Massimo Livi-Bacci

The population of Iberian Colonial America
Ten Essays

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Introduction

The events that have shaped modern America, from the landing of Columbus to independence from Europe three centuries later, have nourished my imagination since childhood; my fascination with the New World has been kept alive by constant and disorderly reading, by visits and travels, and by periods of teaching and research on American soil. Meanwhile, over the past two or three decades I have looked at American events through my habitual professional lenses: those of a demographer eager to transcend the traditional disciplinary fences and gain a better understanding of society and its dynamics. Quantitative data fuel demographic research but this fuel is in short supply when dealing with colonial populations. That very lack of evidence, however, is a powerful incentive to make the most of any scrap of information that may help reconstruct a population's history. Reading the writings of Cieza de Leon – *Chronista official de Indias* – who traveled north to south from Colombia to Chile, contributes mightily to our understanding of the demographic collapse of the indigenous population after contact. Almost three centuries later, Alexander von Humboldt's travel writing, *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent*, is a rich mine of information about the functioning of indigenous societies and the environment in which they lived. I cite these works not only for their anthropological value but also because they are entertaining and attractive to the reader.

This volume is a collection of 10 essays published in various scholarly journals between 2001 and 2023[1]. I hope that bringing them together may be of some interest to scholars in the field. At the same time, I must confess that the compilation of this book has given me great personal satisfaction. I abandoned an initial idea of giving them a forced sort of unity with a summary

introduction and will limit myself to offering a few comments on some of the gaps and unsolved issues concerning the history of the populations of the New World, those same gaps and issues that stimulated my curiosity in the first place, inspiring my intrusion in an area outside my usual field of studies.

First and foremost, I have been intrigued by the puzzle of the dimension of American populations at the time of first contact with the European conquerors. Scholars of different disciplines have made evaluations that range from a few million to over a hundred million people. The last reasoned estimate goes back to the early 90s. Since then, new research, more refined methods, and new findings have accumulated evidence that can provide better estimates of the populations of the major regions of the continent. Archeology, genetics, geography, environmental sciences, history, and other disciplines, if properly coordinated and questioned, can help in providing a more solid range of estimates. Indeed, the assumed size of the population at the time of the first intercontinental contact is not a neutral factor when trying to discern the causes of the ensuing demographic disaster.

The second gap in knowledge is germane to the first. It relates to the speed and the scale of the populations' collapse. Estimates of the demographic dimensions of America grow firmer with time, but because we know so little about the "starting" point at contact, we are hard pressed to gauge the pace of that collapse. Knowledge of this pace is important to understand the factors of the catastrophe: violence and warfare, epidemics and diseases, dislocation and forced migration, and usurpation of the labor force and resources. A further enigma relates to the reasons behind the very different destinies of the various native ethnic groups. Many disappeared after only a few generations; others suffered declines from dramatic to relatively mild; very few prospered. What made the natives more or less resilient in the face of disruption and catastrophe? The third issue concerns the mechanisms by which new diseases imported from Eurasia – particularly smallpox – generated epidemics. How deadly were they, and what were the processes of immunization and selection by which some of the indigenous populations built a defense against them?

Another vast area of investigation regards the mixing of the indigenous with the white and black populations that arrived following on the conquest. How strong were the barriers to

miscegenation, religious, social, and political? This area of study is extremely complex but the study of demographic factors – fertility, reproductivity, and migration – offers key insights. At contact, America was populated by a few tens of million natives, reduced to only a fraction of this number after a few generations. Three hundred years later, around 1800, the population, following that initial collapse, had recovered to about 30 million people, but only four out of ten were natives, ceding primacy to whites, Africans, and mixed-race persons.

These collected essays do not fill the gaps nor solve the many pending issues. They only offer a few demographic tools for a more articulate vision of the population history of Iberian America.

I.

The Depopulation of Hispanic America after the Conquest

In 1574, the cosmographer López de Velasco published his *Geografía y descripción general de las Indias*. Together with much other interesting information and data, Velasco reported the number of tributaries as enumerated in each district in tax reports and other assessments (López de Velasco [1574] 1971). Adding up the data yields a total close to 2 million, corresponding to 8 to 10 million people for all of Hispanic America, comprising the majority of the total population of the Western Hemisphere[1]. This number reflects the knowledge of Spanish authorities in the early 1570s-80 years or so after Columbus's landfall, 50 years after the destruction of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán by Cortés's expedition, and 40 years after the assassination of the Incan emperor Atahualpa in Cajamarca at the hands of Pizarro and his companions. Three decades later, at the beginning of the 1600s, the population was smaller: in central Mexico it had declined from 2.7 million in 1568 to 1.4 million in 1595 (Cook and Borah 1971). In Peru (current boundaries) the population fell from 1.3 to 0.9 million between 1570 and 1600 (Cook 1981: 94). I cite the data from Mexico and Peru, not only because they represented the most populous, densely settled, and advanced areas of the Western Hemisphere, but also because the quality of the information, for that period, was relatively high and at any rate unsurpassed until the end of the eighteenth century. After the mid-sixteenth century, the colonial governments in the Virreinatos of Nueva España and Peru reformed the taxation system and made serious efforts to enumerate the tributaries, while curtailing tax exemptions and relocating dispersed populations[2]. The *visitas* (visits, or inspections), although not properly modern censuses, were efficient headcounting operations made by knowledgeable functionaries and offer a reasonable picture of the population's size and distribution[3].

Before the 1560s and 1570s, there are glimmers of information, but no reasonably complete population counts. For Mexico after 1546, the taxation system inherited from the Aztecs was revised through a series of inspections whose results are available in a document (*Suma de Visitas*) that reports counts for 900 localities, about half the total for central Mexico (Cook and Borah 1960a and 1960b). However, a large proportion of families and individuals were exempted from the tribute – and therefore not counted – and extensive areas were not covered by the inspections, reducing the value of the document for estimating the total population. In Peru and elsewhere, quantitative knowledge before the mid-sixteenth century is limited to scattered local information that does not permit a reasonably accurate estimate of the total population. What is known, however, is sufficient to corroborate the testimony given by contemporaries of a continued population decline, even collapse, in the decades following the Spanish Conquest. Among the major Caribbean islands, the native Taino Indians were almost extinct by 1550, plummeting from a contact population that although not in the millions – as some modern scholars have estimated[4] – certainly numbered several hundred thousands (Livi-Bacci 2003b). The coastal areas of the gulf of Mexico and of Peru were largely depopulated by mid-century, their inhabitants killed or dislodged by malaria in the former and by the wars and the intrusion of Europeans in the latter. Evidence of a similar nature can be found for other parts of the hemisphere.

So the story of the first century of the Spanish Conquest is one of decline, collapse, or catastrophe. But while there is a reasonable consensus around the population estimates for the latter part of the sixteenth century, there is wide disagreement about the size of the native populations at the time of first contact (Alchon 2003: 150-172). Table 1 gives an idea of the extent of disagreement, the ratio of the highest to the lowest population estimate being 12:1.

A discussion of the merits of the various estimates is beyond the scope of this essay. Eclectic methods and criteria were used in obtaining them, ranging from assessments based on archaeology and geographical and political factors to the backward projection of depopulation rates observed for a later period to an earlier one. However, the assumed size of the population at the time of first contact is not a neutral factor when trying to discern the causes

of the ensuing demographic disaster. There are three reasons why the decision whether to select a high estimate or a low one influences the explanation of the following demographic downfall. For the sake of conciseness, I will name them "confiscation of labor", "diffusion of disease", and "Conquest's atrocities".

TAB. 1. *Estimates by twentieth-century authors of the population of the Western Hemisphere at the time of first contact with Spanish settlers (millions)*

	Kroeber (1939)	**Steward (1949)**	**Rosenblat (1954)**	**Dobyns (1966)**[a]	**Denevan (1976)**	**Denevan (1992)**
North America	0.9	1.0	1.0	11.0	4.4	3.8
Mexico	3.2	4.5	4.5	33.8	21.4	17.2
Central America	0.1	0.7	0.8	12.2	5.7	5.6
Caribbean	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.5	5.9	3.0
Andes	3.0	6.1	4.8	33.8	11.5	15.7
Lowland South America	1.0	2.9	2.0	10.1	8.5	8.6
Western Hemisphere	8.4	15.5	13.4	101.3	57.3	53.9

[a] *Estimates from Dobyns are averages of low and high variants, which for the hemisphere as a whole are 90 million and 112.6 million.*

Source: Denevan (1992), pp. xviii and 3.

Confiscation of labor. This was a powerful cause of the social and economic dislocation brought about by the Conquest, often producing a fall in agricultural production and resultant famine. The conquered Indios were not legally slaves, but they were forcibly employed by the Europeans to provide services and support on their haciendas, for transport and construction, and in the search for gold (Simpson 1966; Alchon 2003: 242). On the island of Hispaniola (modern Haiti and Dominican Republic), for instance, the Spaniards numbered no more than 10,000 at the height of their settlement period around 1510[5]. This population size was large enough to wreak havoc in a society of a few hundred thousand people or so, as some (myself included) conjecture the island contained at contact. But it was too few to have a decisive negative impact in a society with 8 million people, as some modern authors have assumed was the case[6].

Diffusion of disease. New diseases imported from Europe were a major cause of the population collapse in the Americas, as I later discuss. However, the extent and speed of their diffusion

were certainly greater in densely settled areas and much less so where the population was of small size, scattered, or isolated. So the assumed size of the population at first contact is a relevant question when assessing the impact of the new pathologies on the demographic collapse.

Conquest's atrocities. Atrocities were repeatedly perpetrated against the conquered peoples, particularly with the first wave of the Conquest. But the direct impact of killings, maimings, rape, abduction, and depredations on the conquered population must have been directly associated with the ratio of conquerors to conquered, and therefore inversely correlated with the natives' population size.

Paradigms of collapse: The origin of the Black Legend

Fray Toribio de Benavente, who took the *nahuatl* name of Motolinia (the Humble), was one of 12 Franciscan friars sent to the Indies for the purpose of converting the natives to Christianity. He arrived in Mexico in 1524, less than three years after the fall of Tenochtitlán. Motolinia traveled throughout the country, preached to the Indians in *nahuatl* (their native language), and converted, christened, married, and buried multitudes of Indians. He shared the awareness of other contemporary observers that the natives were becoming fewer and fewer. His *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* was probably written in the 1540s; the first chapter deals with the "ten plagues" that devastated Mexico [Motolinia [1858]1973: 13-18). They were: 1) smallpox that struck the country in 1520, "and in the majority of the provinces more than half the population died, in others slightly less"[7], followed by measles in 1531; 2) war and the "many who died in Nueva España's conquest and particularly in the city of Mexico"; 3) the famine that followed the war because the fields had been devastated and abandoned; 4) the *calpixques*, supervisors of labor in the fields and tax collectors on behalf of the Spanish *encomenderos* (*conquistadores* and colonists to whom the land and the natives were granted); 5) the excessive tributes exacted from the natives, including in gold; 6) the mines of gold and the craving for gold; 7) the rebuilding of the "great city of Mexico" by Indians obliged to lend their labor and provide materials without compensation; 8) enslavement of Indians, who were sent to work in the gold mines; 9) the corvées for supplying