HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN LATIN AMERICA

Contents

Chapter 1: Pre-modern Americas

General A variety of social situation prevailed in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. Many areas remained in hunting and gathering economies, or mixed economies involving some agriculture but very limited social hierarchies. Evidence from the Pacific Northwest figures prominently in recent studies of relatively advanced societies that preserved substantial social equality (and avoided extensive formal government). However, key civilizations emerged both in Central America and in the Andes, and though the two regions were quite separate, they both developed clearly hierarchical social structures.

Evidence Detailed evidence of the nature of social hierarchy is limited thanks to the destruction of most written records by European conquerors. However, imaginative work for example on the Mayan people in Central America uncovers clear data on pronounced social hierarchy. A minority – probably about 10% -- of the population thus lived in distinctively opulent and highly decorated housing. Their skeletons are better preserved in death, thanks in part to better nutrition, in part to more elaborate burial procedures. They had more cavities in their teeth, somewhat ironically reflecting diets richer in various carbohydrates. The Mayan upper classes also deployed some system of wooden clamps on the heads of their infants, creating elongated skulls that differentiated them visibly from the bulk of the common people.

Basic Mayan structures Beneath the ruler, the top layer of Mayan society was composed of priests and nobles, both wealthy and privileged; this stratum was ranked into several subgroups. Nobles provided government administrators and also led military forces. The two groups were the only literate segments of society. Merchants and artisans came next, followed by the peasantry, the largest group (some of whom were serfs). Slaves included criminals and military captive, debtors, children sold into slavery by impoverished parents, and some hereditary slaves. In some cases, slaves were sacrificed when their masters died (so they could continue service after death). Slaves did domestic work, agricultural labor, and helped build the monumental temples – as well as being the likeliest targets for ritual sacrifice. Social divisions were for the most part quite rigid, with the nobility a hereditary class.

Aztec society Patterns were similar to those of the Mayans earlier on. Technically a five-fold division prevailed, headed by the emperor (a position that was not hereditary, though a council chose new emperors from the family of the previous ruler). Priests, nobles and other military leaders formed the second tier (divided into four segments). Nobility was technically not hereditary, but based on government office; but most offices were filled from noble families. Most though not all priests were from the noble class. The broad cluster of commoners were clearly headed by merchants whose status was hereditary; this group had many privileges, including opportunities to send children to the schools of the nobility. Artisans came next, and then other commoners (about 30% of the population), most of whom were farmers or fishers. The fourth group were peasants, technically free but inferior to commoners; some of these were laborers, with no land of their own. At the bottom were slaves, some of whom however could actually own property. Slavery was not hereditary, and some slaves bought freedom during their own lifetimes or were freed on a master's death. Overall, this was not a caste system, and limited mobility based on talent was possible – even into the priesthood. However, class lines were rigid and largely hereditary.

Inca society This society, expanding in the Andes in the centuries shortly before European arrival, was close to a caste system, with detailed rules barring social interaction among different groups depending on position in the hierarchy. Mobility was difficult, though some young women managed to marry older men of a higher caste, based on looks and ability to work. Several gradations of nobility depended heavily

on relationships to or positions in the royal family (with emperor clearly on top). The nobility in general were excused from taxation. And they were easily distinguished (in ways intriguingly similar to those of the Mayans): boards were attached to the heads of young children in the noble class, creating a visibly pointed skull – the symbol of nobility, up to and including the emperor himself. Leading nobles were all ethnic Incas, but as the empire expanded it needed more officials, so some non-Incas became lower-level aristocrats (regarded as Incas by adoption). Beneath them was a familiar pyramid of merchants and artisans, and then the agricultural population, some of them slaves though Inca society did not include a rigid category for slaves.

Drawbacks Features of the social structure contributed to problems in the later stages of empire, right before the arrival of the Spanish and contributing to their success. Particularly with the Aztecs, subject peoples resented the taking of slaves for use in religious sacrifice, weakening support for the empire when it came under attack.

Study questions

1. Were the pre-Columbian American civilizations unusually hierarchical?
2. What was the social position of the major urban groups?
3. How did ethnicity relate to social class for the Incas and Aztecs?

Further reading

Michael E. Smith and Frederic Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” in D.L. Nichols and E. Rodriquez-Alegria, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

Jon Lohse and Fred Valdez Jr., eds., *Ancient Maya Commoners* (University of Texas Press, 2004)

Terence d’Altroy, *The Incas* (Wiley, 2014)

Chapter 2: Latin America since 1900

Overview Three features of Latin American social structure over the past two centuries, since the end of the colonial era, are worth special attention. First is the ongoing importance of racial hierarchies, though this varies with the specific region. Groups of European origin continue to predominate in wealth and prestige over mestizos and indigenous groups. In places like Brazil, with an extensive population of African or partly African origin, gradations by skin color are pronounced, more in fact than in the United States though there is less systematic prejudice against the lighter-skinned. Second, and somewhat related, income inequality between the wealthy and the majority of the population has been and remains unusually great, in comparative terms, and persistent over time, again since the colonial period – despite the absence of a formal aristocracy. And third, social structure has reflected the important evolution of the Latin American economy, from emphasis on low-wage agricultural and mineral exports to a much more diversified portfolio, along with extensive urbanization and the growth of urban as well as rural poverty.

Class structure in the 19th century Into the 20th century, Latin American social structure was dominated by the push to expand export production of agricultural and mineral products, backed by governments as well as powerful landlords. Small peasant proprietors were increasingly displaced by larger estates for products such as coffee (in several regions) or wheat (in Argentina). In parts of Central America by 1900, banana production had similar impact. Several regions were also shaped by mining or, again by 1900, oil production. Both mines and plantation agriculture expanded the population dependent on wage labor – and where workers were scarce, as in Argentina and Brazil, European immigrants or in some cases Asian immigrants, some of them on indenture contracts, were brought in as supplements, aimed at keeping wages low. Landowning elites gained great political and well as economic power, joined by a new group of export-oriented merchants in some of the major cities. Middle classes were weak, though they gained some ground by the early 20th century thanks to a growth in public sector employment and the expansion of educational opportunities for a growing minority. In a few cases also, as in Mexico, a noticeable urban working class began to develop, along with some labor unions.

Impact of the Depression Declining export demand hit Latin American economies hard in the 1930s, leading to growing populist political pressure. In many countries, policies shifted to emphasize

industrialization, seeking to replace imports from the West with home-grown products. This change prompted considerable growth of urban groups, both middle class and working class. Urban demand also encouraged more commercial agriculture, including (in Mexico) the first stages of the “green revolution”. This however benefited larger landholders, further pressing small-holding peasants. The result was a growing migration of many poorer people into the cities, beginning the creation of the characteristic Latin American urban structure, with vibrant center cities surrounding by massive urban slums on the outskirts (called *favelas* in Brazil) and a correspondingly large informal economy. However, a large factory working class also emerged, forming the largest economic group in many countries by 1960. Many landless peasants now depended heavily on remittances from relatives in the cities (or emigrants to the United States).

More recent developments The complexity and heterogeneity of the Latin American class structure clearly increased from the final decades of the 20th century onward. The further growth of commercial agriculture plus some land reform largely displaced the old landlord class, with many farms now run by middle-class managers. However, rural poverty has remained high. Rural activism Increased, but the outflow to the cities continued as well. Many rural residents combine cultivation of tiny plots of land with wage labor on commercial farms (plus remittances from family members elsewhere). A distinct and wealthy upper class now combines merchants and exporters with newer industrialists and leading managers in state-run enterprises. Middle classes have grown considerably, with managers and professional personnel, civil servants, and professionals. The ranks of the urban working class, however, have diminished, with significant declines in the manufacturing and mining population thanks to growing automation and foreign competition. Some regions have however benefited from employment opportunities in foreign-owned enterprises producing for export (and often utilizing many female workers). Urban slums and their informal economies remain vitally important, though slower population growth has eased some pressures and a number of successful independent industries have developed as well, creating a more mixed picture. Overall, urban populations continue to gain ground, constituting about 75% of the total by 2000.

Study questions

1. Why, despite considerable social change, has modern Latin America consistently displayed unusual economic inequality?
2. What have been the main challenges to peasant land ownership from the 19th century to the present?
3. What are the principal features of Latin America’s urban social structure in the 20th century?

Further reading

Fernando Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (University of California Press, 1979)

Dirk Kruijt, Carlos Sojo, and Rebeca Grynspan, *Informal Citizens: poverty, informality and social exclusion in Latin America* (Rozenberg, 2002)

Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman, “Latin American Class Structures: their composition and change during the Neoliberal era,” *Latin American Research Review* 38 (2003)