

The Historical Demography of Colonial Central America

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ABSTRACT

Literature available in English and in Spanish, much of it published over the past ten years, is reviewed in an attempt to delineate key features of Central American demography from European penetration in the early sixteenth century to Independence from Spain in 1821. Themes and issues of focus include native population size at Spanish contact; post-conquest native population decline; the arrival of Spaniards and Africans resulting in the emergence of a *casta*, or mixed population; and population composition on the eve of Independence. Based on recent research, a native population estimated to number 5.1 million at Spanish contact is depicted as having plummeted considerably in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the late eighteenth century, natives and newcomers together numbered approximately one million. Contrasts are noted in the demographic experience of the north and west (Chiapas, Guatemala, El Salvador) and the south and east (Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras). Processes dating to the colonial past are responsible for population patterns clearly visible today.

Spaniards first explored the shores of Central America in 1502, members of the fourth voyage commanded by Christopher Columbus. They sailed the short distance to the mainland that lay south of the Bay Islands, continued eastward along the Atlantic coast of Honduras, then south along the littoral of what is today Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Morison 1949, 598; Davidson 1990). How many people then inhabited the isthmus only a few scholars have attempted to estimate. So little is known about this early contact period. Conquest followed some years later, in thrusts south from Mexico and north from Panama. Penetration from Mexico was likely preceded by a terrible outbreak of sickness in the early 1520s, a harbinger of even more disruptive times to come (MacLeod 1973, 38-39; Lovell 1992). Before the onslaught of disease and conquest, however, Spanish slaving raids carried off native dwellers on the Bay Islands and possibly from settlements along the mainland of the Bay of Honduras. People from these parts were taken captive in order to meet labor demands on the Antilles, especially Cuba, where indigenous inhabitants were already fast disappearing (Sauer 1966; MacLeod 1973, 38). In effect, then, the first sad chapter in Central American population history began over a decade before Spaniards established a permanent presence. Our essay examines key features in the peopling, and de-peopling, of the jurisdiction known in colonial times as the Audiencia de Guatemala, a far-flung region stretching, in terms of present-day geography, from the Mexican state of Chiapas in the north to the border between Costa Rica and Panama in the south. We review, in turn, native population size at Spanish contact; post-conquest native population decline; the arrival of Spaniards and Africans resulting in the emergence of a *casta*, or mixed population; and the ethnic characteristics of population make-up on the eve of Independence.

NATIVE POPULATION SIZE AT SPANISH CONTACT

Scholars from several disciplines have made informed estimates of contact-period population for all modern jurisdictions of Central America. Geographers, more so than anthropologists and historians, have been disposed to viewing aboriginal America as a New World that was more thickly than thinly peopled, a perspective that may be traced back to the influential thinking of Carl Sauer (1935) and, before him, to Karl Sapper (1924). William Denevan (1976) undertook a geographical synthesis that saw him estimate the contact population of Central America (including Panama) to be 5,650,000, roughly ten percent of his hemispheric figure of 57,300,000. Denevan's [end p. 127] reckoning falls squarely within the Sapper (1924) figure of five

to six million people at contact, estimates that are more presciently borne out by detailed regional studies conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s than are other isthmus-wide calculations shown in Table 1. Until further evidence is presented that might disprove them, the estimates by Sapper and Denevan may be considered the most plausible at hand, at least for Central America.

Table 1: Range of Estimates for the Native Population of Central America at Spanish Contact

Country or Region	Higher Estimates	Lower Estimates
Central America	10.8 to 13.5 million (Dobyns 1966) 5 to 6 million (Sapper 1924) 5,650,000 (Denevan 1976)	2,250,000 (Sherman 1979) 800,000 (Rosenblat 1954) 736,000 ¹ (Steward 1949)
Chiapas	275,000 (Gerhard 1979) 200,000 (Wasserstrom 1983)	
Soconusco	90,000 (Gasco 1987) 80,000 (Gerhard 1979)	67,500 (Gasco 1987)
Guatemala	2,000,000 (Denevan 1976) 2,000,000 ³ (Lovell, Lutz and Swezey 1984)	315,000 ² (Zamora 1983) 300,000 (Solano 1974)
El Salvador	700-800,000 (Fowler 1988) 500,000 (Daugherty 1969)	116-130,000 (Barón Castro 1942)
Honduras	1,200,000 (Johannessen 1963) 800,000 (Newson 1986) 750,000 ⁵ (Denevan 1976)	100,000 ⁴ (Kroeber 1939)
Nicaragua	1,000,000 (Radell 1976) 1,000,000 (Denevan 1976) 800,000 (Newson 1987)	100,000 ⁶ (Kroeber 1939)
Costa Rica	400,000 (Denevan 1976)	119,499 (Steward 1949)

¹ This estimate does not include Guatemala but does include Panama, as do all other estimates for Central America as a whole.

² This estimate is for western Guatemala only, specifically the colonial jurisdiction known as the *Alcaldía Mayor de Zapotitlán y Suchitepéquez*.

³ This estimate is for southern Guatemala only, spatially defined as the area of the present-day republic without the department of El Petén.

⁴ This estimate also includes Nicaragua.

⁵ This estimate also includes Belize.

⁶ This estimate also includes Honduras.

We would be remiss, however, not to point out that this is an issue that will always arouse debate. Those who champion one particular figure, and thus a certain view of what happened in history, have their detractors, even among geographers. Felix Webster McBryde (1947, 10), for instance, dismissed Sapper's reckoning in favor of that of the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1939), whose contact estimate of 3,300,000 for Mexico as well as Central America McBryde considered "more moderate and carefully thought-out." He alludes also to the "temporary impact" of disruptions wrought by the Spanish conquest. Just as the recent literature referred to in Table 1 stands in contrast to McBryde's assessment of contact numbers, so would other work (Carmack 1988; Lovell 1988) challenge his mindset regarding the longevity and impact of conquest.

In order for us to compare Denevan's isthmus-wide estimate with regional population calculations, we must subtract some territorial jurisdictions and add others to conform to what were the boundaries of the

Audiencia de Guatemala. When we subtract Denevan's estimate of one million for Panama (part of the Audiencia of New Granada, not the Audiencia of Guatemala) from his isthmian total, the figure for Spanish Central America becomes 4,650,000. To this figure we must add all population totals for Chiapas and Soconusco, Mexican jurisdictions since the early nineteenth century but integral parts of the Audiencia de Guatemala for the three colonial centuries. Denevan calculated a contact population for these two regions of 800,000, which, added to the sub-total of 4,650,000, provides an *audiencia* estimate of 5,450,000.

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Denevan's reckoning stands up remarkably well when set against the more recent regional totals listed in Table 1. For our part, if we accept the figure 275,000 put forward by Peter Gerhard (1979) for Chiapas; add to this a mid-range figure of 80,000 from the work of Janine Gasco (1987) on Soconusco; stick with our own estimate of two million for Guatemala (Lovell, Lutz and Swezey 1984); opt for an average estimate of 750,000 from the research of William Fowler (1988) on El Salvador; include 800,000 each for Honduras and Nicaragua to reflect the sound contribution made by Linda Newson (1986; 1987); accept Denevan's 400,000 figure for Costa Rica, then we emerge with an *audiencia* total of 5,105,000. This estimate is slightly less than the one made by Denevan, but still within the range put forward by Sapper.

POST-CONQUEST NATIVE POPULATION DYNAMICS

The above estimates, those advocated by Sapper, Denevan and ourselves among them, would be of little meaning if we did not know something about the tragic, enduring repercussions that the Spanish conquest unleashed on native Central American populations. We may discern, admittedly from scattered and incomplete data, some awareness of the fate of indigenous peoples throughout the isthmus, a colonial experience that varied markedly from region to region, if not from place to place within a region. Generalization, therefore, is a risky business, but we volunteer the following with a certain degree of confidence.

In Spanish Central America, conquest proceeded most briskly in highland areas and along the Pacific littoral, where existing populations were predominantly more developed and advanced, affiliated with the great cultural traditions of Mesoamerica (Sanders and Price 1968). Conversely, conquest was protracted in lowland areas and Atlantic watershed zones, where people lived less sedentary, less elaborate lives influenced more by South American than Mesoamerican ways. Possibilities for Indian survival were usually greater in the former than in the later domain, dependent on key variables that relate to culture and environment, the nature of Spanish exploitation, and the passage of Old World disease. Newson (1986, 336) puts it succinctly thus: "Indian survival was favored in more complex and productive societies and where few resources existed to attract conquistadors and colonists; in less well-developed societies and where there were abundant natural resources, Indian survival was more problematic." The correlation does not hold for all peoples, at all times during the entire colonial encounter, but is indeed a useful one to make.

Native populations declined drastically in size in the century and a half following conquest, dropping between eighty and ninety percent in many parts, disappearing altogether in others. In Table 2 we have pulled together available population data on jurisdictions falling within the boundaries of the Audiencia de Guatemala, data pertaining to all three centuries of Spanish rule. Again, no universal pattern is evident. However, we observe that, by and large, native peoples were able to recover from the demographic shock of conquest in the north and west, most notably in Chiapas, highland Guatemala, and (to a lesser extent) El Salvador. On the other hand, retarded recovery or continued decline, due in part to the greater influence of miscegenation, characterizes what took place in the south and east, most notably in western Nicaragua, west-central Honduras and throughout Costa Rica. Population nadirs are also indicated, tentatively and variously: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in the second half of the seventeenth century; Honduras, Costa Rica,

and Chiapas in the course of the long eighteenth. At the time of Spanish contact, 3.1 million natives (61 percent of the Central American whole) inhabited the north and west; two million (39 percent of the isthmian total) lived in the south and east. On the eve of Independence, three centuries later, an estimated 431,000 Indians (74.3 percent of total native numbers) occupied the north and west while only about 149,000 (the remaining 25.7 percent) populated the south and east. Indians then alive in Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador represented only about fourteen percent of the estimated contact population. Those who survived in Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica constituted less than eight percent of contact-period numbers. Were we to ignore coastal or lowland areas in the north and west as we make this comparison, then the percentage of natives who survived in highland parts of this region, especially in Guatemala, would be far greater than anywhere else in the isthmus. Unfortunately, the data upon which such a calculation might be based is not readily available, though Solorzano (1985) provides us with some rudimentary insights.

Gaps in our knowledge abound. Two subjects, however, which have received more attention than others are: 1) the Nicaraguan slave trade; and 2) regional studies of depopulation in Guatemala. Table 3 shows the range of estimates made by four different scholars of the impact that traffic in slaves had on native population decline in Nicaragua during the early sixteenth century. Radell (1976) summarizes ideas first expounded in his doctoral **[end p. 129]**

dissertation (1969) to argue that between 1527 and 1548 some 450,000 to 500,000 Indians were shipped from Nicaragua to Panama and Peru. Over the same period of time, Radell maintains that between 400,000 and 600,000 Indians died as a result of warfare and disease or fled beyond Spanish control to areas where they could not be exploited. Radell's estimate of the numbers involved in the slave trade coincides with the upper of the two figures (200,000 to 500,000) advanced by Newson, but stands in marked contrast to the figure of 50,000 put forward by Sherman (1979). MacLeod (1973) champions a figure that coincides with the lower end of Newson's range, a figure he considers conservative. Newson (1987, 123-124) is guarded but speculative, suggesting that "the general impression is that the Indian slave trade and disease were of equal importance, perhaps accounting for one-third each of the total decline. The remaining one-third can be attributed to the ill-treatment and overwork of the Indians and to the disruption of Indians communities brought about by Spanish conquest and colonization." Knowing how much loss to attribute to which particular factor, or combination of factors, is by no means simple, but Newson's proposition again strikes us as a reasonable one to make.

Statistics that relate to the issue of native depopulation in Guatemala are shown in Table 4 and Table 5^(*). Of the five sets of figures laid out in Table 4, those suggested by Denevan and ourselves pertain to all or a sizeable part of the present-day republic of Guatemala. Sanders and Murdy (1982) cover only highland Guatemala, while Zamora (1983) deals only with western Guatemala. Solano (1974) never delineates his spatial focus very clearly, but his work incorporates large areas of the country. Differences in territorial extent must therefore be kept in mind when comparisons are being made.

We query Solano's figures on grounds of accuracy and completeness. His contact estimate seems unreasonably low. While his figures indicate drastic decline between 1525 and 1550, the ongoing if slowed-down depopulation observed by other scholars stops, in Solano's data, after 1575. For the last quarter of the century, he indicates a surprising and difficult-to-corroborate population increase. Zamora, by contrast, shows not only precipitous early collapse but continued shrinking of population throughout the sixteenth century. His contact estimate on first inspection appears to support that of Solano. When we take into account, however, the spatial basis of his calculations, he more closely coincides with Sanders and Murdy and in fact is not far removed from Denevan or ourselves.

If the indeterminate or variable scales of analysis confuse the issue in Table 4, less misleading is the regional picture that emerges in Table 5. Once again, gaps proliferate, but for the seven regions for which we show

two or more estimates between 1520 and 1575, certain comparative observations may be made. In crude, relative terms the Northwest appears to have suffered lower population losses than did the Verapaz, the Northeast, the Southwest, Totonicapán, and Atitlán. Depopulation seems most pronounced in the Northeast and in Atitlán, the former a lowland region, the second comprising lands along the southern shores of Lake Atitlán as well as large tracts of the Pacific piedmont lying at intermediate altitudes below the lake. The Atitlán region experienced the full force of Spanish military conquest and intense economic exploitation thereafter, including enslavement of local populations, the imposition of *encomienda* and *repartimiento* demands, and involvement in the boom days of *cacao* (Bergmann 1969). The remote Northeast, on the other hand, was spared almost all direct contact with the conquest regime, save for having to deal with the Cortés expedition that passed through the region *en route* to Honduras in the mid-1520s (Kramer 1990). Two more different physical regions, two more dissimilar colonial encounters are hard to imagine in the Guatemalan context, but early, accelerated decline was a fate shared by both.

How Indians fared in the Northwest may be related to the region's mountain isolation and paltry resource endowment holding the invaders somewhat at bay, but even here there were important exceptions that caution against any further generalization (Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz 1991). While problematical, the population mosaic that the regional studies of Table 5 collectively constitute represents the least hazardous way of deriving either an aggregate contact figure or some sense of what happened in what areas during what periods of time.

AFRICANS, SPANIARDS, AND CASTAS

>So far we have dealt with the emergence of a population divide between north and west and south and east in Central America in terms of the decline or disappearance of native inhabitants. Concurrent with changes in the size and distribution of Indian populations was the appearance on the scene of Africans, Spaniards, and strains of mixed bloods known as *castas*. If our knowledge of native demography following conquest is patchy, even more so is our understanding of non-Indian groups. We consider, first, the predicament of those who came against their will, African slaves; next, that of Spanish colonists; and third, that of their *casta* offspring.

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Table 2: Comparative Depopulation and Recovery of Central America's Native Peoples, 1511-1821

Date	Chiapas	Soconusco	Guatemala (excluding Petén)	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua (including Nicoya)	Costa Rica
1511	275,000 ¹	80,000 ¹ 90,000 ⁸					1492 - 400,000 ²
1519				700-800,000 ³			
1520			2,000,000 ⁴				
1524				400-500,000 ³	8,000 Total 600,000 W+C 200,000E ⁵	800,000 Total 600,000 Meso. zone 200,000 S.A. zone ⁶	
1550	125,100 ¹	7,000 ¹	427,850 ⁴		132,000 Total 32,000 W+C 100,000E ⁵		

1555				190,000 ⁶
1569				69,875 ⁷
1570	4,800 ⁸		70,000 ⁹	
1611	85,000 ¹	6,600 ¹		7,168 +540 "infidels" ⁷
1650	70,000 ¹	4,000 ¹	nadir?	
1675-1699		nadir?		61,106 Total ⁶ 22,263 Meso. zone 38,843 S.A. zone
1682				nadir 1,343 ⁷
1700	72,000 ¹	2,700 ¹ nadir		47,544 nadir
1750	65,000 ¹	4,650 ¹		
1778			146,700 ⁹	nadir?
1796			83,010 ¹⁰	
1797		5,470 ⁸		
1800	53,000 ¹ nadir	4,200 ¹		62,692 Total 32,635 W+C 30,057E
				83,059 Total ⁶ 32,246 Meso. zone 50,813 S.A. zone
				less than 1,000?
1806		5,447 ⁸		
1821	58,000 ¹	4,000 ¹	approx. 265,000	107,750 ¹⁰ 200,000 ⁹

Sources:

¹Gerhard, *Southeast Frontier*;

²Denevan, *Native Population*;

³Fowler, "La población nativa;"

⁴Lovell, Lutz, and Swezey, "The Indian Population of Southern Guatemala;"

⁵Newson, *Cost of Conquest*

⁶Newson, *Indian Survival*;

⁷Quirós, *La era de encomienda*;

⁸Gasco, *Cacao and Economic Integration*;

⁹Daughtery, *Man-Induced Ecologic Change*; ¹⁰Barón Castro, *La población de El Salvador*

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Table 3: Range of Estimates for the Nicaraguan Slave Trade, 1524-1549

Estimate	Source	Relative Nature of Estimate
50,000	Sherman (1979)	Low
200,000	MacLeod (1973)	Moderate
200,000-500,000	Newson (1987)	Moderate/High
450,000-500,000	Radell (1976)	High

Table 4: Native Depopulation in Sixteenth-Century Guatemala

Year	Denevan (1976)	Lovell, Lutz and Swezey (1984)	Sanders and Murdy (1982)	Zamora (1983)	Solano (1974)
ca. 1520	2,000,000	2,000,000	500-800,000	315,000	300,000
ca. 1550		427,850		121,000	157,000
ca. 1575				75,000	148,000
ca. 1600				64,000	195,000

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African Slaves

Population data exists for Indians because Spanish colonial law required that they paid a head tax or tribute either to privileged individuals (*encomenderos*) or to the Crown. Similarly, slave importers had to pay a head tax on each African slave officially brought in to the colonies. Slaves, however, were also smuggled illegally in order for those who lived from their traffic to avoid paying taxes. Some 21,000 official and contraband slaves are reckoned by Philip Curtin (1969, 47) to have entered Central America between the 1520s and the 1820s, an average of about seventy persons entering each year. This average figure, however, conceals as much as it reveals. Few slaves arrived, for example, during the economic depression that prevailed for much of the seventeenth century, meaning that slave imports were greatest during the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Except for small pockets in areas suitable for sugar cultivation and the production of other export crops, and in a handful of important urban centers, African slaves were a more apparent presence south and east than north and west. Over the centuries, with intensive miscegenation, this small Black population had a greater impact south and east than north and west, where Indians always remained a demographic force. One reason for the high intensity of miscegenation south and east was that two-thirds or more of imported slaves were male, a proportion that encouraged Black men to look among Indians and mixed-bloods for compatible mates or spouses (Lutz 1982).

Spaniards

Like African slaves, Spanish peninsular immigrants to Central America were also overwhelmingly male. Somewhat ironically, with the exception of such key individuals as Pedro de Alvarado (Recinos 1952), Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1970), and Alonso de Zorita (Vigil 1987), or the information contained in urban censuses carried out towards the end of the colonial period, the population history of Spanish settlers is less well-known than that of native inhabitants and African slaves. We have lists of the number of Spaniards resident in urban centers and throughout the *audiencia* district, especially for the first centuries of colonial rule (Lutz 1982, 313-16; Sherman 1979, 356-70). In round numbers, there were about two thousand Spanish *vecinos* or heads of household in the Audiencia de Guatemala around 1570 and over 2,800 by around 1620. While in the sixteenth century most of these people [end p. 132]

Table 5: Contact Estimates and Native Depopulation, by Region, for Guatemala, 1520-1575*

Region	1520	1525	1550	1575
Northwest ¹	260,000	150,000	73,000	47,000
Verapaz ²	208,000		52,000	
Northeast ³	17,500			524

Southwest ⁴	33,000		8,250	
Totonicapán ⁵	105,000	75,000		13,250
Center-South ⁶ (K'iche')	823,000			
Center-South ⁷ (Kaqchikel)	250,000			
East Central ⁸ (Poqomam)	58,000			14,500
East Central ⁹ (Chorti')	120,000			
Atitlán ¹⁰ (Tzutuñil)	72,000	48,000	5,600	5,300
Southeast ¹¹ (Pipil)	100,000			

*These estimates are taken or are derived from information contained in: ¹Lovell (1985, 145); ²MacLeod (1973, 93); ³Thompson (1970, 48-83); ⁴Feldman (1980, 21,26); ⁵Veblen (1977, 497); ⁶Carmack (1968, 77) and Veblen (1977, 497); ⁷AGI, AG 128 and Lutz (1982, 81-115); ⁸Miles (1957, 765-766); ⁹Thompson (1970, 48-83); ¹⁰Madigan (1976, 176-206) and Orellana (1984, 142); ¹¹Fowler (1989, 151)

maintained a house in a major urban settlement, fourteen or fifteen of which were charitably called cities in the 1570s, MacLeod (1973, 217-20) discerns an increasing pattern of Spanish emigration out into the farms and ranches of the countryside during the seventeenth-century depression.

As Spaniards relocated in rural areas often quite far removed from the urban institutions of Hispanic culture and the social pressures of neighbors and priests, the definition of who was a Spaniard became more relaxed. The "whitening" of Central America perhaps began with the extraordinary exploits of Gonzalo Guerrero in the early sixteenth century (Clendinnen 1987, 17-18) but more commonly involved the passage, in terms of phenotype and economic standing, of persons of mixed descent into the lower echelons of the Spanish group in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Lutz 1982; Gudmundson 1978, 1986). City Spaniards clustered in less than a handful of urban centers (Santiago de Guatemala, San Salvador, Cartago) located at more temperate altitudes. One hypothesis awaiting empirical verification is that peninsular Spaniards arrived in steady streams to settle in the [end p. 133] north and west, whereas White residents in the south and east were more typically creoles, frequently with some degree of mixed ancestry in their background.

Castas

The mixed group known as *castas* also appeared on the scene, in relative terms, more conspicuously south and east than north and west. Blind spots and racial prejudice, conscious or otherwise, have led generations of scholars to emphasize *mestizaje* as the mixing of Indians with Spaniards, overlooking the role that Africans or Mulattos played in the formation of Central American society (Pérez Brignoli 1988; Hall 1985; Lutz 1982). Since people of African descent were the most denigrated, because of the association between blackness and slavery, it is not surprising that many chose to hide or lie about such origins. Imbalance between male and female numbers, along with widespread intermarriage and informal union across increasingly more blurred ethnic boundaries, meant that it was possible for persons of African descent to blend with the offspring of Spaniards and Indians to form what came to be known as the *ladino* population. *Ladino*, a term current from

the late seventeenth century on, denoted persons of mixed descent from Chiapas to Costa Rica, the *capas medias* or middle sectors of Central American society, to use the designation of Severo Martínez Peláez (1971, 257-440).

POPULATION AND ETHNICITY OF THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

By the early nineteenth century, Indians, *Castas*, Spaniards, and Blacks constituted, in varying degree, the population of Spanish Central America. Out of a total population of approximately one million, 580,000 (58 percent) were considered Indian, 375,000 (37.5 percent) were considered *castas*, and 45,000 (4.5 percent) were considered Spaniards (Pinto Soria 1980). Persons of African or Afro-American descent by this date were not numerically significant enough to figure as a separate category, precisely because they had become part of the large *casta* or *ladino* population. This is not to say, however, that Blacks had disappeared from the Central American landscape. In 1804, for example, the governor of the Province of Honduras, one Ramon Anguiano, reported that out of a total population of 128,863, 4.3 percent were Black, 6.5 percent were White, 27.4 percent Indian and the overwhelming majority, 61.8 percent, *ladinos* (Joya 1990). This population breakdown for Honduras imparts nicely the sense of the *casta* presence to the east and south. Even in the province of San Salvador, a region of demographic transition in the scheme of our crude divide, *mulattos* and *mestizos* in 1807 constituted 53.5 percent, Indians 43.5 percent, and Spaniards 2.9 percent of the total population of 162,193. A breakdown of this province by *partido* or district (Table 6) reveals that San Salvador, situated to the west of San Vicente and San Miguel, had a higher percentage of Indians than any of the other three jurisdictions. Van Oss (1981) argues that there is a striking correlation between *casta* growth and indigo production, suggesting that San Salvador remained predominantly Indian because it was less affected by the impact of this key export crop and the resulting immigration of *castas* into areas where it could be grown.

Ethnic distribution by provinces is incomplete but data on the subject for urban centers from 1750 to 1800 is available. For the sake of comparison we have included data in Table 7 from two important Mexican cities as well from the major cities and towns throughout the Audiencia de Guatemala, with the exception of Honduras, for which data is lacking. Even taking into account looser definitions in the south and east as to whom the term Spaniard might actually refer, Table 7 shows that peninsular-Creole and Indian populations were generally larger in Mexican and Guatemalan cities and decreased or disappeared, in the case of Indians, in some centers altogether as one moves east and south. Jointly, Spaniards and Indians formed a majority in the two Mexican cities. This status changes even in the two Guatemalan cities of Quezaltenango and Santiago, but becomes even less significant in cities farther east and south. There only San José (Costa Rica) supported Spanish residents greater than twenty percent of its total population, while only Granada (Nicaragua) had an Indian population that same size.

CONCLUSION

Elsewhere, specifically in the context of colonial Guatemala, we have identified historical forces at work that led to the creation of a developed core and an underdeveloped periphery, each with distinctive social, economic, and demographic characteristics (Lutz and Lovell 1990). The division we make here between north and west and south and east embraces salient features of population history that are also rooted in the colonial experience. In Central America, past processes still influence present patterns.

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Table 6: Ethnic Composition Expressed in Percentage Terms for the Province of San Salvador (1807)

Partido	Spanish	Mulattoes & Mestizos	Indians	Total
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San Vicente	1.9	67.3	30.8	100.0
San Miguel	2.2	58.2	39.7	100.1
Santa Ana	8.9	61.6	29.6	100.0
San Salvador	2.0	42.0	55.9	99.9

Source: Van Oss (1981, 307).

Table 7: Population by Ethnic Group in Selected Mexican and Spanish Central American Cities, 1750-1800

City	Year	Spaniards (%)	Mestizos (%)	Mixed Castas (%)	Mulattoes (%)	Indians (%)	Unidentified (%)	TOTAL 100 %
Puebla	1791	18,369 ¹ (25.7)	13,358 (18.7)	12,670 (17.8) 28,958 (40.6)	2,930 (4.1)	24,039 (33.7)		71,366
Antequera	1792	6,955 ¹ (38.7)	3,316 ² (18.4)	5,830 (32.4)	2,514 (13.9)	5,018 (27.9)	205 (1.1)	18,008
Quezaltenango	1800	464 (4.2)		5,536 (50.3)		5,000 (45.5)		11,000
Santiago de Guatemala	1750s	6,500 (17)		25,000 (65.5)		6,700 (17.5)		38,200
San Salvador	1800	614 (5)		10,860 (90.1)		585 (4.9)		12,059
San Miguel	1800	239 (4.3)		5,300 (95.7)				5,539
San Vicente	1800	218 (5.3)		3,869 (94.7)				4,087
Sonsonate	1800	441 (12.9)		2,795 (81.7)		185 (5.4)		3,421
Granada	1800	863 (10.5)		5,675 (68.9)		1,695 (20.6)		8,233
León	1800	1,061 (14)		6,366 (84.1)		144 (1.9)		7,571
Cartago	1800	632 (7.6)		7,705 (92.4)				8,337
San José	1800	1,976 (23.7)		6,350 (76.3)				8,326

Sources: Chance (1978, 156); Lutz (1982, 11); Thomson (1989, 62-63); Van Oss (1985, 43)

[end p. 135]

Our survey indicates that what we understand of colonial demography relates mostly to native population size at contact and Indian demise in the centuries following conquest. The study of Spanish and Creole elites, to say nothing of Blacks and *castas*, has hardly begun. Temporally, the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries have been somewhat investigated, the seventeenth century by contrast almost untitled. Geographically, literature on Guatemala and Costa Rica far surpasses, in quality and amount, that available for El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the customary qualifiers respectfully implied. Ethnic relations stand out, thematically, as a field sore in need of research, for the region bleeds still on account of unresolved colonial tendencies (Carmack 1988; MacLeod and Wasserstrom 1983). Such topics as natality, nuptiality, mortality, and migration, standard focuses of historical demographers who work on Europe and North America, have been excluded from our survey because of their fragmentary nature, few as they are.

We end by observing that, today, Central America's population of some twenty-seven million is about five times that of the number of people who inhabited the isthmus at the time of the Spanish conquest. Indians now number approximately what they did then, roughly five million. They populate Central America, however, in a far different spatial way than they did when Columbus explored five hundred years ago. Their

trace endures in the north and west. Their mark on the south and east, however, is all but obliterated by a *casta* presence that grows, in places, at an alarming rate.

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