The Original Melting Pot

Unlike areas colonized by the English, Spanish America was always a more racially mixed society, although these mixtures made for their own problems. Early conquistadors\(^1\) were men. Early Spanish settlers were men. Spanish priests were men. So, being men, they all (except, theoretically, the priests) craved female companionship, and before long, intermarriage was a staple of Spanish American life.

Among the higher Spanish officials, wives and families were common, but among the rest of the colonial population, Spanish women were almost non-existent. And voila! Spanish America gave almost instantaneous rise to a mixed-race population, called mestizos, which quickly became numerically by far the largest portion of the population. Some of the intermarriage and intermingling was forced; some was not.

Either way, as the years passed, a complete caste system was organized that classified each person according to the amount of Indian\(^2\) blood they had. This was not unlike the classifications of African-American slaves in the United States in a later century: the more Indian blood a person had, the lower he or she stood on the ladder of social respectability. The Spanish had for centuries lived with laws called limpieza de sangre, or Purity of Blood, in which aspirants to public office—or those brought up before the Inquisition—had to prove that all their ancestors were Christian, as far back as ten generations.

Try it: see if you can come up with a list of all your ancestors in the past four generations. Didn’t think you could. Now, imagine trying this in a world without birth certificates, without the internet, and where most of the population was illiterate. And imagine again trying to prove that your great-great-grandmother on your father’s side was not a descendant of the Inca, but was in fact a Spanish woman. A whole industry existed for the faking of documents and testimony about ancestry, both in Spain (where issues revolved around Jewish and Moorish blood) and in the New World.

Mestizos were barred from various offices, they could not hold many jobs, and they were discriminated against in court. Spanish colonial America was ruled by a small group of pure-Spanish descendants, and the rest of the population had few rights.

This is still a problem in much of Latin America, where Independence in the nineteenth century replaced one ruling class with another. For instance, in Mexico, the ongoing Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas has much to do with the rights of indigenous and mestizo populations who feel they are underrepresented and face discrimination. In Bolivia, a similar story unfolded after the recent election of Evo Morales, an Indian, to the presidency. This is all to say that race played a huge role in colonial Latin America, and still does today.

Slaves

Mestizo culture was not the only racial issue in Spanish America. The terrible destruction of the Indian population

\(^1\) Conquistadors = Spanish Conquerors

\(^2\) In this article, the term “Indian” is used to refer to Native Americans, the indigenous (original) peoples of the Americas. While the use of term “Indian” may be inaccurate and even offensive to some, it is still commonly used, especially in Latin America, to refer to Native American communities.
prompted the Spanish, in their never-ending search for cheap labor, to import West African slaves to work the sugar plantations in the Caribbean and the mines in South America. Over time, intermarriage created yet another ingredient in the racial mixture of the New World. More slaves were brought to some parts of the New World than others; correspondingly, there are more people of African descent in the Caribbean and Brazil than there are in Chile and Argentina. The Spanish viewed Africans as lower on the racial hierarchy than American Indians. Slavery existed in South America even after it was abolished in the United States; Brazil, an independent country by the mid-nineteenth century, didn’t abolish slavery until 1888, when it became the last Western nation to do so.

Cultural Mix

The mixture of Europeans, Americans, and Africans in colonial Spanish America gave rise to a fascinating cultural brew. While Catholicism was designated the official religion, slaves in the Spanish Empire (as in the United States) held onto their own beliefs and incorporated them into their own forms of Christian worship. The same went for indigenous Americans, and when the traditions of three continents combined, a new, Latin American culture flourished. On the frontier in the American Southwest, however, there was less mixture of cultures, mostly because the population was smaller and opportunities for intermarriage were not as plentiful. The tribes of the American Southwest—Apache, Navaho, Comanche—did not often mix with their Spanish rulers, although there was some intermarriage. These tribes stayed separate, preferring to live their lives as free from European interference as possible, and consequently, although the American Southwest faced many issues, there was less of a race-based caste system than in other parts of Spanish America.

Overall, race played a dual role in colonial Latin America. In one sense, it was a prime ingredient in a unique cultural mixture that incorporated African, Indian and European elements, something that happened nowhere else in the world. In another sense, it was the basis for racist divisions in society in which the color of one’s skin and the perceived amount of non-European blood one had limited life’s opportunities and brought about inequality and discrimination. The problem of race was different in Spanish America than in the United States, but it was no less troubling.

SUMMARY

Directions: Write a paragraph summarizing the key ideas of the article in answer to the question, “How did colonization and slavery shape the complex and varied racial identities of Latin America? You must use key terms!