turned quickly to organizing commercial production in mining and sugar--and that production challenged them to create a population of dependent laborers.

In the long era of European expansion, whenever scarcities of dependent laborers threatened the Europeans' visions of profit, they repeatedly turned to coercion in general and slavery in particular to acquire the desired workers.[16] Enslavement allowed Spaniards to create quickly a small but pivotally important dependent labor force in early colonial Mexico. They took Mexicans captive in wars of conquest and declared them enslaved by the European doctrine of "just war". Later, Spaniards claimed control of Mexicans who had served native lords as bondsmen before the conquest. These and other unfortunates soon found themselves living under the European definition of slavery. Pre-Hispanic bondsmen had generally been dependents for life, usually serving in their masters' households. Their status was not inheritable, they could be sold only for specific wrongs, and they rarely if ever served as gang laborers. Spaniards turned these bondsmen and new captives into slaves, subject to sale and liable to unrestricted labor service.

José Miranda has shown that these early Mexican slaves remained a small minority of the conquered population, but that their service was pivotal to the conquerors' vision of profit in the young colony. In early gold production, gangs of as many as 100 indigenous slaves performed the actual mining labor, often in hot, wet lowlands far from their highland homes. To feed and clothe those slave gangs, their Spanish masters would use the maize, cloth, and other goods they took from pendents as encomienda tributes, often requiring that the villagers deliver the goods to the mining site to fulfill their draft labor requirement.[17]

A parallel structure developed to provide labor on the early sugar states of central Mexico. Sugar was not indigenous to the area and its cultivation required large numbers of workers, including several skilled technicians. Sugar states emerged as the first large Spanish commercial agricultural enterprises in Mexico. They demanded a core of permanent laborers to oversee the cultivation and refining of sugar, along with much larger numbers of seasonal hands to plant and harvest the cane. Cortés and other early sugar growers forced indigenous slaves to serve as the core staff of permanent, supervisory, and

[16]See Charles Verlinden, *The Beginnings of Modern Colonization*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970), pp. 3-51.
[17]See José Miranda, *La función económica del encomendero en los orígenes del régimen colonial* (Mexico City, 1965); Silvio Zavala, *Los esclavos indios en la Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1967); and Jean-Pierre Berthe, "Aspects de l'esclavage des indiens en Nouvelle Espagne pendant la premiére moitié du XVI sicle," *Journal de la Société des Americanistes de Paris*, 54 (1965), pp. 192-208.

skilled laborers, while encomienda rights coerced peasant villagers to provide both maize tributes to feed the slaves, along with the seasonal field labor to cultivate the estates' cane.[18]

Before 1550, then, leading Spanish conquerors had instituted a two-tiered system for extracting labor and produce from the Mexican majority. The vast majority of residents of the central highlands remained peasant villagers, producing the goods to sustain their own families while required to provide tribute goods and periodic labor services to sustain the conquerors and their city. At the same time, a small but pivotal minority of Mexicans were forced to become slaves and serve the conquerors as permanent laborers. In demanding tribute goods and labor services from peasants, the Spanish conquerors followed Aztec precedents. In forcing a minority to become slaves, they introduced a European innovation to Mexico. Through the first decades after the conquest, with Mexican peasants entrenched on the land and in control of the basic subsistence economy while Spaniards remained few in number yet militarily powerful, the conquerors used blatant coercion to build this dual structure of extracting the goods and labor services to sustain their power and their capital city.

But while the Spaniards were building this first structure of colonial rule, indigenous Mexicans were dying at catastrophic rates. The battles of conquest and the subsequent social and cultural disruptions were to some degree responsible, but previously unknown diseases introduced to Mexico by the Europeans were the most devastating killers. For the Mexican peasant majority this was a personal, social, and psychological disaster of unfathomable depth. Eventually, over 90 percent of their numbers would vanish in the course of a century. For the Spaniards, the depopulation was an economic disaster. Rapidly shrinking peasant communities could not provide encomenderos with the tribute goods or the labor services they had come to expect. Slaves seemed to die just as they developed the skills most useful to their masters. Early colonial depopulation, then, led to the reconstruction of society in central Mexico beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century.[19]

The colonial state came to the fore in that reconstruction. Mexico had been conquered by freebooters led by Cortés. The Spanish Crown had sanctioned their victory after the fact, but remained wary of the conquerors' independent power. The imperial government especially lamented institutions such as encomiendas and slavery which gave the conquerors direct power over the indigenous population. The depopulation gave the Crown the opportunity to act against those conquest-era institutions. The New Laws of 1542 called for the end of Indian slavery, while aiming to restrict the rights of encomiendas. Enforcement of anti-slavery policies was rapid and effective after the 1560s. Encomienda rights persisted longer, but in the central highlands the Crown was increasingly successful in claiming tribute rights for itself, while eliminating labor services from the encomiendas that survived in private hands. The state thus took advantage of the weakening of the first colonial elite of encomendero-slaveholders caused by the depopulation to undermine the first colonial social structure built by the conquerors.[20]

But the colonial state could not merely act against the primary interests of its most powerful subjects in Mexico. The Spanish Crown had neither organized nor paid for the conquest of Mexico and maintained no substantial armed forces there. Thus it could not rule the colony without the collaboration of the Spanish elite that ruled the colonial economy. After 1550, then, while the Crown acted to end indigenous slavery and rapidly limit encomiendas, the colonial state simultaneously looked to reconstruct colonial society

[18]On early sugar estates, see Fernando Sandoval, *La industria de azúcar en Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1951); Ward Barrett, *The Sugar Hacienda of the Marqueses del Valle* (Minneapolis, 1970); and G. Michael Riley, *Fernando Cortés and the Marquesado in Morelos, 1522-1547* (Albuquerque, 1973).

[19]Analysis of the social changes set off by the depopulation began with Woodrow Borah's classic *New Spain's Century of Depression* (Berkeley, 1951).

[20]On the end of indigenous slavery, see Berthe, "Aspects de l'esclavage," and Zavala, *Esclavos indios*, pp. 107-178. On the demise of encomiendas, see Gibson, *Aztecs*, pp. 61-63.

to allow ample wealth to the Spanish elite and to concentrate power in its own bureaucracy.

The first step in the reconstruction was the congregation of surviving peasant population into compact communities. Many peasant families had lived scattered across the countryside, near their fields. The missionary church had long called for the congregation of such scattered people to ease the tasks of conversion. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the rapidly progressing depopulation had also left many towns and villages with but small remnants of their pre-conquest populations. It was then that congregation became both desirable and possible in the eyes of colonial state. From the 1550s, as Peter Gerhard has shown, there began a mass re-settlement of peasants into compact communities--a process repeated late in the 1500s and again in the early 1600s. Re-settlements were usually organized by the local clergy, but the program was designed and sanctioned by the colonial state, which the clergy served, at least institutionally. The newly reconstituted peasant communities, designated *repúblicas de indios,* were allowed limited local political autonomy and allotted lands presumed sufficient to sustain local government, religious celebrations, and the subsistence of the peasant population.[21]

The congregations had several consequences of fundamental importance. They did facilitate the conversion of the peasants to Christianity. They simultaneously created an institutional structure that allowed villagers a critical remnant of local political and economic autonomy--the basis for their adaptation of a community-based, indigenously-rooted, yet increasingly Christian peasant culture that would sustain them through difficult times of depopulation, reorganization, and beyond. And most important to the colonial elite, the congregations vacated extensive tracts of land no longer used by the rapidly shrinking peasant population.

The colonial state then used its developing powers to oversee the allocation of much of that vacated land to favored Spaniards--encomenderos, merchants, and others well connected to powerful officials. Land taking had begun on a small scale soon after the conquest, but it was only with the depopulation and the congregation that Spaniards began to claim large areas in central Mexico. The colonial state did not directly control all land transfers: wealthy Spaniards bought some areas from village notables; other lands were just taken. But the state claimed and successfully held the power ultimately to confirm Spaniards' possessions, while also defining what was left to the peasant majority.[22]

Elite Spaniards began to seek land in Mexico in the late sixteenth century not merely because the depopulation and the congregations made it available, but also because the simultaneous, rapid development of a commercial economy made landed estates potentially profitable means of channeling rural produce to sustain urban life. The discovery of rich silver mines at Zacatecas, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, and elsewhere across north-central Mexico gave colonial elites a product of unlimited demand in Europe.[23] The resulting silver boom led an accelerating commercial development in Mexico. Burgeoning mining centers demanded growing supplies of food and livestock products from estates. The mining boom also brought a rapid expansion of the commercial and administrative activities concentrated in Mexico City, bringing a simultaneous increase in that urban center's demand for estate produce. The emergence after 1550 of the silver export economy, then, not only brought dazzling wealth to a few successful mining magnates and

[21]See Peter Gerhard, "Congregaciones de indios en la Nueva España antes de 1570", *Historia Mexicana,* 26 (1977) pp. 347-395; Gibson, *Aztecs,* pp. 282-287; Margarita Loera y Chávez, *Economía campesina indígena en la colonia* (Mexico City, 1981); and Martin, *Rural Society,* pp. 47-64.

[22]On land re-allocation, see François Chevalier, *La formación de los grandes latifundios en México,* trans. Antonio Alatorre (Mexico City, 1956); Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Exploitation of Land in Central Mexico in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1952); Gibson, *Aztecs,* pp. 270-298; Herman Konrad, *A Jesuit Hacienda in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, 1980), pp. 16-74; and Martin, *Rural Society,* pp. 23-45.

[23]On the silver economy, see P. J. Bakewell, *Silver Mining and Society in Colonial Mexico: Zacatecas, 1546-1700* (Cambridge, 1971).

financiers; it also expanded the urban population across the colony, bringing a newly growing demand for rural produce.

Yet that rising demand for rural produce to sustain Mexico's expanding commercial and urban sectors came just as the peasant population approached its lowest level. Surviving peasants could not (and would not) provide for that growing demand. Encomiendas could no longer serve their original purpose of channeling a portion of peasant production to sustain urban and elite life. Thus, the colonial elite in collaboration with the state claimed lands after 1550, developed commercial estates, and aimed to profit by raising and selling the sustenance of a growing urban population. In the central highlands during the century after 1550, sugar estates expanded in the Morelos basin, maize and wheat growing properties developed across the Valleys of Mexico and Toluca, and grazing estates emerged in the more arid Mezquital.

For the estate builders of late sixteenth-century Mexico, markets beckoned and land was easily avialable–at least for those favored by the colonial state. They faced persistent difficulties, however, in recruiting the workers essential to estate operations. After all, the depopulation that made land available to colonial Spaniards simultaneously made workers scarce. Surviving peasants were few and they usually lived in the congregated communities that provided their families with at least minimal subsistence lands. They had little incentive to work for Spaniards' profit. Again, the colonial state took the lead in seeking solutions to colonial Spaniards' problems. It again sacrificed its vision of a free colonial peasantry and by the 1570s had instituted throughout central Mexican a forced labor draft called the repartimiento. Colonial officials stationed in rural towns organized the coerced provision of seasonal labor services at emerging estates by peasant villagers. Such forced periodic labor services extracted from landed peasants had characterized life in rural central Mexico in Aztec times and had continued under the rule of the encomiendas. The colonial state simply reorganized and claimed control of that continuing institution to facilitate the development of the commercial estate economy during the late sixteenth century. One innovation was the state's insistence that the villagers receive at least minimal wages. Simultaneously, the authorities were working to shift the tribute collections they had claimed from the encomenderos from goods such as maize and cloth to cash. The colonial state was clearly trying to introduce at least a limited money economy into the peasant communities that it had helped to reconstitute in late sixteenth-century Mexico.[24]

The forced draft of seasonal workers provided the large numbers of workers that developing commercial estates employed in planting and harvesting their crops. Estate operations, however, also required a smaller number of year-round workers for an essential core of skilled and supervisory tasks, as well as for the care of livestock. The indigenous slaves who had performed these tasks on the sugar estates of the early sixteenth century were no longer available. After 1550 they were increasingly replaced by slaves forced to migrate from Africa. The income generated in Mexico by the burgeoning silver economy and related commercial activities allowed elite Mexicans to import growing numbers of black slaves. And during the second half of the sixteenth century, they began to appear in larger numbers at the labor-intensive sugar estates of Morelos, while forming a smaller core of permanent laborers at many of the grain and grazing estates across the rest of central Mexico.[25]

Alongside the growing numbers of African slaves, small groups of natives, often called *naborías*, also lived and worked permanently on the Spaniards' estates. Were they the descendants of the indigenous slaves, new legally free, but so long separated from the peasant communities that they could not return? Or were they villagers who fled their

[24]On the repartimiento, see Gibson, *Aztecs*, pp. 224-236.

[25]On African slavery, see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México*, rev. ed. (Mexico City, 1972); Colin Palmer, *Slaves of the White God* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Barrett, *Sugar Hacienda*, pp. 74-102; Konrad, *Jesuit Hacienda*, pp. 246-264; and Martin, *Rural Society*, pp. 121-153.

communities in times of disruption for the secure employment of estate dependence? At present we do not know. Also among the permanent laborers at emerging estates were small but growing numbers of mestizos and mulattoes. Some were surely the offspring of the Indians and Africans who lived and worked together on the estates; others likely had come in search of employment as refugees from a colonial order in which only Spaniards could aspire to wealth and only Indians could obtain land in the peasant communities.

Why African slaves lived and labored at developing Mexican estates is obvious, but why legally free Indians and mestizos did so is not. Were there pressures that pushed villagers from their communities or attractions that drew them to the estates? Once there, did they remain because the estate offered security of employment, or because they were coerced to remain? In his classic studies of colonial Mexican labor, Silvio Zavala found the first signs of what would later be called "debt peonage" among the Indian and mestizo residents of Spaniards' estates.[26] Were debts used to force supposedly free rural Mexicans to live as permanent estate laborers?

One point seems clear: no colony-wide problem of peasant landlessness forced peasants from their communities during this era of depopulation. While Spaniards claimed vast areas of land, perhaps one third of central Mexico, during the century after 1550, the reduction of the peasant population to 10 percent or less of its numbers at conquest allowed the survivors the minimal consolation of retaining lands at least minimally adequate to subsistence. Rather than landlessness, Gibson suggests that it was the dis-organization of community life, along with the mounting weight of tribute and labor demands on shrinking village populations, that led a minority to leave the communities for life at the developing haciendas.[27] Whatever the reasons for which they came, by the early seventeenth century many of these free estate residents owed their employers debts beyond their ability to repay. Does that reveal, as Zavala suggests, an emerging system of minimally veiled labor coercion, forcing technically free workers to remain at estates? The evidence from this era remains inconclusive. Debts are not inherently coercive; they only indicate that workers had received more in goods and wages than their work entitled them at the prevailing wage. Such debts can become the pretexts for coercion only if an effective system of compulsion allows the landowner to force workers to work off their debts. Until we know how long indebted workers remained at estates, how many left without paying their obligations, and what efforts were made to apprehend delinquents, we cannot evaluate the coercive power of debts during the early seventeenth century in central Mexico.

Gibson concludes from limited evidence that the haciendas offered their minorities of permanent, resident employees a minimal security that could shelter poor families in a era of radical social reconstruction.[28] Chevalier emphasizes that the early seventeenth-century estate economy was fundamentally characterized by persistent labor scarcities.[29] It thus appears probable that estate operators used varying combinations of incentives--the security of regular employment, guaranteed food rations, etc.--and forms of coercion--pressures to pay off debts--to recruit and retain the essential core of permanent "free" workers to complement their expensive slaves during the era of estate building.

During the great colonial transformation for 1550 to 1650, as we have seen, the combination of population and congregation made land available to Spaniards, while the silver boom created expanding commercial opportunities. In that context, the state used its power to re-define land rights in central Mexico, alloting much of it to favored Spaniards while leaving a subsistence minimum to most villagers. A commercial agricultural economy thus developed alongside a shrunken but surviving peasant sector. The vast majority of

[26] "Orígenes coloniales del peonage en México", *El trimestre económico*, 10 (1944), pp. 711-748.
[27] Gibson, *Aztecs*, pp. 246-249.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.
[29] Chevalier, *La Formación*, pp. 53, 58.

rural Mexicans still lived in landed communities. As a result, only coercion could provide large numbers of workers to emerging commercial cultivators. The state thus used its developing powers to control the repartimiento draft that forced the peasant villagers of central Mexico seasonally to plant and harvest estate crops for minimal wages. The state also sanctioned the use of African slaves as a core of coerced, permanent laborers, while the landed elite apparently used combinations of incentives and coercion to create minorities of "free" estate dependents.

The colonial transformation of 1550 to 1650 may be summarized as the state taking a leading role in consolidating its own power, while enabling the colonial Spanish elite to graft a commercial economy onto an established, if shrinking, peasant society. That transformation brought some important changes to agrarian social relations in central Mexico: Africans replaced Mexicans among the strategic minority who labored as slaves; the surviving peasants were congregated into compact communities; the dual structure persisted by which a minority of the rural poor served the elite as permanent laborers, while the majority remained landed villagers who provided Spaniards with only seasonal labor services; and overt coercion remained central to agrarian social relations, as slavery forced Africans to serve permanently while the repartimiento forced villagers to work seasonally.

Once the new colonial structure was entrenched, however, overt coercion began to recede. First to collapse was the repartimiento. That forced labor draft was in steady decline after 1600, as villagers often refused to cooperate. By the 1630s, the state was no longer trying to coerce the seasonal labor of peasant villages in central Mexico, except for state projects such as the drainage of the Valley of Mexico. Yet the villagers had not stopped providing the essential seasonal work for estate agriculture. That pivotal relationship continued, increasingly organized through a multitude of local arrangements between estates and village leaders.

By the early decades of the seventeenth century, central Mexican peasant villagers had apparently found their own reasons for continuing to labor seasonally at the commercial estates that crowded their villages across the central highlands. The state's collection of tributes in cash surely led many to seek wages from estate labor, otherwise they would have had to sell part of their subsistence produce to obtain the money to pay that tax. The typically unequal distribution of lands within central Mexican communities probably left a minority of villagers with lands insufficient to subsistence, making the wages of estate labor a necessary supplement to their cultivation. In addition, the village notables who negotiated the provision of labor gangs to nearby estates often gained access to hacienda pastures and woodlands in exchange for regular labor services. They probably also obtained cash or other rewards for themselves. And as villagers came to demand metal tools and other goods available only from the Spanish commercial economy, there would emerge a broad incentive to gain cash earnings from nearby estates to complement peasant production. Until detailed studies of seventeenth-century labor relations between peasant villages and commercial estates are completed, we can only assume that varied combinations of factors such as these kept villagers working seasonally at estates despite the absence of overt coercion. [30]

A few decades after the collapse of the repartimiento, African slavery began to decline as a means of coercing the minorities of permanent workers at central Mexican estates. Black slaves remained among the small populations of estate residents for more than another century, but from the middle of the seventeenth century their importance waned. Few slaves were brought to Mexico after 1650, leaving estate operators to rely on the existing population and its offspring. Yet increasingly, the descendants of slaves were free mulattoes. The vast majority of African slaves in Mexico were men, living amidst a much

[30] See Gibson, *Aztecs*, pp. 235-236; Barrett, *Sugar Hacienda*, pp. 86-87, 99-100.

larger Indian population. Unions between slave men and Indian women became increasingly common, and since status followed the mother, this left a growing population of free mulattoes. Many remained estate resident laborers.[31]

Why did organized coercion disappear from the relations between peasant villagers and estates in central Mexico, and recede from the relations between the estates and their core minorities of permanent laborers, during the later seventeenth century? Unfortunately, the decades from 1640 to 1760 are the least known era of Mexican history. Several recent studies of life in areas of the central highlands, however, have begun to fill that gap. By 1650 the first colonial silver boom had collapsed. There followed a long era of instability and stagnation in the commercial economy, creating persistent financial difficulties that plagued many great landed families. The problems of the commercial economy surely limited the demand for estate workers, while landowners' financial difficulties made organized coercion difficult to implement. Certainly, few Mexican estate operators could afford to purchase expensive slaves from Africa under such circumstances.[32]

Meanwhile, the Mexican rural population available for estate labor was expanding. The numbers of castas--mestizos and mulattoes--grew steadily as Indians, Africans, and Spaniards continued to live and work together in poor sections of the city, in rural towns, and on estates. They generated a growing population that faced limited economic opportunities. Few could hope to gain positions of wealth and power in the city. Most were excluded from the pueblos de indios and thus had but limited access to subsistence lands.[33] Such castas, then, had little choice but to accept lives as dependent laborers or tenants in rural areas. Increasingly after about 1650, central Mexican estates recruited their core permanent laborers from among this growing population of castas, without resort to overt coercion. Many were free mulattoes who found few alternatives to working as wage laborers in roles once held by their enslaved ancestors.[34]

Villlagers also continued to provide central Mexican estates with the large numbers of seasonal workers essential to grain production during the century from 1650 to 1750. Finally recovering from the catastrophes of the conquest era, peasant villagers began to expand their numbers during this period. As Margarita Loera's studies of Calimaya and Tepemajalco reveal, most peasant families retained subsistence lands through the early eighteenth century.[35] Growing peasant numbers, however, increased the villagers' needs to work at nearby estates--to gain cash for tribute payments, to purchase goods in the commercial economy, to supplement subsistence production, especially during years of poor harvests, etc. Overt coercion was unnecessary to that labor relationship. Local negotiations between estate managers and village leaders continued to organize the pivotal provision of seasonal labor to central Mexican estates--the primary channel by which the work of peasant villagers produced the goods to sustain urban life and elite profits.

The dual structure of agrarian labor, in which a core minority lived and served permanently on Spaniards' estates while the vast rural majority remained peasant family cultivators living in villages and serving the estates only seasonally, persisted in the central highlands through the century after 1650. But the new conjunction of commercial stagnation, elite financial difficulties, and population growth brought the demise of overt coercion in sustaining those labor relations. By 1750, only the bonds that held a remnant

[31]On African slavery and resistance, see Patrick Carroll, "Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community", *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 19 (1977), pp. 488-505; David Davidson, "Negro Resistance to Spanish Rule in Mexico", *Hispanic American Historical Review,* 46 (1966), pp. 235-253; J. I. Israel, *Race, Class, and Politics in Colonial Mexico* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 60-78; Edgar Love, "Marriage Patterns of Persons of African Descent in a Colonial Mexico City Parish", *Hispanic American Historical Review,* 51 (1971), pp. 79-91; and Bohumil Badura, "Biografía de la hacienda de San Nicolas de Ulapa", *Ibero-Americana Pragensia,* 4 (1970), pp. 75-111.

[32]See Konrad, *Jesuit Hacienda*; Margarita Loera y Chávez, *Calimaya y Tepemajalco* (Mexico City, 1977); Gisela von Wobeser, *San Carlos Borromeo* (Mexico City, 1980); and Martin, *Rural Society.*

[33]Aguirre Beltrán, *Población negra.*

[34]Badura, "Biografía de la hacienda."

[35]Loera y Chávez, *Calimaya y Tepemajalco* and *Economía campesina.*

of slaves were clearly coercive elements. The majority of those who worked permanently or seasonally at the estates that sustained Mexico City and profited its aristocratic landlords served "freely". They worked because they perceived a need for earnings, not because they were forced to relinquish alternative means of sustenance.

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the enduring structural parasitism of the city on the countryside, of Spanish Mexico City on the surrounding indigenous peasant population, was re-consolidated through social relations that increasingly served to mask that parasitism. Before 1650, while the colonial state and elite blatantly forced workers to produce the goods that sustained the city and profited its most powerful residents, the parasitism of the relationship was obvious. From the middle of the seventeenth century, however, the exploitation inherent in relations between Mexico City and its rural hinterland became veiled. The colonial redistribution of land was largely completed and estates held properties acquired decades earlier through rights sanctioned by an entrenched state. Villagers, too, retained limited but critically important subsistence lands guaranteed them by the same state. The colonial courts continued to mediate disputes that arose among villagers, and between estates and villages. William Taylor and Woodrow Borah have demonstrated that while the courts did not always favor communities in land disputes, they did maintain the principle that villages had the right to at least minimal subsistence lands and local autonomy in their use.[36] The growth of the peasant population after 1650 did progressively reduce the lands available to rural families. But in a stabilized land distribution and with the continued mediation of conflict by the courts, such slowly developing difficulties were difficult to blame on the recent actions of the state or landowners. And in that context, the available wages from seasonal labor at nearby estates might appear as a critical "opportunity" for increasingly necessary cash earnings.

By the middle of the seventeenth century the colonial redistribution of land had become an established reality. The elite profited from the new structure and the rural poor had little alternative but to adapt to it. For a minority of castas, the estates offered relatively permanent and secure employment. For the majority of villagers, estate labor provided the seasonal earnings increasingly needed to supplement subsistence cultivation. Since the limited resources left to colonial villages could rarely be increased, access to seasonal labor at estates became essential to the persistence of peasant family and community economies.

It was thus the colonial re-allocation of land, largely completed in the central highlands before 1650, which laid the foundation for the non-coercive and stabilized relations between estates and villages that I characterize as symbiotic exploitation. Estates could not feed the urban populace of Mexico City and generate profits for landowners without the seasonal labor of the villagers. Villagers increasingly relied on the supplemental income from estate labor to sustain their families and their communities. Given the colonial distribution of resources, the relationship was symbiotic. But it was also exploitative--villagers gained but minimal wages for performing the labor that maintained the colonial capital and sustained the luxurious living of its elite. Symbiotic exploitation proved a most effective means of consolidating the structural parasitism of the city on the countryside.

Such symbiotic exploitation proved socially stabilizing in large part because once the land re-distribution was in place, coercion could fade from fundamental labor relations of inequality. Yet no group or institution had planned these developments. It had taken the conquest, depopulation, congregation of the surviving peasants, and the state's re-allocation of land during an era of commercial expansion from 1550 to build estates and establish their labor relations with peasant villagers. It required a subsequent era of commercial stagnation, accompanied by renewed population growth, to remove the coercion from those relations. The state was most active in developing that structure–con-

[36] William Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979), and Borah, *Justice by Insurance*.

gregating peasants, reallocating lands, and mediating disputes. Great families were also important–claiming lands, buildings estates, and generally promoting the commercial economy. The peasant villagers of central Mexico were also active participants--staunchly insisting on remaining subsistence producers, living in communities, and developing their own variant of colonial, Christian, communitarian, peasant culture.

After 1750, population growth continued and perhaps accelerated in the rural regions of the central highlands. At the same time, the commercial economy entered a new phase of rapid expansion, led again by a boom in silver production.[37] The late eighteenth-century combination of commercial expansion with population growth was unprecedented in colonial central Mexico and it brought new pressures upon social relations there. Remarkably, the established structure of symbiotic exploitation held. Tensions mounted during the decades after 1750, but there was no turn toward coercion by the powerful, no mass resort to violence by the rural poor. The structure of symbiotic exploitation proved able to stabilize social relations of increasing inequality.[38]

Mexico City and its demand for rural produce grew substantially in the eighteenth century.[39] The tithe income of the Archbishopric of Mexico City, a good indicator of estate production in central Mexico, increased by 70 percent from the 1770s to the 1780s.[40] With no major changes in cultivation techniques, such increases in estate production brought parallel increases in estate labor demands. Most central highland estates continued to employ minorities of permanent workers, along with much larger numbers of seasonal field hands. The permanent employees continued to come from the rapidly expanding population of mestizos and mulattoes, joined by smaller numbers of Indians and poor Spaniards. The last remnants of overt coercion finally vanished from permanent estate employment in central Mexico during the decades after 1750. The remnants of the slave population that had persisted since the seventeenth century finally escaped bondage, as slaves liberated themselves by running away, purchasing their freedom for small sums, marrying free women to free their children, and various other means. By 1800, slavery had no role in estate labor relations across central Mexico. The uncontested collapse of slavery in eighteenth-century Mexico, an obvious contrast with the violent conflicts over abolition elsewhere in the New World, was possible because of the growing availability of a free laboring population composed mostly of castas who had to labor to sustain their families.[41]

The growing demand of central highland estates for seasonal field hands after 1750 was met by expanding populations of peasant villagers. Community lands remained limited to the allotments of the congregations completed in times of depopulation. The late colonial population growth, then, inevitably reduced the land available to peasant families. That developing land shortage was not shared equally within the villages. Local notables used their powers over village governments to insure that they and their kin retained land enough for subsistence, and perhaps for modest comfort. Most villagers, however, were forced to watch the available lands divided with each expanding generation, leaving the peasant majority with lands less and less adequate to sustain expanding families. There is also evidence of an emerging sub-class of fully landless villagers in late eighteenth-century central Mexico. As a result, after 1750 the majority of villagers needed increasing earnings to supplement subsistence production. Village notables could thus continue to profit by

[37]See Brading, *Miners and Merchants*, and Claude Morin, *Michoacán en la Nueva España del siglo XVIII* (Mexico City, 1979).
[38]Tutino, "Creole Mexico", pp. 343-368.
[39]Florescano, *Precios del maíz*, p. 171; Alejandro de Humboldt, "Tablas geográficas-políticas del reino de la Nueva España", in *Descripciones económicas generales de Nueva España, 1784-1817*, eds. Enrique Florescano and Isabel Gil (Mexico City, 1973), pp. 151-152.
[40]*Ibid.*, p. 158.
[41]On the demise of African slavery in central Mexico, see Jean-Pierre Berthe, "Xochimancas: Les travaux et les jours dans une hacienda sucriére de Nouevelle Espagne au XVIIe siecle", *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft, und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas*, 3 (1966), pp. 88-117; Badura, "Biografía de la hacienda"; Barrett, *Sugar Hacienda*, pp. 78-80; James D. Riley, *Haciendas jesuitas en México* (Mexico City, 1976), pp. 161-185.

organizing labor gangs that provided needed seasonal labor to estates and essential supplemental earnings to the majority of central Mexican villagers. Villagers thus remained residents of their communities, produced subsistence goods to the extent they could, and participated in village religious and social affairs, while becoming increasingly dependent on their earnings from labor in the commercial estate economy.[42] In that context, estates often appeared as economic benefactors, offering work and earnings to the rural poor, allowing many to remain members of peasant communities increasingly short of land. The escalating demands upon rural families to produce goods for urban consumption and to generate profits for the elite --a clearly intensifying parasitism-- remained masked in stabilizing relations of symbiotic exploitation through the end of the colonial era in central Mexico.

There were, of course, regional variations across the central highlands. Estates were generally more dominant on the valley bottoms, while peasant villagers retained resources most successfully in the uplands. Estate builders with favored access to the state had early claimed level lands most useful for extensive cultivation, though they never fully eliminated village holdings in those favored areas. And many estate operators came to understand that it was in their interest to leave villagers entrenched in nearby uplands. There, peasants would struggle to subsist and almost inevitably face a need to labor seasonally at valley estates. Guillermo de la Peña and Cheryl Martin have shown how the Morelos basin was dominated by sugar estates, while surrounding highland villagers provided a reservoir of seasonal workers.[43] Similar relations developed in cereal zones. Estates near Texcoco, in the eastern Valley of Mexico, relied heavily on villagers in uplands just east to obtain field workers. That relationship was so important to estate operations that when in the 1780s a newcomer to local landholding tried to claim the lands of the highland villagers, the Conde de Santiago, patriarch of one of Mexico City's oldest and most landed clans, paid for the defense of the villagers' lands, thus helping preserve the local source of seasonal workers.[44]

Variations of agrarian social structures across the central highlands also reflected the different products raised in varied regions for Mexico City's markets. Grain producing estates predominated in the Valleys of Mexico and Toluca, with grazing and pulque haciendas most numerous in the more northerly and arid Mezquital, while sugar plantations ruled in the hotter and wetter Morelos basin to the south. Symbiotic exploitation remained strongest in the zones of cereal production, where both estates and villages held lands. Villagers there primarily raised maize, estates wheat and maize. Estate grain production created labor demands sufficient to provide villagers with important supplemental earnings, yet limited enough to allow them to cultivate their own fields. When estates and villagers both raised maize, there was potential for conflict over labor priorities. Whether estate or village maize was planted or harvested first was often in dispute, with the outcome an indicator of relative strength in local labor relations. And estate records lament many instances in which commercial maize had to await harvesting while villagers tended their subsistence plots.[45] Conflicts over land and labor did increase in the cereal zones of the central highlands with the increase in population and market pressures after 1750s, but they remained local disputes and were almost universally resolved in the colonial courts.[46] Despite mounting tensions, the stabilizing structure of symbiotic exploitation held strong in the cereal regions of the central highlands to the end of the colonial era.

In the Morelos zone dominated by sugar estates, however, that relationship began to show mounting strains after 1750. Sugar production created far greater labor demands for

[42]See Tutino, "Creole Mexico", pp. 270-342.
[43]Martin, *Rural Society,* p. 168; Guillermo de la Peña, *Herederos de promesas* (Mexico City, 1980), pp. 44-49.
[44]Tutino, "Creole Mexico", pp. 345-346
[45]John Tutino, "Hacienda Social Relations in Mexico", *Hispanic American Historical Review,* 55 (1975), pp. 496-528.
[46]Tutino, "Creole Mexico", pp. 343-368; Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion*, pp. 113-151.

both permanent workers and seasonal field hands. Planting and especially harvesting cane were lengthy and labor-intensive processes, and cut cane had to be immediately refined into at least coarse sugar, another labor-intensive process. It was that larger labor demand that led the sugar growers of Morelos to import the largest populations of African slaves in rural central Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That same demand led Morelos planters to respond to growing urban markets in the basin, seeking both lands and workers for expanding production. Cheryl Martin has shown that the early colonial influx of slaves created a regional population–in the villages as well as at estates–that was more mulatto and more Hispanized that in other areas of rural central Mexico. And she has also demonstrated that an increasing tide of conflict between Morelos estates and villagers toward the end of the colonial era left the structure of symbiotic exploitation weakened on the valley bottom, though still operative and stabilizing in relations between sugar estates and the villagers of the surrounding highlands.[47]

In the drier regions of the northeastern Valley of Mexico, the Mezquital just to the north, and the plains of Apan to the east, conflict between estates and villagers also began to escalate toward the end of the colonial era. There, symbiotic exploitation was destabilized not by increasing labor demands, as in Morelos, but by population growth in regions where estate labor requirements were limited and expanding only minimally. In these dry regions, peasant maize production was always precarious. Estates there had primarily engaged in stock grazing through most of the colonial era.[48]

During the eighteenth century, the rapid growth of the peasant population there coincided with a transformation of estate production that did not create the increasing demand of seasonal workers that might maintain relations of symbiotic exploitation. During the decades before 1750, estates in the northeastern Valley of Mexico and adjacent zones began a rapid shift from stock raising to pulque production. That drink, fermented from tlachique, the sap of the maguey cactus, had been a staple of Mexicans since long before the Spanish conquest. During the first colonial centuries peasant villagers continued to make pulque for family use, as well as for small sales in both rural areas and in the city. Around 1750, however, commercial estate operators in the region began to see potential profits in converting grazing lands to maguey and making pulque on a large scale for the expanding Mexico City market. Through the following decades, peasant producers were squeezed out of the pulque market as the haciendas northeast of the capital moved to all but monopolize that trade.[49]

Estate pulque production required the annual transplanting of vast fields of young cactus, creating a large demand for temporary workers during a few weeks. But tapping the mature maguey and fermenting the tlachique into pulque required little labor. One skilled Indian, called a tlachiquero, could produce large quantities. Thus, a very few villagers in the pulque zones found regular and generally well-paid work using traditional skills as tlachiqueros at the estates. But the vast majority could rely only on the irregular and limited opportunities in transplanting. Villagers facing persistent difficulties of subsistence production in a dry environment thus lost access to the earnings once provided by small-scale pulque production, yet gained little access to estate labor that might bring compensating earnings. When the population growth of the late eighteenth century heightened the pressures on peasant families, conflict in the pulque zones escalated.[50]

The varying strength of relations of symbiotic exploitation across the central highlands led to differing responses among the rural poor to the conflicts of the independence era beginning in 1810. First Hidalgo and later Morelos led their insurgents toward the colonial

[47]Martin, *Rural Society*, pp. 155-200.
[48]Konrad, *Jesuit Hacienda*, pp. 175-214; Badura, "Biografía de la hacienda".
[49]Tutino, "Creole Mexico", pp. 134-141; Konrad, *Jesuit Hacienda*, pp. 141-149, 203-208.
[50]Tutino, "Creole Mexico", pp. 308-310, 346-347; and Juan Felipe Leal and Mario Huacuja Rountree, *Economía y sistema de haciendas en México* (Mexico City, 1982) pp. 38-42.

capital through the Valley of Toluca. The villagers of that cereal basin, however, generally ignored the calls to insurrection. For Hidalgo, the lack of support in the Toluca basin began the collapse of his insurrection. For Morelos, with a smaller and more mobile force, it was possible to move to Cuautla, in the heart of the sugar basin that now bears his name. There, Morelos elicited no mass insurrection among the rural poor, but he did find enough local support to hold the town of Cuautla for several months, until he had to flee a royalist siege.

The pulque zone proved the most rebellious region of the central highlands in the independence era. There, bands of guerrillas led by Julián Villagrán in the Mezquital and Francisco Osorno at Apan found enough support to maintain rebel enclaves for years. From 1811 until well into 1813 in the Mezquital, and until 1816 around Apan, guerrillas with local agrarian support dominated much of the pulque area. Mexico City landowners lost control of estates there, and the profits they might have produced; the colonial state did not rule in the pulque zones. Again, these were hardly mass insurrections. But the less symbiotic relations between estates and peasant villagers in the arid pulque region led to an apparently greater readiness to support guerrillas who challenged the colonial elite and state.

Nowhere in the central highlands were there mass uprisings during the independence era like the one Hidalgo's Grito de Dolores set off in the Bajío, a region northwest of the capital with a radically different agrarian social structure. The central Mexican structure of symbiotic exploitation, despite its weakening in Morelos and the pulque zone, held through the independence years and maintained rural social stability. The limited extent of rural risings in the central highlands facilitated the royalists' ability to defeat Hidalgo, Morelos, and other insurgents and allowed the landowning elite to emerge again triumphant when independence was attained under Iturbide in 1821. Parasitism effectively masked as symbiosis maintained social stability in rural central Mexico despite worsening extremes of inequality and exploitation, and with insurrection swirling around much of the rest of Mexico.[51]

As a brief epilogue, it should be noted that the stabilizing structure of symbiotic exploitation did not endure in central Mexico long past independence. The destruction wrought by civil wars, the collapse of silver mining and the export economy, and endemic political turmoil all contributed to a decline of commercial estate agriculture after 1821. Financially weakened estate operators repeatedly found that they lacked the funds to pay central highland villagers' wages in cash, and the villagers proved reluctant to labor without cash payment. Elite financial difficulties thus began to strain the relations between estates and villagers after independence.[52] At the same time, the colonial state that had long mediated those relations was replaced by a national state created by Mexican elites to serve their interest. It remained for decades, however, a poor and unstable state. When central highland landowners repeatedly attempted to use their new access to state powers to press villagers for lands, etc., they found those powertoo poorly financed and too often divided to be effective. Thus, the attempt of great landowners to use the new national state as an agent of class interests primarily served to provoke a rising tide of agrarian conflict.

By the 1840s, extensive and violent agrarian conflicts had erupted in Morelos and the Mezquital, where discontent was already evident in the independence era. In the same decade, court battles and local riots proliferated across the cereal zones of the Valleys of Mexico and Toluca. The Chalco region, long the primary source of estate maize for Mexico City, saw escalating agrarian tensions erupt into violence by the late 1840s. And rural conflicts pitting villagers against haciendas and government officials would explode even more intensively across the central highlands in the late 1860s, and again in the late 1870s.[53]

[51]The remainder of this essay summarizes sections of John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico* (Princeton, 1986).
[52]See Tutino, "Hacienda Social Relations".
[53]One nineteenth-century agrarian conflicts, see Leticia Reina, *las rebeliones campesinas en México, 1819-1906* (Mexico City, 1980).

The post-independence collapse of the commercial economy, combined with the disappearance of the mediating colonial state, began to undermine the colonial structure of symbiotic exploitation. In the 1850s, the national state was claimed by liberals whose new Constitution of 1857 denied to Mexican villages the right to hold land communally. The goal was to mobilize peasant property, attacking thus the landed base of peasant production. That policy was increasingly implemented after 1880 under the regime dominated by Porfirio Díaz. That era saw renewed population growth, economic expansion, political stabilization, and a widening assault on peasant landholding. Symbiotic exploitation then collapsed.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, under the combined pressures of liberal attacks on land rights, rapid commercial expansion, and population growth, central highland peasants lost lands while facing increased demands for only seasonal labor services. To maintain profitable operations, however, estates found a way to re-establish the dual agrarian labor regime that had persisted since the sixteenth century. They continued to employ a small but growing minority of mostly mestizos as year-round workers. And to maintain the essential pool of seasonal workers for planting and harvesting estate crops once village lands were no longer adequate to even partially sustain much of the peasant population, estates began to let out increasing areas of often marginal hacienda lands to villagers for sharecropping. Peasants without community lands could thus resume subsistence production, but now they owed half their crop to the estates. That adaptation did maintain the reservoir of seasonal laborers in the central highlands; but it failed to maintain social stability. Seasonal labor to supplement community-based subsistence production could appear symbiotic; seasonal labor combined with insecure sharecropping on the poorest of estate lands was blatantly exploitative. During the later nineteenth century, the parasitism of the city upon the rural poor intensified and became increasingly obvious to its victims. When Díaz' state collapsed after 1910, Emiliano Zapata led many of the country people of the central Mexican highlands in vehement revolutionary class warfare against Mexico City and its powerholders.