

Contextualizing the Biocultural Examination of Colonization in Mexico

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The volume we present is about a cascade of events that began 500 years ago as part of the European colonization of the Americas. The events of 2020 through to the present prove that this cascade, the fallout from the clash of cultures that included Spanish ships landing on what later became known as Mexican soil, continues today. Here we refer to the social upheaval of a global pandemic exacerbated by inequitable distributions of health resources within and between nations as well as the continual suppression and resurgence of the call for basic, equal human rights in the United States, in Mexico, and around the world. These characteristics of the first quarter of the twenty-first century are downstream consequences of the cultural shift that took place when Europeans came seeking wealth—and found it.

In 1521 several Native cultural groups from central Mexico teamed with recently arrived Spanish forces to defeat the Aztec Triple Alliance and topple the government of Tenochtitlán. As the new government formed, the Spanish attempted social control through the *castas* system, which developed as a way to organize society according to parentage and social construction of race, including *españoles* (Spaniards), *indios* (indigenes) and *negros* (Africans). However, this pattern quickly gave way to ever more complex systems of classification. Children of *españoles* and *indios* were called *mestizo*; children of *mulatos* (the offspring of *negros* and *españoles*) and *indios* were called *lobos* (Gomez 2008). *Ladinos* were free Spanish-aculturated Blacks with their own corporate identities (Landers 2006). Such terms defined not only one's heritage but also one's potential for educational and economic opportunity, including land ownership (see Vinson 2018 for a complete background).

The chapters in this volume derive from a symposium held in May 2020. We invited esteemed scholars from both Mexico and the United States representing

the fields of archaeology, bioarchaeology, genetics, and history. Most of the researchers focused on central Mexico, but we were joined by scholars who presented their work from other regions of Mexico, inviting comparisons about the colonial experience.

This meeting was originally planned to take place in at the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City. However, due to pandemic travel restrictions, we made the determination to hold the conference virtually. Prior to the meeting, we asked participants to develop presentations on their research that related to this primary question:

What are the consequences of colonization and the ensuing power structure for individuals' and groups' access to power, social mobility, health, and mate choice?

Beyond this overarching inquiry, we asked participants to address one or more of the following questions:

What, generally, are the effects on the biology of peoples when state-level societies clash in a colonial moment? What specifically can we learn about this from the Mexican experience?

How did concepts of race, ancestry, and ethnicity, such as the *castas* and *mestizaje*, develop in New Spain, and to what extent did they shape the way individuals had access to power, property, economic opportunity, and mates?

How did these *castas* shape the history of Mexico, through the colonial period and into modern times?

How did the tumultuous development of the new postcolonization Mexican culture shape patterns of health, genetic admixture, or structural inequalities / structural violence?

Each scholar presented their research at our virtual meeting held across two countries. The presentations were rich and diverse, but perhaps the most important components of the symposium developed during the extended discussions that followed each presentation. These discussions provided opportunities for questions, answers, and insights drawn across disciplines, regions, and theoretical perspectives.

Following the symposium, scholars uploaded drafts of their papers to a shared space in Microsoft Teams, which allowed researchers to read drafts of each other's work and to refer to them in their own chapters. Our participants drew on a variety of theoretical, methodological, and biohistorical approaches.

Here we emphasize those approaches that highlight the connections among the chapters in this volume.

Approaches to Understanding Biological Consequences of Colonization

Theoretical and Disciplinary Approaches

Ethnic identity is a complex mix of elements that include reflexive political identity, family tradition and history, economic circumstances, cultural beliefs and practices, solidarity and belonging, visible and identifiable “emblems” of group membership, and personal agency (Bourdieu 1990; Jones 1998; Scherer et al. 2007). In colonial situations, hybrid cultures and biologies are dynamic and sometimes ephemeral. A critical approach to the study of colonialism, which includes the perspective of the colonized, is warranted (Barker et al. 1994; Gasco 2005; Seed 1991). A bioarchaeological approach is valuable in illuminating dynamic identity construction when biological measures of similarity differ from material culture or historical patterns (Stovel 2013).

In Mexico, the full extent to which structural inequality, patterns of admixture, or structural violence (stress/health disparities) resulted from the *castas* system or from the national identity of *mestizaje* (meaning a mixed population) that replaced it is poorly understood (Harvey et al. 2017). In this volume, we attempt to critically examine the intersectional factors that shape the identity of the colonized. How did the lived experience of the racialized *casta* system, cross-*casta* interactions, gendered experiences, and economic opportunities (or lack thereof) affect the identity of people living in colonial spaces?

Regardless of location, several features exemplify colonization and nation formation: Indigenous religion is co-opted or repressed; colonizers exert economic and political control over the colonized, favoring certain groups over others; and demographic health consequences follow (Marx 1969; Sack 1986). Colonial events lead to conflict and structural inequality (Madley 2004). Early in the twentieth century, scholars argued that “primordial” divisions, such as race and ethnicity, would dissipate in the face of modernization and industrialization (Weber 1978). The passage of time has shown that this has not been the case (Glazer and Moynihan 1963).

An interdisciplinary, comparative approach is necessary for understanding how colonization happens and how it shapes the societies that develop in its aftermath. However, for the most part, anthropological scholarship of colonial

societies has been siloed by discipline. Historians and archaeologists explore how cultures change in response to tumultuous events, like war and conquest (Effros and Lai 2018). Ethnohistorians examine ramifications in religion and economics (Aswani and Sheppard 2003). Scholars in biological anthropology seek to understand how inequality is embodied in individuals and populations (Stojanowski 2005). Feminist scholars add an intersectional approach but rarely draw from fields beyond history or sociology for their research (e.g., Patil 2013), although a nexus of violence/race/sex has been recognized since the term “intersectionality” was first coined (Crenshaw 1991). Here we combine these approaches to ask how major historical events that result in migration, demographic change, and social upheaval shape human populations in terms of both culture and biology. We hope we have produced an integrated, interdisciplinary look at state-level colonization and conflict that will be broadly applicable to anthropological studies.

The chapters in this volume indicate that our participating scientists use both inductive and deductive reasoning. These researchers formulate their hypotheses, if their research is hypothesis-driven, from historical records and archaeological data as well as from a shared body of middle-range anthropological theory, attempting to link human remains and cultural contexts with human behavior (Raab and Goodyear 1984). These theoretical approaches vary among the authors but generally relate to political economy (Roseberry 1989), structural violence (Farmer 2004), and resilience (Holling 2001) and may relate to investigating the effects of inequality among various components of a population.

Methodological Approaches

Examining patterns of genetic or phenetic variation; the distribution of nutrition, health, and disease; and the relationships among these factors requires researchers to draw on many characteristics of individuals. This is especially true when the questions being asked are about past populations. Table 1.1 summarizes the kinds of data available for these studies. Authors in this volume drew upon four of five commonly used indicators of population mixture. Additionally, they drew upon all but 4 of 14 common indicators of developmental stress, health, and diet. These observations illustrate the breadth and depth of research approaches used to address the questions we posed.