Racism Without Race:
Ethnic Group Relations in Late Colonial Peru
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In 1912, Lord James Bryce, the British Ambassador to the United States, returned from Spanish America and proclaimed the region an excellent laboratory for the study of race relations. No doubt his view was the result of Spanish America’s unique population. Miscegenation had taken place there since the sixteenth century, at an unparalleled rate, so that the idea of race as it applied to Latin America referred to a peculiarly complex reality. Despite Bryce’s implicit advice to social scientists, the subject of Spanish American race relations is still virtually untouched, and so is the related subject of racism.

Racism has been defined as “the assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another which is usually coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over the others.” As a phenomenon in Spanish America, it is usually associated with the turn of the nineteenth century. Buffeted by the harsh winds of international economics and internal strife, Latins rejected their indigenous past and sought their future among waves of European immigrants, whom they felt would infuse the region with a dynamism that was biologically inspired. The “scientifically” based ideas of European intellectuals such as Gobineau, Huxley, and Spencer that a racial hierarchy with whites, or Aryans, constituting the upper stratum formed the proper basis for world society seemed little more than belated recognition of what had been a reality in Latin America for three centuries.
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The purpose of this paper is to explore the colonial antecedents of this phenomenon. By reviewing briefly the social structure and racial composition of late colonial Peru, Spanish racial attitudes, and ethnic group relations, it may be possible to determine whether Spanish American racism can be said to have existed prior to the nineteenth century, and perhaps more importantly, if so, on what bases it was predicated. Peru, as the seat of the former Inca empire, produced a variety of racial strains and thus offers an opportunity for an interesting case study of ethnic group relations. Hopefully, this study will aid in the more precise analysis of a universal phenomenon that is of concern to all thinking persons.

Following the conquest of America, social rank or status was based largely upon phenotype, i.e. color and physiognomy, with a whitish skin indicating limpieza de sangre, or purity of the blood from Moorish or Jewish ancestry, a virtue prized since the days of the Reconquest. Yet although Spanish law regarded each racially-definable group as a separate social stratum, with attendant rights and obligations, by the eighteenth century, and probably well before, miscegenation, or race mixture, had caused racial lines in Peru and elsewhere to become hopelessly blurred. Definition for the purposes of maintaining social stratification on the basis of race alone became virtually impossible, so that the Spaniards perforce adopted sociocultural indices to maintain intact the social system.

As early as 1560 the social pyramid in Peru consisted of a small upper stratum of Spaniards, numbering between 5,000 and 10,000 persons, who by this date had been matched in number by Mestizos, the issue of their liaisons with Indian women. Negroes, both free and slave, brought from Africa, ranked directly below them. The base of this social pyramid consisted of a large number of Indians who formed a separate culture from the above. There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to the exact configurations of this social structure, with one authority viewing it in terms of multiple hierarchies rather than a single pyramid; the point for our purposes, however, is simply that “racial” identification by the mid-sixteenth century was becoming difficult. A 1796 census in Peru indicated a population of 1,115,207 persons. Of this number 56.5 percent were classified as Indians, 26.5 percent as Mestizos, 4 percent as Negros, both slave and free, and 13 percent as Españoles, or whites. This population was ranked by the Spanish authorities according to at least twenty-one “racial” categories, fourteen of which applied to mixed-bloods alone.

Because of the distinct minority position of the whites in Peru, and the omnipresent fear which they harbored of native rebellion, society was necessarily predicated upon the concept of racial separation rather than integration. This was facilitated by the fact that ethnic groups tended to reside in different geographic regions. A majority of Peruvian Indians tended to reside at the higher elevations which had been the centers of the Inca empire, while most Mestizos lived in or around the Spanish towns where they had been born. Whites lived in the major urban areas, notably the capital of Lima, located on the coast, which by the eighteenth century had an estimated population of nearly 60,000 persons. Most Negroes also resided on the coast, either as laborers on the great landed estates or as tradesmen and mechanics in the towns.

This geographic and residential separatism was reinforced by the Laws of the Indies, which constituted an attempt to apply the corporate, hierarchical society of estates existing in late medieval Castile to the multiracial situation developing in Spanish America. Laws ordered Indians to remain in their own towns, which were placed under Spanish governance. Similarly, laws covering dress, admission into trade guilds, militia units, universities, hospitals, as well as those on intermarriage, taxation, and the bearing of arms, were all predicated upon the existence of a racially-definable social system. Peruvian viceroys received their subjects in three separate rooms: those for whites, Indians, and Castas, or mixed-bloods. The Church retained separate parish registers on the same basis, while military units were organized along similar lines.

Certain features of this Spanish quest for separatism should be noted as the basis for understanding ethnic group relations in Peru. First, it was probably never strictly enforced. Owing to extensive miscegenation, it became impossible to distinguish light mestizos from darker Creoles or American-born whites or, for that matter, from Indians who spoke and dressed as Mestizos. Secondly, the
demands for free labor, especially in the urban centers, facilitated some limited upward social mobility. Finally, the rivalry between Peninsular Spaniards and Creoles for appointive office in the Spanish imperial bureaucracy provided some limited opportunities for men of talent, regardless of birth, to ascend to positions of responsibility normally closed to them. It is probable, however, that the number of lower-class individuals appointed by the Spaniards in preference to the Creoles was small, because of the pernicious effect it might have on the hierarchical social system.

There are numerous examples in late colonial Peru of mixed-bloods serving in the trade guilds, the military, and the Church, attending the university, and even participating at the lower echelons of the imperial bureaucracy, regardless of the provisions of the Laws of the Indies. To a much lesser degree, the same was true for Negroes of talent and Indians, especially those of noble birth, who were used as minor provincial administrators. Moreover, the Crown allowed wealthy Castas to purchase cédulas de gracias al sacar, or “certificates of whiteness” which theoretically entitled them to admission into the fringes of the colonial elite. Similarly, the Church might, for a fee, register an infant into a higher social category in the baptismal records to achieve the same results.

The foregoing should not be construed as examples of Spanish racial toleration. By and large, Spaniards in Peru viewed Indians as being sensual, fatalistic, alcoholic, stupid, and lazy. Although the Crown had taken several measures to assure their protection during the sixteenth century by relegating them to the status of perpetual minors under the care and protection of the Church, the need for a servile labor force in the silver mines, which were an economic mainstay of the empire, dictated their ultimate decimation and brutalization during most of the colonial period. By the eighteenth century, Spanish commentators exhibited little concern for the plight of the once-noble savage unless he demonstrated a willingness to renounce his cultural heritage and accept Mestizo status in the Spanish-speaking world. Even then there was never any hint that the Indian could ever become the equal of the white in any sense.

By and large, the Spaniards considered Negroes, especially freedmen, to be sensualists and troublemakers, and, if anything, less adaptable than the Indian to the ways of Spanish civilization. Because of the aridity of coastal Peru, no extensive system of plantation agriculture developed there as it did in other parts of Latin America, notably Cuba and Brazil. Although the number of Negro slaves rose dramatically during the last years of the colonial period, blacks never constituted more than four percent of the total population. While it may have been true that the Spaniards regarded slavery as more a matter of military misfortune or social class than of race, there is no body of convincing evidence that these attitudes caused Peruvian, or Latin American, slavery to be less oppressive than elsewhere.

Over half of all Negroes in Peru were freedmen, employed in the interstitial trades and professions. Although there were vocational opportunities as millermen available to blacks that were often not available to Indians, it would be incorrect to assume that this indicated any significant degree of racial toleration towards them. Using the military as a case study, I have found numerous examples of socioracial discrimination in promotion, pay scales, and judicial sentences against Negroes in both the regular and militia components of the Army. Royal attempts to tax free blacks on the same basis as Indians, which placed them in the category of subject peoples, were strenuously resisted.

Because of the stigma of illegitimacy which attached to mixed bloods and their marginal position in Peruvian society, fully accepted neither by whites nor native peoples, discrimination was especially pronounced against these groups. One category of Mulattos were known collectively as salto atrás, literally, “a jump backwards” from the white ideal. Perhaps employing a play on words, Alonso Carrió de la Vandra, an eighteenth-century social critic, likened the mulatto to a mule, because both pretended to be gentle in order to kick their masters when they so desired. In 1742, the Spanish naval lieutenants Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, who were visiting Peru on a secret mission for the King, noticed that Mestizos there disdained manual labor and preferred to live dissolute lives, oftentimes outside of the law. After 1780,
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owing primarily to the massive rebellion against royal authority launched by the Mestizo Túpac Amaru, additional restrictions were placed upon Mestizos in an effort to limit their revolutionary potential.19

By the eighteenth century in Peru, Spanish attempts to impose a caste system had failed as the direct result of race mixture. As it became impossible to distinguish ethnic groups on the bases of color and ancestry alone, cultural and behavioral patterns were employed in their places as primary status determinants. Language, dress, the wearing or non-wearing of shoes, diet, and sleeping arrangements gradually had replaced color and physiognomy as definitions of a person’s “racial” category. As historian Woodrow Borah has noted for Mexico, “the family which wears peasant dress, goes barefoot or in sandals, eats corn tortillas to the exclusion of wheat bread, and sleeps on the ground may be classified as Indian.”20 Conversely, those who chose to speak Spanish and wear Spanish dress became Mestizos. Thus it was not rare or impossible for Indians to “pass” into the Mestizo category, and talented mixed-bloods might also ascend into the fringes of the colonial elite groups. The hectic pursuit of higher “racial” classifications by the lower social groups in Peru indicates that white superiority was institutionalized and that most groups subscribed to white values as a means of self-improvement.

Besides the labor force and revenues which accrued to the Crown, this policy of limited social mobility performed another important function. By absorbing small numbers of talented, and potentially hostile, leaders of the masses into higher social categories, the system of social stratification based on white dominance was preserved with minimal changes, since these entrants were forced, as terms of admission, to accept elite standards and values in place of those of the groups from which they came.21 In order to combat a potentially threatening racial situation, the white Spanish minority in Peru had thus substituted for an unworkable caste system a pragmatic and rather flexible system of cooptation, in which limited social and vocational mobility was afforded talented individuals, who thus became valuable adjuncts of the colonial elites. Denied leadership, the masses rarely could rise in successful opposition to the Crown. For example, during the massive revolt of 1780 led by Túpac Amaru, practically no Mestizo or Indian leaders defected to the rebel standard, a fact that insured the eventual defeat of the insurgents.22

Although most Peruvian Indians remained segregated in their own towns, separated both residually and occupationally from whites, and though Negroes and mixed-bloods in urban centers were similarly restricted to areas which were ghettos in all but name, one observes significant differences between these Spanish racial policies and modern South African apartheid. The intent behind Spanish separatism was to protect the Indian from the vicious mixed-bloods, rather than to protect whites from the people of color—as is at least nominally the case in South Africa. Yet at the same time, it is notable that no mixed-bloods in Spanish Peru, much less Negroes or Indians, ever achieved membership on the town councils or in the high courts; nor were they promoted to senior rank in the ecclesiastical, military, or imperial bureaucracies. The distrust of Mestizos and Indians prompted by the revolt of Túpac Amaru tended to restrict their passage, both occupationally and socially, into the colonial elite groups. Creoles thus preserved their status as an establishment during and after independence in Peru, with only minimal concessions granted to the lower social groups.23

There is evidence that in Peru the efforts made by the late Bourbon reformers to undercut the power of this entrenched Creole elite by permitting mixed-bloods to assume positions of responsibility, especially in the Church and the military, prompted no small number of racist remarks against these groups. This leading conclusion has prompted the assertion that socioracial prejudice was on the increase in Spanish America by the late eighteenth century.24 However, the fact that these racial remarks were widely reported by European travellers may reflect less an increase in socioracial prejudice than an increase in publication of ideas regarding race which had been held for centuries.25 Nor is the increase, both in number and intensity, of mass rebellion in late colonial Peru any clearcut indication of increasing dissatisfaction on the part of lower social groups with the racial policies of the Crown. Although
it is not certain that the insurgents did not feel themselves to be the objects of socioracial prejudice, the list of grievances set out by them indicate that factors other than racism were prevailing causes behind the revolts.  

Because the white Creole elites assumed control over the masses during the Wars for Independence in Peru, no basic changes took place to alter the relationships between ethnic groups during the early nineteenth century. Aside from a few military men who climbed the social ladder as caudillos, or political bosses, the basic structure of Peruvian society continued to resemble closely that of colonial times, and the policy of cooptation of talented mass leaders remained in force. While the legal and administrative usage of ethnic classifications, save that of Indian, or indígena, was officially abolished in 1825 in Peru, these had long been useless as status determinants, which were culturally derived; needless to say, the edict did nothing to reduce socioracial discrimination. Not until 1854 was Negro slavery abolished and the Indian freed from the payment of tribute.

During the nineteenth century, a declining economic situation and a disastrous loss to Chile in the War of the Pacific (1879–83) combined to increase the mood of racial pessimism in Peru. At about the same time, the mass emancipation of Negroes after 1854 assured their entrance into society at the lowest economic levels and thereby increased socioracial prejudice over what it had been earlier, when Negro freedmen constituted an important part of the economic system.  

As late as 1911, Lord Bryce noted that the Peruvian Indian was still a citizen for military, but not for political, purposes, in the sense that he could neither vote nor hold office, because of a variety of unofficial restrictions.  

As a direct result, ideas rationalizing the socioracial inferiority of darker social groups in Peru were widely accepted as explanations for the situation in which the nation found itself.  

In conclusion, the heritage of the colonial period to the future of ethnic group relations in Peru was in providing a social structure and a domestic tradition which remained virtually intact after independence and was largely congruent with European racist viewpoints. Ever since Spanish times, Peruvians have tended to accept socioracial factors as influencing and determining the potential of the diverse ethnic groups which comprise their population. Today, these beliefs still affect the relationships between various ethnic groups and pose a serious obstacle to Peruvian nation-building.

NOTES

1. Lord James Bryce, who served as British Ambassador to the United States, 1907–13, visited South America in 1911–12. His book, South America: Observations and Impressions (New York, 1912), is still a valuable assessment of the region. For his analysis of the contemporary racial situation there, see pp. 454 ff.


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11. For a history of Spanish efforts to protect the Indian, see the works of Lewis Hanke, especially The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America (Philadelphia, 1959).
16. Leon G. Campbell, “The Military Reform in the Viceroyalty of Peru, 1762–1765,” unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, 1979. For example, units were segregated by “race” and officered by whites. Negroes were punished more severely for their crimes by military courts than their white counterparts. Royalist authorities often refused to use Negro militiamen in the highlands to combat the Indian rebellions out of a belief that blacks could not function efficiently in higher altitudes. Although field commanders rejected these biological stereotypes, many are still uncritically accepted today. For a case study of black rebellion, see my “Black Power in Colonial Peru: The 1779 Tax Rebellion in Lambayeque,” Phylon: The Atlanta University Journal of Race and Culture, XXX:2 (Summer, 1972), 140–52. Although the revolt was economically based, it had racial overtones as well.

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24. Mörner, Race Mixture, 57.
26. See Boleslao Lewin, La rebelión de Túpac Amaru y los origenes de la emancipación americana (Buenos Aires, 1957), and Carlos Daniel Valcárcel, La rebelión de Túpac Amaru, 2nd ed. (Mexico, 1965), which documents Túpac Amaru’s desire to free “Americans” of all races from Spanish domination. Both my article “Black Power in Colonial Peru” and Juan Bromley’s account of a Negro revolt in Lima in 1775, in Vírreyes, Cabildantes y Oidores (Lima, 1944), pp. 85–93, indicate that Peruvian Negroes considered themselves discriminated against on the basis of race. Only recently have sociologists such as Roberto MacLean begun to analyze the incidence of alcoholism, suicide, and mental illness among Peruvian Negroes in calculating the adverse effects of this discrimination (Racismo [Lima, 1945]).
28. Bryce, South America, p. 469.
29. See especially the works of Francisco García Calderón (1883–1953) and of José Santos Chocano (1875–1934). The brilliant Marxist intellectual José Carlos Mariategui, in his Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality, translated by Marjory Urquidi (Austin, 1971), synthesizes this legacy of sociocultural discrimination.