

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN AMERICAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Social class and hierarchies are a direct result of the governance structures imposed by the Europeans. Their goals involved maintaining tight control of property, resources, and the populace by means of privileging relations with the Iberian peninsula, and establishing a strict and rigid hierarchy, with all the prejudices and resentments that such a system inevitably engenders. The attitudes and values persist to this day, although they are often well masked.

## PRECONQUEST

**Priests:** Throughout Latin America, the priests and shaman classes occupied a position of privilege. They were the spiritual leaders, which meant a great deal, given the prevailing belief that the only way to keep the world from entering into oblivion was to placate the gods, often by means of rituals led by the priests.

**Kings, Royal Family:** The Pre-Conquest Latin American world was one of distinct social hierarchies. They were monarchies, and the members of the royal family enjoyed a higher standard of living than the other city dwellers. However, they did pay a price, since the Maya, Aztec, and the Inca believed that blood sacrifice should come from the ruling class.

**City-Dwellers:** The average city dwellers were engaged in the arts, trades, and crafts of daily life. For example, in Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico, many city dwellers were vendors and they sold their goods in the central marketplaces.

**Captured Warriors and Slaves:** Life was not pleasant for the warriors unlucky enough to be captured by the Aztecs. They were often the first to be sacrificed in rituals of human torture and sacrifice, the spilled blood believed to placate and satisfy their gods.

## Colonial (Early Modern)

**Encomienda:** When the Spaniards established themselves in Latin America, they aimed to keep control by installing their own countrymen in grand estates. They were expected to pay a portion of their annual production to the crown, and for that reason, the encomiendas (or grand estates) that happened to be in mining territory were considered the most desirable. The encomienda system essentially kept the land controlled by Spaniards (by proxy), and essentially disenfranchised the majority of inhabitants in Latin America.

**Roman Catholic administration of Class:** Class was essentially race-based, and it was determined at birth. It was entered in the records of birth by the local Roman Catholic clergy. Thus, if you were determined to be a “criollo” (European descent born in the New World) by the clergy you enjoyed better social standing than if you were considered a “mestizo” (mixed race). Your race directly determined your opportunities in life. There was a very clear hierarchy, which consisted of European, Indigenous, African, and mixed race peoples.

**Peninsulares:** Peninsulares were Spaniards who were born in the Iberian peninsula. They were considered to be “pure” or “true” blood, and they possessed privilege, power, and prestige. Because of their direct link to the Spanish monarchy, they were given the right to control the entire government, and all its economic affairs.

**Criollos (Creoles):** When the Peninsulares had children in the New World, they were considered to be of nobility due to their “pure” blood. They were also given control of resources.

**Mestizos:** Mestizos were of mixed ancestry, with both European and Amerindian heritage. It is important to keep in mind that when a Creole married someone of Amerindian descent, their race was entered in the church records as “mestizo.”

**Mulattoes:** A mulatto was a person with mixed European and African descent. They were considered to be of mixed race, and did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as the Creole class.

**Amerindian or “Indio”:** Although the Amerindians were the original inhabitants of the land, they suffered the same negative fate of conquered peoples, and were placed on a lower rung of the social hierarchy than Mestizos.

**Negro / Zambo:** Dark-skinned peoples of African descent, the “Negro” or “Zambo” had few rights, and tended to live in poverty. They were considered the second lowest social class, and were essentially the descendants of slaves who had somehow achieved their freedom.

**African Slaves:** The survivors of the inutterably cruel “Middle Passage” voyage on a slave ship from Europe to the United States, the slaves had no rights whatsoever, and were considered, by society to occupy the lowest rung. They had no freedom, no rights, and could be beaten and otherwise mistreated with impunity. The legacy of slavery means that despite the fact that countries such as Brazil have declared themselves to be colorblind and that there is equal access for all, there still exists a kind of tacit racism that results in exclusion.

### Nineteenth Century

**Independence:** Social hierarchies stayed in place, even with the gaining of independence from Spain. The only major change was that there tended to be more social mobility among the middle class and the professions (medicine, accounting, engineering, etc.).

### Twentieth Century

**From Peon to Patron – Land Reform and Upward Mobility:** In the twentieth century, major reforms led to more opportunities for individuals who had never had access to land to become landowners and “patrones” instead of “peones.” In Mexico, the 1934 Agrarian Code involved the expropriation of American-owned agricultural property. The land was divided and given to citizens in the different Mexican states. This change was not always an easy one, because even though the poor now owned land, it did not mean that they had enough for it to support their family, and nor did it mean that they would be able to afford equipment, seeds, or storage facilities. The dilemma of the smallholder was captured in Juan Rulfo’s short story, *Nos Han Dado la Tierra*. Later in Mexico, with the 1970s Land Reform, there was another surge of repatriation of foreign-owned private farms. The farms were placed in the name of community members. These collectives were called “ejidos,” and they became increasingly contentious after a generation and more collective owners between the children (additional heirs).

**Entrepreneurs:** An important new social class emerged in the twentieth century throughout Latin America. Entrepreneurs encouraged investment and growth in all sectors of the economies, particularly after the privatization of public utilities and services. Entrepreneurs were a strong force for positive growth, but in countries where there did not exist a strong anti-monopoly framework, unscrupulous entrepreneurs often emerged as possessing control of the market, reducing the situation to essentially a one-source oligopoly.

### Discussion/Questions

1. If you were a captured warrior in a Pre-Hispanic culture, chances are, you would already understand the rules of the game, and you would know that you were likely to be painfully murdered in order to placate someone else's gods. Chances are, you would simply hope that it would be a quick death, but you would hold out hope that you would have a reward and be able to ascend the social hierarchy in another life. You might look at the ruling class -- the kings, priests, and princes -- and think that they had a much better life. But, did they? The more we know about Incas, Maya, and Aztecs, the more we realize that they had to subject themselves to periodic blood-letting, flagellation, and ritual torture. Imagine a society where the ritual torture, self-torture, and human sacrifice extend across every level of society. How might that affect one's sense of one's place in society? How does it contrast with the view that those who fail to conform are those who merit torture? How might the Inca or Maya mindset result in a flatter society?

2. In order to establish control, the Spanish immediately executed leaders, tortured non-believers, and imposed their own order. It was not enough to maintain physical control. It was necessary to try to eliminate all with a competing

mindset; an activity which replicated in many ways what happened in the Iberian Peninsula in the clashes with the Muslim North Africans (the Moors). Thus, the priests and representatives of the Catholic Church worked closely with the government placed themselves at the highest level of the social hierarchy. Those directly from Spain were considered the closest to the desired values. Analyze the situation and propose a step-by-step process of establishing classes.

3. If you found yourself recently captured from your home in West Africa, dragged to a large wooden ship where you were chained to a wall in the sickeningly dirty quarters below decks, fed very little, and abused daily, just to be sold as a slave to a West Indies, Brazilian, or coastal plantation, would there be any hope for you? As a slave, what was your position in society? If you escaped and invented a false identity as a freedman, could you ascend in society? How? What would you have to do? If you had children with a "criolla" woman of European descent, would your children have any hope of ascending the social hierarchy? What would they have to do? Could establishing a flourishing and profitable business help you? Could learning to read, write, and produce eloquent writings in support of the church or a head of government help? What would you have to do?

4. When land reform first took place in Mexico, big blocks of land that had previously been controlled by the viceroy were deeded to families that were long-established in a community. Suddenly, instead of simply working for a wealthy landowner, they had the chance to become self-sufficient. However, there were challenges. The first was the problem of investment capital. The second was the problem of inheritance, and the fact that the blocks of land had to be distributed among the heirs, resulting in small chunks of land that were often isolated and too small for raising crops or establishing businesses. So, your chance at upward mobility (moving from a landless peon to a landed patron), could evaporate like a light rain on cactus. What would you do? In such a situation, how could you marshal forces and make your dream of ascending in society a reality? If you were one of the class who recently lost your land, how could you make the best of the situation? Would you team up? Or, would your class prejudices block you?

#### Reading

Marini, Raay M. *America Latina, Dependência e Integração* (Sao Paulo: Editora Brasil Urgente, 1992), pp. 141–149.

Moneta, Carlos. "The Latin American Economic System as a Mechanism to Control Conflicts," in Michael A. Morris and Victor Millán (eds), *Controlling Latin American Conflicts: Ten Approaches* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), pp. 99–116.

Vich, Victor. *El Discurso de la Calle* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2001), pp. 169–186.

Williamson R.C. *Social Structure and Change: Latin America and the World*. In: *Latin America*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. 2006.