

TITLED NOBLES, ELITES, AND INDEPENDENCE: SOME COMMENTS

THE MEXICAN NOBILITY AT INDEPENDENCE, 1780–1826. By DORIS M. LADD. (Austin: University of Texas, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1976. Pp. 316. \$5.95.)

The Mexican Nobility at Independence is a timely reminder that, despite current emphasis upon the inarticulate and downtrodden, there is still much to learn about the highest ranks of colonial Spanish American society. Although titled nobles were prominent during the colonial period, particularly from the late seventeenth century until Independence, historians have focused little attention upon them. Drawing heavily upon the Archivo General de la Nación, among other Mexican archives, Ladd offers both the first full study of titled nobles for any region in Spanish America and a revisionist interpretation of Mexican Independence. The result is a stimulating, seductively written book. Unfortunately, carelessness in detail weakens what otherwise might also have been a very useful reference work.

When Ladd writes "nobility" she usually means "titled nobility," the small group that answered to "conde" and "marqués." These titled nobles included Mexico's wealthiest and most prominent families. Numbering some fifty families at Independence, they formed the top layer of Mexico's elite.

Ladd describes the titled nobles' origins, their diversified economic activities, and their use of entail to reconcile social and economic "mixed" investment. She emphasizes that kinship, marriage, and *compadrazgo* muted creole-peninsular strife among them. Dependent upon credit, the titled nobles bitterly opposed the Consolidation of 1804, "the primary economic grievance of Mexican elites on the eve of Independence" (p. 104). For Ladd, Consolidation was the critical moment in late viceregal Mexican history, the point at which an autonomist movement seeking a commonwealth, monarchy, corporatism, and centralism was able to coalesce.

Splintered by the crisis of 1808 and in disarray throughout the 1810s, the autonomist position flowered in the Plan of Iguala, a document that marked its culmination rather than simply a reaction to events in Spain. By 1823, however, the autonomist movement had failed, discredited by Spain's refusal to grant Mexico a monarch, a constitution, and independence, and by Iturbide's creation of an independent empire. The titled nobility, nonetheless, survived Independence. Although they willingly gave up entails and titles, their families, the ongoing centers of power, remained.

The book's greatest strength lies in chapters 2–4: "Nobles as Plutocrats," "The Noble Life Style: Social Determinants of Investment Preferences," and "Entail: Reconciling Social and Economic Investments." The author provides ample detail to demonstrate titled nobles' involvement in mining, trade, agricul-

ture, and finance. Simultaneously she shows how the pursuit of prestige determined investment in financially unprofitable but socially important areas. In some cases, for example, a military position, both practical benefits and prestige were combined.

Focusing on the titled nobles enables the author to write a study of manageable proportions. Within the Mexican context, however, the definition seems somewhat artificial. Most of Mexico's titles at Independence were of recent creation; almost half had been authorized from 1772 to 1821. In contrast, prior to 1772 Spanish monarchs had created nearly one hundred titles for persons in Peru, at least triple the number created for Mexico during the same years. Although the number of titled nobles resident in each region in 1821 was nearly identical, the nobles of New Spain as a group were of more recent origins and their titles lacked the respect born of ancient foundation.

One must stress the recent origin of many Mexican titles for it was often only the title itself, rather than life style, lineage, or wealth, that separated its holder from other members of the elite. This was especially true for the original title recipients. Antonio de Bassoco's varied financial activities, for example, were pre-noble rather than noble investments for most of his life. Bassoco was seventy-two years old when he gained his title in 1811; a more normal life span would have precluded him from becoming a conde, but not affected a lifetime of "noble" activities. Stressing this temporal distinction underscores how little might separate titled nobles from untitled but clearly elite families. And, as Ladd shows, the Crown's policy toward entails after 1789 discouraged some candidates for noble titles from accepting them (p. 91).

The problem of definition plagues the study in another way. To ask who comprised the Mexican titled nobility seems a reasonable and straightforward question. Once criteria have been established, documentary sources are available in archives in Seville, Simancas, and Madrid that would permit constructing a complete base list. Ladd's work, however, provides neither clear criteria nor a definitive list of the Mexican nobility. To include in one list titled viceroys who served in Mexico but did not establish permanent families in the region seems excessive. Ladd's failure to clarify her criteria also produces, for example, the seemingly inexplicable inclusion in Appendix F of the Marqués de Sonora, who spent only six years in New Spain as the untitled José de Gálvez and received his title many years after returning to Spain. Listing the untitled Francisco Tagle, the Fagoagas, and the Villaurrutias in an appendix otherwise restricted to titled nobles further clouds the question while again underlining the artificiality of employing titles as a basis for social definition in late viceregal Mexico.

The intertwining of titled and untitled families through marriage and kinship ties and their similar pursuit of prestige and profit emphasize the problems of defining the elite in the late viceregal period and the place of titled nobles in it. When Ladd repeatedly notes that titled nobles were only a small part of Mexico's elite, she assumes that readers would know who the elite were. Like many other scholars, her approach implicitly modifies a well-known quotation to read, "an elite is like a giraffe—difficult to describe but you know one

when you see one." Yet it is increasingly apparent that there is no detailed agreement on who constituted the colonial elites. The question deserves attention when examining titled nobles, for the greater their proportion to the total elite, the greater their relative prominence in society.

If one employs D. A. Brading's definition, Mexico's colonial elite might have totaled nearly 325,000 persons, a figure encompassing approximately one out of four persons of Spanish descent. Comprising this elite, he writes, were "most European Spaniards, all clergymen, qualified doctors, lawyers, and notaries, the royal bureaucracy, merchants, hacendados and successful silver miners."¹ Placed within this multitude, or any figure remotely approaching it, Mexico's titled nobles were numerically insignificant. Yet the social and economic prominence they enjoyed emphasizes their importance, indeed uniqueness, and argues against this broad definition. A detailed examination of Mexico's society would probably reveal an elite numbered in the hundreds rather than tens of thousands of families.

A brief look at Peru illustrates the distance between the usual broad approach to elites and a more narrow, common sense perspective that limits them to persons with financial power, social prominence, or high office. Timothy Anna has recently provided an occupational definition that results in over a third of Lima's white adult males being the city's "true elite." Like Brading he placed the entire royal bureaucracy, merchants, and clerics within his definition.² Yet not a dozen officials outside of the *audiencia* received salaries of over five thousand pesos and less than one-fourth of the bureaucrats drew salaries exceeding one thousand pesos annually. To include in the elite the *oficial octavo* of the Secretaría de Cámara or the *porteros* and *amanuenses* in government offices, to cite extreme examples, simply because they received royal salaries is excessively liberal. To consider all merchants (*comerciantes*) as elite is equally misleading. Probably fewer than seventy of the 393 merchants listed in Lima's 1790 census were wealthy or socially prominent enough to warrant inclusion. The number of ecclesiastics in the elite, too, was far smaller than is often realized. Lima's cathedral chapter numbered about twenty-four men and the heads of the city's religious houses added another two dozen persons. It appears, moreover, that both the city's total ecclesiastical population and the clerics' social status were declining during Bourbon rule.

Several other eighteenth-century sources provide further evidence for considering Lima's elite modest in size. When the Viceroy of Peru listed the city's most prominent persons in 1721, he included 213 names: twenty-seven titled nobles, members of the *cabildo*, merchants, knights of military orders, a few officials, some hacendados, and a few men described only as "creole, single, very poor."³ Such cryptic comments remind us again that elite status was not synonymous with wealth. Forty percent of the persons listed, including nine titled nobles, were reputedly wealthy; an equal percentage, again including nine titled nobles, were described as impoverished.

The traveler Tadeo Haënke's comments on society in the late colonial years provide further confirmation that the city's elite was modest in size.⁴ Haënke reported that Lima had over three hundred noble houses derived from

conquistadores and *pobladores*, subjects employed by the government, and successful merchants. Approximately one-sixth of these houses bore noble titles, a percentage clearly higher than in Mexico where the number of titled nobles in 1810 was only slightly less than Peru's while the white population was far larger both absolutely and in proportion to the total population. Although Ladd uses titled nobles' views and concerns as illustrative for the entire Mexican elite, it seems quite possible that Peru's titled nobles were comparatively more representative of the elite's concerns within that viceroyalty than in Mexico.

Emphasizing numerically small elites in Mexico and Peru helps to clarify the much discussed creole-peninsular hostility. Not only have historians frequently exaggerated the number of *peninsulares* (almost five-fold in the case of Mexico), but also they have overestimated the extent to which they belonged to the elite. It is true, nonetheless, that *peninsulares* were relatively better represented than creoles. Ladd identifies eleven of Mexico's sixteen new title creations going to *peninsulares* between 1790 and 1821 (p. 19). D. S. Chandler and I have found for the Empire as a whole that 68 percent of the men named *audiencia* ministers from 1778 to 1808 were *peninsulares*.⁵ Brading has earlier shown the preponderance of *peninsulares* among Mexico's major merchants.⁶ In light of this evidence, Ladd's contention that strife between creoles and *peninsulares* was "clearly an interest that was not shared by the elites" is questionable (p. 29).

Marriage, kinship ties, and mutual economic considerations certainly softened antagonisms, and "colonial establishments" embracing Spaniards of both Old and New World origin were present in each colony. Yet this should not obscure the unmistakable reactions that occurred in the late eighteenth century in Mexico, Peru, and New Granada to the Crown's policy of restricting American appointments in general and native-son appointments in particular. To argue that such concern was no more than "evidently a class interest sustained by the middle groups" overstates the case (p. 29).

Creole hostility to *peninsulares* grew in the late viceregal period precisely because their opportunities to enter or remain in the small elites through office had declined after 1750. Without denying that Ladd's "middle groups" were avid for personal advancement, one must emphasize that protest to the Crown's appointment policy emanated *inter alia* from the city councils of Lima and Mexico City, bodies whose members contemporaries considered among the elite. Anxious for their creole sons, these men were protesting that there were too few opportunities to enter the elite and thus that their heirs should be dominant in the important area of offices.

It is a long step from unhappiness over too few native sons gaining high office to active pursuit of Independence, however. Ladd shows that in other areas the Crown's response to elite grievances was sufficient to prevent alienation. It took the Consolidation of 1804 to shatter the accord. To Ladd, Consolidation was not only Mexico's most important economic grievance on the eve of Independence, but it initiated a homegrown autonomist movement that eventually culminated in the Plan of Iguala and Independence.

Consolidation assuredly struck hard at wealthy titled nobles dependent upon credit. Yet when its enforcement ended and Hidalgo's horde threatened

social upheaval, the autonomist movement faltered and most nobles soon sat on the sidelines, dealt with both sides as the occasion warranted, and generally tried to avoid unequivocal commitments.

Ladd minimizes the traditional 1810 starting date for the Independence movement in Mexico and attempts to shift the emphasis from "independence" to the desire for "autonomy." Her effort to alter the traditional periodization and focus is not completely convincing. The critical responses in 1821 were from the army and clergy, not from a titled nobility that had spent the 1810s in watchful waiting and double dealing. The army and clergy felt threatened by the course of events in Spain following the Riego Revolt. They faced attack on explicit corporate privileges that were without great significance for the titled nobility since its strength lay in its extended families and mixed investments. The end of Spanish rule reflected not only self-protection but the loss of legitimacy suffered during the 1810s. Moreover, it was the culmination of a growing politicization encouraged by the trauma of 1808. Without denying that Consolidation was a major grievance, until more evidence is presented, the traditional view that the Plan of Iguala and Mexican Independence were primarily reactions to events in Spain rather than a fulfillment of an autonomist movement begun before 1808 need not be abandoned.

While Ladd adds substantively to historians' knowledge about Mexico's titled nobility, Latin Americanists must exercise caution in exporting her discussion to regions south of the isthmus of Tehuantepec. Peru's titled nobles were far more numerous until the late eighteenth century, and entails in the southern viceroyalty were few compared to those in Mexico. In the important matter of Consolidation, Peru not only provided a far smaller yield (perhaps one-seventh of Mexico's), but also was comparatively free from the anguished response to the measure that marked Mexico. The chronological and geographical limitations of Ladd's work leave the way open for a companion study of Peru's titled nobility. Such an examination could benefit from her insights while avoiding several difficulties that have weakened this pioneering volume. The first problem for a potential author is to construct a complete list of titled nobles to be examined. This involves not only turning to documentary sources available in Spanish archives, but also developing criteria for which titled nobles to include.

Ladd's decision to use a massive genealogical and occupational appendix for the nobles studied deserves emulation. The unreliability of published sources, however, calls for protracted archival research in Spain as well as America. If this is not done, the result is such errors as attributing to Antonio de Villaurrutia y Salcedo and his sons Jacobo and Antonio either positions they never held or, in the case of the younger Antonio, an office in a court to which he was never appointed.

The author should exercise care to avoid such errors as, for example, labeling a chart "1726–1800" when it contains figures from 1529 to 1900, or referring to a group of audiencia ministers as "Godoy appointees" when two of the four men were already in the Mexican tribunal when Godoy gained power and a third had held high office since 1778 and received a normal advancement to the body (pp. 59, 109). An explanation of the study's starting date would also be

helpful. Ladd neither explains why she selected 1780 nor provides evidence that the year had any unusual significance to Mexican history in general or the examination of the titled nobles in particular. Finally, the author of any study of Peru's titled nobility should threaten the publisher with dire consequences should he permit the book's index to appear containing references uniformly in error for the first 170 pages of text.

Even with these caveats in mind, the potential author of a companion volume on Peru will face a considerable challenge in providing a study as thoughtful and gracefully written as Ladd's.

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NOTES

1. D. A. Brading, "Government and Elite in Late Colonial Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 53:3 (August 1973):390.
2. Timothy E. Anna, "The Peruvian Declaration of Independence: Freedom by Coercion," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 7:2 (November 1975):237.
3. Conde Bertrando del Balzo, "Familias nobles y destacadas del Perú en los informes secretos de un virrey napolitano (1715–1725)," *Revista del instituto peruano de investigaciones genealógicas* (Lima) 14 (1965):108–20. Paul Bentley Ganster has summarized the contents in "A Social History of the Secular Clergy of Lima during the Middle Decades of the Eighteenth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1974), p. 20.
4. Tadeo Haënke, *Descripción del Perú* (Lima, 1901), pp. 15–16.
5. Mark A. Burkholder and D. S. Chandler, *From Impotence to Authority: The Spanish Crown and the American Audiencias, 1687–1808* (Columbia, Mo. and London, 1977), p. 145.
6. D. A. Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico 1763–1810* (Cambridge, Eng., 1971), part 2.