The conquest and colonization of the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created the conditions for the exploitation of the vast territories described by Marie Price in Chapter 2. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, European imperialist expansion resulted in the defeat and subjugation of the native peoples of Latin America, the first non-European continental area to be Westernized. It was not until the early nineteenth century that challenges to European domination unleashed the revolutionary forces that culminated in independence. Therefore, an understanding of the enduring legacies of a colonial system that lasted for three centuries is fundamental to the illumination of developments and issues in contemporary Latin America. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which Europe imposed itself on the New World and how independence was achieved. Recent research has shown that the native peoples were never passive victims. Despite the ultimate failures of armed resistance, they were still able to decide what elements of the new Spanish civilization to incorporate into their daily lives.

The Conquest

Spanish colonization began after Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean in 1492. Ineffective resistance in the islands allowed the Spaniards to exploit conquered native peoples as virtual slaves. They did so initially through the brutal system of repartimiento (from the verb repartir, “to distribute”) in which native peoples were seized and enslaved. In 1503, the crown adopted the legal system of encomienda (from the verb encomendar, “to entrust”) to replace the earlier system. Henceforth, the conquerors were obliged to Christianize
the native peoples and treat them justly. Nevertheless, this “civilizing” role degenerated rapidly, given an economic imperative for free labor. Therefore, captured native peoples remained in a state of virtual slavery.

European diseases ravaged the indigenous populations of the Caribbean, leading to slave-hunting expeditions on the coasts of Florida, Venezuela, Central America, and the Yucatán. These expeditions also continued the avid search for mineral wealth as the small gold deposits in the Caribbean became exhausted. The discovery of pearls off the island of Cubagua in 1510 led the Spaniards to occupy the northeastern part of Venezuela and expand into the interior in search of El Dorado (the legendary city of great wealth).

Hernán Cortés set out from Cuba in 1519 to pursue reports of a rich kingdom in the highlands of central Mexico. Cortés and his small force conquered the vast Aztec Empire—whose population of 20 million was defended by at least 100,000 warriors—by forming alliances with tribes that sought to end Aztec rule and by deceiving Montezuma, the powerful Aztec leader. By 1521, central Mexico was under Spanish control.

Indian laborers then leveled the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, and built Mexico City on the same site, which immediately became the wealthiest and largest colonial city in Latin America. From the central location of Mexico City, Spanish expeditions fanned out in all directions to subdue any pockets of native resistance. The march into Central America brought Spanish rule to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras by 1525. The Yucatán Peninsula, however,
was successfully defended by the militaristic city-states of the Maya until 1527, when Francisco de Montejo and his son began the conquest they finally completed in 1546.

Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed Panama and became the first European to view the Pacific Ocean in 1513, and Panama City was established in 1519. From this strategic location, Spanish explorers moved into surrounding regions. The indigenous peoples of the highlands of Costa Rica had repulsed the sporadic Spanish expeditions until the 1570s, when the Spaniards were able to complete the conquest of the Pacific Coast and the highlands in Central America. Only on the Caribbean side of Central America did Spanish rule fail to take hold, not because of any major opposition but simply because the sparse indigenous population, the lack of any immediately valuable resources, and the scorching tropical climate combined to make the region unattractive to the Spaniards.

Rumors of a rich kingdom to the south along the Pacific Ocean led Ferdinand Magellan to discover the straits at the extreme southern tip of South America in 1520. In an attempt to find what lay between that point and Panama far to the north, Francisco Pizarro took two exploring expeditions south from Panama along the Pacific Coast of Colombia in the mid-1520s. Pizarro returned to the coast of Peru in 1532 with a force of roughly 200 explorers and soon discovered the Incan Empire, the largest in the Americas. Rather than conducting a frontal attack, Pizarro entrapped the unsuspecting Incan emperor at Cajamarca in 1533. The huge Incan armies could not be assembled in time to try to stop the advancing Spaniards. Hence, the capital, Cuzco, was captured easily, and the entire Incan Empire—which had stretched from Quito, Ecuador, to Santiago, Chile—came under Spanish control. In 1535, Pizarro established the Spanish capital in Lima, which became—the second most important urban center in colonial Latin America.

Expeditions fanned out from Peru in all directions in the hope of finding either precious metals or large numbers of indigenous peoples for free labor. To occupy the southernmost parts of the Incan Empire, Pizarro sent Pedro de Valdivia, who established Santiago, the capital of Chile, in 1541. South of Santiago, the Araucanians mastered European methods of warfare and successfully resisted Spanish control. But the region contained gold, and miners and settlers continued to clash with the indigenous peoples in almost continuous warfare until the late nineteenth century.

An expedition from Spain landed on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, and Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada took this force up the Magdalena River into the highland native kingdom of the Chibchas. After defeating the Chibchas, Jiménez de Quesada established the capital at Bogotá in 1537. To the east, through a piecemeal process, Spanish colonizers gradually converged from the original pearl fisheries on the Caribbean coast of Venezuela and the trading routes on the west toward the central region in Caracas, founded in 1567. To
the south in the Río de la Plata, an expedition from Spain had established Buenos Aires in 1536, but the bitter hostility of the seminomadic native peoples forced starving colonists to relocate to Asunción, Paraguay, where the friendly Guaraní developed a uniquely harmonious relationship with the settlers. Only later, in 1580, did the Spanish colonists feel strong enough to reestablish Buenos Aires as a permanent settlement.

Spanish explorers continued to push into distant areas. Although the indigenous civilizations were advanced in aspects of astronomy and mathematics, they lacked basic elements of technology—in particular, the wheel and iron. Thus, hundreds of Spaniards could easily defeat tens of thousands of their opponents using steel swords, firearms, and cannons. Also, horses terrorized native peoples, who were unfamiliar with them. Even though the conquerors were only slightly better than armed civilians, with few professional soldiers among their ranks, the Spaniards' knowledge of tactics and strategy far surpassed the indigenous peoples' sometimes rudimentary conception of warfare. And the European diseases were the most terrifying weapon of all, decimating millions. Against such odds, the desperate native resistance against the invaders should evoke as much admiration as the boldness of the Spaniards in entering unknown regions.

The plight of the native peoples gave enemies of the Spanish crown ample reason to be extremely critical of the conquest and colonization of the Americas. For example, La Leyenda Negra (the Black Legend) attributed only great cruelty, evil, and exploitation to the Spaniards. Ironically, the Black Legend was based in part on information from missionaries such as Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566), who attempted to end the abuse and enslavement of the native peoples. Later, leaders of the Latin American independence movements used the Black Legend—a mixture of fact and myth—to justify revolution against the crown. More objective interpretations of this history include references to the achievements and loftier purposes of the conquest as well as to the negative impact of this encounter between cultures.

Although formal conquests had ended by 1580, the task of incorporating frontier regions was far from over. The Spanish Empire continued to grow until it reached its greatest extension in the eighteenth century.

The Colonial Period

The conquerors gave their colonies such names as New Spain and New Granada, thus affirming their desire to reproduce Spanish civilization in the New World. Map 3.1 illustrates the colonial divisions. The colonies were treated as the personal possessions of the Spanish monarchs who created structures for government, the church, and the economy that essentially transplanted their European institutions into the Western Hemisphere. Hence, social classes and cultural
Map 3.1 Eighteenth-Century Colonial Latin America
values, particularly Latin American ones, emerged gradually—often with unexpected consequences.

Spain was able to duplicate its institutions and culture fairly closely in areas with scant numbers of native peoples such as along the Río de la Plata, as well as in areas where the indigenous population rapidly disappeared such as in the islands of the Caribbean. Spanish became the sole language and Hispanic practices rapidly took root. However, in areas of dense native populations, particularly central Mexico and the Peruvian highlands, the process of transmitting Hispanic structures and customs took much longer and was seldom ever completed. Where native peoples survived the ravages of war, diseases, and exploitation, they aptly selected those Spanish objects or traits most suitable for their daily lives. Native peoples quickly adopted practical materials like iron, the wheel, and wool clothing as well as the corresponding nomenclature. They came to accept selected Spanish items, customs, and terminology as integral parts of their timeless traditions. And they readily accepted some new foods (particularly, chicken, eggs, and sugar), but steadfastly refused to accept the wheat that the Spaniards so insistently imposed on them.

The Spanish encomienda succeeded only because the authorities based it on existing pre-Hispanic structures. Outwardly converted to Roman Catholicism, the native peoples preserved many of their spiritist beliefs within the new Christian rituals. In spite of repeated orders to use only the Spanish language in official documents, not until the 1770s did the native peoples of Mexico finally adopt the language of the conquerors for paperwork. As native rebellions became infrequent after the sixteenth century, the Spanish crown no longer saw the native peoples as a threat to Spanish rule and tolerated their failure to adopt all the new customs and official practices. As a result, indigenous populations of Mexico and Peru found themselves with a significant degree of control over precisely how they would coalesce with the Spanish world.

The Spanish government tried to prevent the rise of any group or rival institution that might challenge royal authority. This absolutist monarchy relentlessly sought to enforce its monopoly over political power in the newly conquered territories. The first urgent task of the royal government was to remove from power those men who had carried out the conquest of the New World under the sweeping authorizations that the crown itself had granted. Asserting royal power in the Caribbean and marginal areas like Panama proved easier than on the mainland where the conquerors were well entrenched. The opposition became so violent that in Peru the Pizarro family led an insurrection against Spain. The crown’s obsession with absolute power triumphed in both Peru and Mexico largely because the government did not revoke the economic privileges of the original conquerors.

Throughout the colonial period, the Spanish government remained extremely reluctant to share any political power with the wealthy upper class. An unwieldy separation arose between political power and economic wealth, making
colonial government ineffective and cumbersome at best as government officials—who were generally short of funds—tried to impose official policies on the wealthy upper classes. This pattern of conflict between economic and political power has continued to plague Latin American countries in the modern era. Spain left Spanish America a legacy—not of open government and consensus building, but of secrecy and absolutism.

The highest-ranking colonial official was the Spanish viceroy appointed by the crown, who, because of the slowness of communications with Spain, enjoyed powers almost comparable to those of the king. The viceroy in Mexico City had jurisdiction over North America, and the viceroy in Lima had jurisdiction over South America. The distances were too vast for the viceroys, so in the sixteenth century, Spain appointed captains general to rule over strategic regions such as Santiago, Caracas, and Havana. The captains general, who were also peninsulares (Spaniards) appointed by the crown, were soldiers whose military practices necessarily reinforced the authoritarian nature of colonial institutions. The decline of Peru and the increase in foreign threats convinced Spain of the need to create two new viceroys in the eighteenth century, one for Buenos Aires and another for Bogotá.

The colonial government was subject to much abuse and corruption. Moreover, peninsulares looked down on criollos (creoles; Europeans born in the Americas). Special privileges, called fueros, were granted to peninsulares, clergy, the military, and government officials. Although abolished in Spain in 1820, fueros were continued in Latin America even beyond independence. Membership in the cabildo (town council) usually remained the only form of political participation available to upper-class criollos. In addition, the centralizing tendencies of the eighteenth century came to reduce the modest authority of the municipal bodies and aroused criollo resentment.

The viceroys and captains general formed the executive branch of government, yet they also possessed sweeping legislative and judicial powers. The highest courts in Spanish America were the audiencias, whose number fluctuated around eight and whose oidores (judges) were peninsulares appointed by the crown. In effect, the audiencia formed the main council of the viceroy or captain general while functioning as the highest court of appeals in Spanish America (appeals later could be taken to Spain). Although most legislation came directly from the king’s councils in Spain, the audiencia issued local laws and decrees. The principles of Roman law used in the audiencia simplified the application of laws at the personal level. Roman law, however, became one more vehicle through which to reinforce absolutism and impose authoritarian principles.

One of the most problematic legacies of the colonial period was the confusion among the three branches of government. The same officials, whether viceroys or judges, often performed legislative, executive, and judicial functions. By the twentieth century, Latin America was able to define the authority
of the executive branch and, to a lesser degree, that of the judiciary. The failure to develop viable, independent legislatures, however, has often undermined attempts to practice democracy and has reinforced tendencies toward authoritarianism. The ongoing political implications of this colonial legacy are discussed in greater detail by Thomas J. D'Agostino in Chapter 4.

In pursuit of a policy of divide and rule, Spain created overlapping territorial jurisdictions for viceroys, captains general, and *audiencias* and also for the parallel structure of the Catholic Church. Spain successfully prevented any high royal or church official in the New World from ever challenging the authority of the crown, but it did so at the cost of increased inefficiency. The officials were more concerned with defending their power or spying on each other than with conducting government business. After independence, the vague lines separating the colonial jurisdictions led to conflicting territorial claims and border wars. Such conflicts have continued through the years, including a longstanding border dispute between Ecuador and Peru that was not peacefully settled until 1999. Tensions between Venezuela and Colombia persist, occasionally flaring up for political reasons, as evidenced in July 2010 when Colombian president Alvaro Uribe accused Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez of providing refuge to members of opposition groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Venezuela and Guyana continue to argue over the Essequibo region, a dispute that dates back to the late nineteenth century.

Spain justified its extraordinary authority over the Catholic Church on the grounds that civil and ecclesiastical officials had to function as one to carry out the vast undertaking of the military and spiritual conquest of the New World. The Catholic Church could do nothing without the approval of the crown, and the authority extended to matters of religious belief or dogma. Whatever doctrine the Pope proclaimed in Rome was valid for the New World only if the Spanish crown approved. But even after almost all of Latin America had been converted to Roman Catholicism, the government continued to preserve its authority over the church for the more blatantly political reason of allowing no rival power base to emerge. In Chapter 12, Hannah Stewart-Gambino shows how this affected the ongoing role of the church in Latin America.

Initially, the task of converting the large native populations to Catholicism was carried out with missionary zeal. The priests learned the native languages and established missions in remote areas. The idealism of the first generations of missionaries gradually waned, however. And in any case by the 1560s, few native peoples remained to be converted. Unable to enter local politics, the clergy devoted itself to the profitable management of wealth.

The Catholic Church soon owned the largest percentage of the land in Latin America and received a vast income from the properties. The money reserves accumulated, and the church’s institutions became the financial lenders of the colonial period (banks did not appear until the mid-nineteenth century).
Land was the almost universal collateral, so the failure to repay loans meant
the church added foreclosed property to its already enormous holdings.

The spiritual decay of the clergy caused the Spanish government, in part
out of religious conviction but also to avoid any questioning of its authority,
to attempt to revitalize the Catholic Church. Supported by the Spanish go-

government, the Jesuits (members of the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus) entered
Latin America in 1572. Although the Jesuits encouraged scholarship and inde-
pendent thinking in their schools, the Inquisition (a special Spanish law court
designed to identify heretics and “allow” them to repent or be put to death—
at times by torture) severely limited intellectual activities. The Inquisition
began its Latin American operations in 1569 in Lima and Mexico City and

gradually opened branches in other major cities. Although staffed by clergy,
the Inquisition was a governmental body that made its most valuable contribu-
tion by detecting and punishing sexual crimes by priests and other religious
personnel.

This moralizing effect on the clergy, however, came at the high price of
an unending series of witch hunts against ordinary people. The inquisitors ear-
ginely searched for any signs among the local population of unusual behavior
that could fall under the broad definition of heresy or “crimes against the
faith.” The favorite investigative techniques of the Inquisition were anon-
mous accusations and torture, and its jail cells were filled with supposed crimi-

als. Although the Inquisition executed fewer than 200 men and women, its
most ruinous effect was to stifle free inquiry in the New World. Because all
native peoples were considered minors and not fully responsible for their ac-
tions, they were, in principle, exempt from the Inquisition’s jurisdiction. How-
ever, in Mexico, some unlucky native peoples occasionally fell victim to it.
The environment of fear made dissent dangerous, and the Inquisition rein-
forced the tendency toward absolutism. Spain accepted the Inquisition be-
cause, as an institution independent of the bishops and viceroys, it provided
one more check on the government and the church in the New World. It could
be argued that the Inquisition was the forerunner of the infamous secret police
and intelligence services that emerged in Latin America in the early twentieth
century.

Throughout colonial Latin America, both the Catholic Church and the
Spanish government constructed extensive institutional structures that were
supported by the material resources of the New World. The Spanish crown not
only had expected the new institutions to be self-supporting but, from the start,
had also demanded a major share of the wealth coming out of the New World.
To extract the largest amount of wealth from the New World in the easiest way
possible, the Spaniards established a colonial economy whose two foundations
were the exploitation of local labor and the mining of precious metals—activi-
ties that often occurred simultaneously. In Chapter 6, Scott G. McKinney an-
alyzes the negative impact of the colonial economy on future Latin American
development.

Throughout the colonial period, gold and silver exports paid for imports
from Europe and brought additional wealth to Spain. The apparently endless
waves of precious metals leaving Latin America created the image of a rich
paradise. Consequently, England, France, and Holland sent trading expeditions
to the Caribbean from the 1530s until the 1620s. Gradually, a pattern of trade
and smuggling with Europeans became an accepted practice for the Spanish
American population, which sought to avoid high Spanish taxes on imported
merchandise.

The decline of the Spanish Empire in the seventeenth century gave Euro-
peans the opportunity to establish bases in many of the deserted islands of the
Spanish Caribbean, starting with the British island of Barbados in 1627 and
the Dutch island of Curaçao in 1634. Seduced by tales of great wealth and
aware of Spanish weakness, a British force tried to capture the entire West In-
dies, only to meet with dismal failure in its attack on Santo Domingo. This
same expedition did capture Jamaica from Spain in 1655, and this island be-
came the staging base for subsequent British penetration into Spanish Amer-
ica. France also began to occupy islands in the West Indies and by 1665 had
gained control of the western part of Santo Domingo, which is now Haiti.

The islands occupied by the Dutch, French, and British served as excel-
ent ports for an extensive smuggling trade with Spanish America but, by the
second half of the seventeenth century, the non-Spanish Caribbean had turned
to plantation agriculture as the main source of its wealth. Examination of par-
allel events in Portuguese Brazil illuminates how the plantation system spread
to the Caribbean.
Conclusion

The early-nineteenth-century independence of Spain's and Portugal's vast colonial territories carries great historical significance in the emergence and subsequent evolution of Latin American countries. Three centuries of dominance were followed by the elimination of two great colonial empires from the Western Hemisphere.

Although the peninsulares lost power to the criollos, independence did not result in democratic government. Native peoples, persons of African descent, and mestizos did not benefit; the successful slave revolt in Haiti and the native rebellion led by Hidalgo were exceptions. Liberation allowed for expanded US, British, and French trade and investment. Hence, the newly developing Latin American economies came increasingly under the control of foreign investors. Caudillismo (rule by military dictatorship), civil war, anarchy, and foreign intervention in the lengthy period immediately following independence and subsequent government instability reveal the perseverance of the strong colonial impact as well as modern Latin America's difficulty in developing alternative stabilizing systems.

Conquest allowed European institutions to be transplanted in the distant territories of the New World. As in most experiments in colonial governance, political, economic, and social systems were modified by indigenous cultures, thereby producing innovative patterns. In the case of the Americas, Eurocentric societies were influenced by indigenous and African traditions. Conditioned by both integrative and disintegrative forces, the resulting fusion became known as Latin America.

The absolutist and centralized political tradition Spain transferred to Latin America continues to be manifested, even during a period of supposed democratization, in a strong tendency toward authoritarianism. This tendency had been bolstered by moral and theoretical foundations provided through the church as an instrument of the state. The power of the church and the importance of land ownership continued after independence. In effect, the separation from Spain and Portugal, far from initiating a liberal social revolution, left intact the transplanted conservative triumvirate of power: the church, the military, and the criollo oligarchy.

Attempts to hold on to privilege and the status quo, however, produced great political instability in the absence of a unifying central authority, such as that previously provided by the crown. Rival caudillos and elite factions entered into open conflict. The institutions transferred through conquest and colonialism persevered, but were highly problematic in light of changes set into motion the new political, social, and economic imperatives of independence. In Chapter 4, Thomas J. D'Agostino discusses the ongoing effects on pot-ties of this historical background. In this context, it is important to remember the profound impact of the conquest and colonization periods in the evolution of contemporary Latin America.
Bibliography


