History Compass 3 (2005) LA 155, 1–10

Many Historiographical Mexicos*

William B. Taylor
University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

Recent trends in scholarship about Mexico during the colonial period are glimpsed in this article, with an emphasis on the place of material culture in current and future cross-disciplinary work in the field. Archaeologists and art historians are becoming major voices in this field, addressing key issues in the historical literature, yet there has been little conversation and debate across disciplines to date.

Imagining the present becoming the future for the study of New Spain, especially the territory of modern Mexico, brings many possibilities to mind. This article will only mention some of the trends and highlight one that historians tend to overlook in our conversations among ourselves. Perhaps it is just my associative cast of mind, but I suppose the various possibilities suggest how diffuse and incomplete historical study remains, and not just for Mexico. Under the circumstances, groups of scholars concentrating their efforts along one line of inquiry can be very productive. But seemingly scattered activity is not a bad thing. For my part, I am grateful to Charles Gibson for never telling his students what to study or how to study it. It would be crippling if scarce resources for the study of New Spain, Mexico, or Mesoamerica (the area of densely settled, pre-colonial state societies in modern central and southern Mexico and Central American highlands) before the nineteenth century were limited to a few schools of thought, subjects, or approaches.[1]

A few hours with the Digital Dissertations database and the American Historical Association's list of dissertations in progress shows the continuing prominence of Mexico in Anglophone Latin American historical studies. (More than one-third of the 4,000+ Latin American history and history-related dissertations listed since 1990 concern Mexico). Interest in the colonial period remains quite strong, too, although more of the most exciting work now is being done on the nineteenth century. I checked for waves of interest in the colonial period scholarship, and found some, but also noticed quite a few recent dissertation projects on unfashionable subjects, such as fiscal administration, imperial institutions, biographies of viceroys, elite families, the professions, merchants, political economy, *encomienda*, transportation, education, print culture, and music. Some of the great books,

big and small, about New Spain have been created this way, outside the main currents of their generation, or leading the way into new currents – Robert Ricard's *La "conquête spirituelle" du Mexique*, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's *La población negra de México*, George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* and *Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century*, Elizabeth Wilder Weismann's *Mexico in Sculpture, 1521–1821*, François Chevalier's *La formation des grands domaines au Mexique*, Francisco de la Maza's *El guadalupanismo mexicano*, Edmundo O'Gorman's incendiary little books *La invención de América* and *México: El trauma de su historia*, and Charles Gibson's *Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* come to mind.[2] Without much variety of topics and approaches, the base from which to practice history as "the restless discipline of context" is going to be exceedingly thin. And hot topics can go out of fashion, sometimes without leaving much of a trace. Bernard Cohn, the South Asianist anthropologist-historian at the University of Chicago, noticed with some bemusement thirty years ago our soft spot for revisionism and novelty. For historians, Cohn wrote, "revisionism was and is the sure way to fame – correcting errors of fact or interpretation, toppling the 'big book' of the preceding generation – which leads to 'founding' new subjects, and now, consuming new theories and methods."[3]

But pursuing many avenues of investigation as a corrective to current fashions and revisionism leaves us open to a familiar criticism, endorsed in his way by Walter Mignolo, that historians lack a subject and an epistemology beyond serving the hands that feed us, and that cumulatively there is not much more to what we do than the residue it leaves behind for historiographers. In this view, past and present discourses about history become most of what there is to the knowable past, and, if taken to a radically relativist extreme, one story about the past becomes about as good as any other. While social construction of knowledge is inescapable and requires our close attention, Mignolo's line of criticism is not one I am going to take up here. I could not do much for it in a few lines, and I think it represents what have become increasingly incommensurable approaches to the study of culture in the colonial period by scholars who make separate homes in history and Romance languages departments. This has not always been so, but our differences now often choke off conversation and close reading of scholarship across these departmental lines, setting potential interlocutors at cross purposes that exaggerate a distinction between empirical truth and socially constructed knowledge in ways that tend to lose sight of the fact that people lived, loved, toiled, and remembered long before we arrived, and that we are trying to reckon with their circumstances, experiences, and understanding, without claiming to know them "first hand."

Thinking about recent trends in the study of New Spain that have more to do with an internal logic, redirections, and cumulative development of the field, I was tempted to talk about a certain disenchantment with analytical studies of communities and regions in favor of new narratives about private

spaces and personal lives; to set these narratives alongside a seemingly contradictory turn to the state and ideology in terms of social as well as political history, often in the form of popular political culture; and to consider attempts to bridge these two trends by "writing history from the margins of the nation state," as Florencia Mallon puts it. But I'm not sure the politics were ever left out by most of us during the rush to social history in the 1970s and 1980s, and perhaps it is time to consider again the possibility that not everything everywhere is soaked in state formation.[4]

Another trend is a turn to Inquisition files and other ecclesiastical court records for an array of social, cultural, and political topics, especially for gender studies and Foucaldian concerns about power/knowledge – often with the religion left out, unfortunately. Another is a growing, but not yet sharply focused interest in what might be called Baroque studies. Still another is the recent (now sustained) interest in geographical and political frontiers, expressed especially in a veritable renaissance of scholarship on New Mexico, Texas, and Alta California for almost any topic you can imagine – a development that is reordering the sense of process and chronology for colonial history in those places.

I also thought to talk about some popular topics and approaches that are being pursued with a depth and vigor that promises to leave a lasting mark on the field: gender, race, class, and ethnicity studies, for one, often springing from a search for agency, transculturation, and social construction of identity;[5] religion and religious institutions for another; women religious; creole nationalism; Afro-Mexicans; outcomes of "the new philology" James Lockhart spearheaded; studies of the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries; the perennial interest in Indians under colonial rule, urbanization, Bourbon reforms, and the wars of independence, for a few more.

I admit I was also tempted by a more eccentric point of entry – to consider topics and approaches that seem to have run their course or been abandoned, like demographic history and land systems, or subjects that have long been neglected for no good reason, such as economic history and history of science. But I know it is mainly in the Anglophone scholarship that demographic history, economic history, and land systems have gone by the boards lately. Land and society, and an array of topics in economic history have remained vital, often hotly debated, areas of research among Mexican scholars. And demographic history and landed estates really have not disappeared from current research in the scholarship outside Mexico. A 2003 issue of *Ethnohistory* is devoted entirely to the subject of landed estates in Mesoamerican history; and within months of that publication an issue of the *Revista de Indias* ran a series of new articles on demographic history.[6]

These views of the field from inside are only part of the story. What about the influence on the writing of early Mexican history of conceptual approaches and developments in other fields of learning, both within and beyond history? – whether it is the ever-flexible ambitions and approaches of *Annales* history; the legacy of Marx, Weber, and Foucault; Richard

White's "middle ground"; the consumption of post-colonial theory and Subaltern Studies; and current politics of grantsmanship. Here are deep waters, and this is the briefest of overviews, so let me stay closer to shore with a largely external trend that poses a challenge and opportunities for us now. I am thinking of the study of material culture and visual representation, and the various uses and approaches to them in art history, ethnography, historical archaeology, and geography.[7] Like it or not, we need to pay closer attention to what scholars in these fields have been doing with the history of New Spain, because they are doing quite a lot and asking historians' questions (especially when the questions turn to politics, power, cultural change, and affiliation). They have been examining written records that are – or should be – familiar to us, presenting new sources, and staking claims to special knowledge of "lived experience" – that is, how society, politics, religion, production, and consumption worked, and were understood then.

For more than two generations, art history has been moving away from the Old Masters and aesthetic connoisseurship in favor of the contextualized study of image-making and use – for images of all kinds – leading some art historians toward the questions of anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, and various branches of history. I think especially of David Freedberg's *The Power of Images*, and David Morgan's *Visual Piety* and *The Sacred Gaze*.[8] And there are colonial Latin Americanists among them, including Tom Cummins, Dana Leibsohn, Carolyn Dean, Barbara Mundy, and Ilona Katzew. Recent dissertations supervised by Cummins, Elizabeth Boone, and Cecilia Klein deal with such topics as "Art and allegiance in Baroque New Spain" (Michael Schreffler, University of Chicago, 2000), "The role of images in influencing colonial policy" (Travis B. Kranz, UCLA, 2001), and "Power, politics, and persuasion: The painted histories of the Tira de Tepechpan" (Lori Diel, Tulane University, 2002). Serge Gruzinski's work with images comes into play here, too, whether he is regarded as a historian or *provocateur* without portfolio.[9] The study of colonial images and image-making has converged recently on the famous *casta* paintings of the eighteenth century. It is encouraging to find historians Susan Deans-Smith and Ramón Gutiérrez in active discussion with art historians and cultural studies scholars about those paintings, rather than leaving the study of them to run on separate tracks while asking the same questions about patronage, reception, and significance for understanding ethnicity, race, and class in late colonial society.[10]

Historical archaeology has become an especially dynamic nexus for the study of material culture and colonial America outside history departments. It has been going on in particular ways for quite some time at national historic sites in North America – witness colonial Williamsburg, Monticello, St. Augustine, and Spanish missions in California and San Antonio, Texas back to the 1930s. But these projects were mainly about the reconstruction of national monuments. The recent work is different and involves a larger number of archaeologists who are more inclined to work across traditional academic fields with world systems, cultural transformations, agency, identity,

and resistance among their watchwords. Their ambitions are ethnographical and historical; they don't think of themselves as "pre-history" specialists. For New Spain, the long-term projects of Kathleen Deagan and her students working at colonial St. Augustine and other sites in Florida and the Caribbean led toward more comprehensive, historical approaches and hypotheses in the 1980s and 1990s.[11] It is going on now in other archaeology programs, including Vanderbilt, UCLA, UC-Berkeley, Texas A&M, Tulane, Simon Fraser, and some regional centers of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, among others.[12] These archaeologists are interested in what historians have done with written records, but they are convinced that contextualized physical remains – history from the ground up in the most literal sense – provide them with better access to colonial subjects and a more phenomenological history in which everyday practices are documented and unstated (or at least unrecorded) values, views, and affiliations behind them can be inferred.[13] To this end, several PhD students at Berkeley are working across the pre-Columbian/colonial line for indigenous communities in El Salvador and the Ulúa Valley in Honduras, using sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscript sources as well as their excavations, following on earlier work by William Fowler and Rosemary Joyce.[14]

Archaeologists are becoming leading voices in the renaissance of Alta California studies, which has grown to include some significant scholarship in religious studies, ethnomusicology, economic history, and ethnic studies, as well as books and articles by historians James Sandos, Steven Hackel, Lisbeth Haas, Robert Jackson, Edward Castillo, and George Phillips (among others),[15] that offers new sources and different perspectives.

Kent Lightfoot's *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (University of California Press, 2004) is the most comprehensive and challenging entry yet in this recent scholarship by historical archaeologists. In it he seeks "a more balanced, multi-voiced perspective of the past" that can establish how "colonial structures were actually negotiated in the practice of daily living by native peoples." Combining Native American oral traditions with his own extensive archaeological program at Fort Ross, the large, scattered literature on mission archaeology and history, and the latest excavations at non-mission sites, Lightfoot presents a rich and original comparative view of Spanish/Mexican and Russian colonial histories in northern California that emphasizes, among other things, the "double lives" of mission Indians. He writes that in private they practiced traditional ways, or combined them with colonial culture for themselves, while meeting the mission's public demands for obedience, conformity, and service. Lightfoot's book is both something of a vindication of and a twist on the "new mission history" outlined by Robert Jackson and Edward Castillo.[16]

While archaeologists in California are digging within mission, presidio, and trading post compounds for the lives and values of non-elite residents,

some are also moving outside those compounds to ranchos, farms, hamlets, fishing and hunting camps, and residential sites of dispersed Native American groups who maintained contact with mission, pueblo, and presidio centers. Barbara Voss has followed some individuals and groups associated with the presidio at San Francisco – including several women – out of the armed compound and into a hinterland of ranchos, camps, and trade networks,[17] and Steven Silliman offers a full scale study of native American workers on a colonial and Mexican-period rancho in the north Bay area in his book *Lost Laborers in Colonial California: Native Americans and the Archaeology of Rancho Petaluma* (2004).

We historians need to know this new scholarship by archaeologists on the colonial history of Greater Mexico. Whether for historians reading archaeology or archaeologists reading history, "knowing" will have to mean more than extracting stray nuggets of information and tipping over straw men. We don't live in Mr. Rogers's neighborhood, and the conversations among us may not be easy. Anthropologists, including Lightfoot and other historical archaeologists I have met, are inclined to privilege what comes out of the ground or is expressed in native oral tradition as the real evidence of how "colonial structures were actually negotiated in the practice of daily living by native peoples," while leaving written records to express the intentions of colonial elites and the operation of their institutions. And the sociology of academic departments has a way of working itself out in territorial terms that severely limit the time and energy we can muster for conversation across fields. But the need to keep the conversation going is compelling, especially now that the questions and approaches to research are merging. Historically minded archaeologists and cultural anthropologists have been taking some steps across familiar boundaries that have separated anthropology from history as fields of learning – boundaries where anthropologists' methods are said to be largely atemporal and comparative, and historians' methods atheoretical; and where history is said to be a descriptive, idiographic field of study (studying particular cases, events, and places) and anthropology a nomothetic field (searching for general laws or theories which will cover whole classes of cases).

Our academic cultures and sense of field work certainly differ, but this division between history and anthropology has always seemed contrived to me, and more so now as claims on all sides to objective, scientific truth, and first-hand knowledge have become muffled. Anthropologists often have done better with their particular cases and places than with establishing general laws; and many historians have been comparativists in their reading habits and have found theory in the social sciences and humanities good to think with. E. P. Thompson's vision of history as the restless discipline of context could just as well be said of historical anthropology, and there is a shared recognition that most of our evidence is going to be circumstantial, accidental, and enigmatic. We have no choice but to tolerate complexity, ambiguity, and surprise.

So, there is much for historians and historical archaeologists of New Spain to discuss. Missing the opportunity is going to diminish both fields at a time when archaeology is becoming more ethnographical and historical, and history is becoming a less resolutely textual field of learning.

Notes

William B. Taylor taught in the University of Colorado, University of Virginia, and Southern Methodist University before becoming the Muriel McKevitt Sonne Professor of Latin American History, University of California, Berkeley in 1998. He has written mainly about the colonial period, and his current research centers on shrines and miraculous images across five centuries of Mexican history.

⋆ Adapted for *History Compass* from a paper presented at the Mexican Studies Committee session, Conference on Latin American History, American Historical Association Convention, Seattle, January 7, 2005.

[1] The challenge has always been to take on something substantial, both in terms of subject and sources; to do the work as fully and synoptically as possible; to risk the time and trouble to explore many aspects, follow every lead, and hold them all in mind; and to recognize which are the salient contexts for understanding a particular episode or relationship.

[2] R. Ricard, *La "conquête spirituelle" du Mexique* (Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1933); G. Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México, 1519–1810; Estudio etno-histórico* (Mexico, Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1946); F. Chevalier, *La formation des grands domaines au Mexique: Terre et société aux XVIe–XVIIe siècles* (Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1952); F. de la Maza, *El guadalupanismo mexicano* (Mexico, Porrúa, 1953); G. Kubler, *Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1948) and *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962); E. W. Weissman, *Mexico in Sculpture, 1521–1821* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1950); E. O'Gorman, *La invención de América: Investigación acerca de la estructura histórica del Nuevo Mundo y del sentido de su devenir* (Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958) and *México, el trauma de su historia* (Mexico, UNAM, 1977); C. Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519–1810* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1964).

[3] B. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 34–5.

[4] One recent current in Anglophone scholarship does reduce the importance of state institutions in colonial politics, as in T. Herzog's *Defining Nations: Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), and A. Cañeque's *The King's Living Image: The Culture and Politics of Viceregal Power in Colonial Mexico* (New York, Routledge, 2004).

[5] Identity as a category of study is increasingly criticized for being conceived in thing-like, static ways. See Herzog, *Defining Nations*, p. 6: "We need to abandon the quest for 'identity' and examine instead processes of 'identification'."

[6] *Ethnohistory*, 50 (1), 2003, issue devoted to "Beyond the Hacienda: Agrarian relations and socio-economic change in rural Mesaomerica"; *Revista de Indias*, 62, January–April 2003, issue devoted to "¿Epidemias o explotaciones? La catastrophe demográfica del Nuevo Mundo." It was also tempting to pick up on last year's Mexican Studies Committee gathering (described by Ben Vinson in the 2004 CLAH newsletter) which reopened the question of periodization, and comment on recent seventeenth-century studies, continuing interest in the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries as a time frame, and the growing attention to the nineteenth century in general, as well as Marcello Carmagnani's recent proposal to consider a long conquest (1519–1630), an early colonial period (1630–1730), and a mature colonial period (after 1730), "¿Hacia una nueva síntesis del pasado colonial mexicano?" *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 20 (1), 2004, pp. 167–74. I would want to develop the idea that no one periodization is going to work for most places and aspects of life. See also E. van Young, "Two decades of Anglophone historical writing on colonial Mexico: Continuity and change since 1980," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 20 (3), 2004, pp. 275–326.

[7] There are also convergences around landscape studies, environmental history, legal studies, and sacred movement. The organization of space, place-making, and time, too, are becoming nexuses for historians, geographers, art historians, literary scholars, historians of religion, and anthropologists.
[8] D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991); D. Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998) and *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005).
[9] S. Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)*, trans. H. MacLean (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001); *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th–18th Centuries*, trans. E. Corrigan (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993) and *Painting the Conquest: The Mexican Indians and the European Renaissance*, trans. D. Dusinberre (Paris, Flammarion, 1992).
[10] Recent books include M. Carrera, *Imagined Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003); I. Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004). The study of mapping in the colonial period is another nexus of Latin Americanists in recent years which has involved historians less, for no particular reason I can think of. See B. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996); R. Padrón, *The Spacious Word: Cartography, Literature, and Empire in Early Modern Spain* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[11] For example, K. Deagan, *Archaeology at La Isabela: America's First European Town* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002); *Puerto Real: The Archaeology of a Sixteenth-Century Spanish Town in Hispaniola* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1995); *America's Ancient City: Spanish St. Augustine, 1565–1763* (New York, Garland, 1991) and "Colonial transformation: Euro-American cultural genesis in the early Spanish-American colonies," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 52 (2), 1996, pp. 135–60.
[12] Historical archaeology for New Spain has been slower to develop among Mexican scholars. Some of the reasons why are broached in P. Fournier-García and F. A. Miranda-Flores, "Historic sites archaeology in Mexico," *Historical Archaeology*, 26 (1), 1992), pp. 75–83.
[13] While phenomenology is invoked, and Merleau-Ponty, de Certeau, and Roland Barthes are cited, the practice of the new historical archaeology seems more in the venerable ethnographic tradition of inferring meanings from behavior. As Bernard Cohn described it some forty years ago, anthropology's "central fact" is the conviction that "people lead meaningful lives and the meanings can only be discovered within the context of those lives." See Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, p. 19.
[14] W. R. Fowler and R. Gallardo (eds.), *Investigaciones arqueológicas en Ciudad Vieja, El Salvador: La primigenia villa de San Salvador* (San Salvador, CONCULTURA, 2002); W. R. Fowler, *Caluco, historia y arqueología de un pueblo pipil en el siglo XVI* (San Salvador, Patronato Pro-Patrimonio Cultural: Fundación Interamericana, 1995); R. A. Joyce, *Cerro Palenque: Power and Identity on the Maya Periphery* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1991).
[15] Recent studies include J. A. Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004); S. W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of St. Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2005); L. Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769–1936* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995); R. H. Jackson and E. Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995); G. H. Phillips, *Indians and Intruders in Central California, 1769–1849* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). Also M. Chávez García, *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California, 1770s–1880s* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2004); M. Duggan, "Market and church on the Mexican frontier: Alta California, 1769–1832," PhD dissertation (New School of Social Research, Economic History, 2000) and *The Chumash and the Presidio of Santa Barbara: Evolution of a Relationship, 1782–1823* (Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, 2004); Q. D. Newell, "Transforming mission: Catholic rites of passage and changing family structures among central California Indians at Mission San Francisco de Asís, 1776–1821," PhD dissertation (University of North Carolina, 2004); C. Mujal, "Out of the apocalypse to Alta California: Franciscans in the New World, 1524–1833," PhD dissertation (University of California,

Berkeley, 2002). And see the bibliography in M. Lightfoot's *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004). A foundation for recent scholarship is D. J. Weber's *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992).

[16] Lightfoot's Indians "trapped" in the Franciscan missions, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants*, p. 158, echoes the incarceration model proposed by Jackson and Castillo, in *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization*.

[17] B. Voss, "Sites of identification: Colonial landscapes in Spanish San Francisco," paper presented in the symposium, "Moving on: Toward a phenomenological approach to colonial subjectivities," 2004 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

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