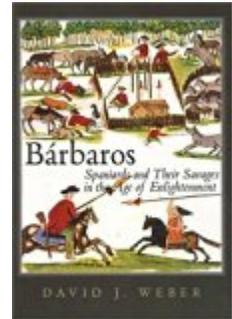


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Reviewed by Christopher Vecsey (Department of Philosophy and Religion, Colgate University)

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## The Indian Problem in Waning New Spain

From the fifteenth until the nineteenth century Spain controlled a huge swath of the Americas. At the periphery of this realm lived “unconquered Indians, or savages, as the Spanish called them—the most consistently vexing challenge Spain faced on the frontiers of America” (p. xiv). David J. Weber, an eminent scholar of Spanish American History at Southern Methodist University, has written a magisterial study of Spain’s relations with these Bárbaros, from 1759—when the Bourbon King Carlos III took the Spanish crown—to the early 1800s, when the Spanish colonies began to gain their independence. Built upon the archival research of generations of scholars, and documented meticulously regarding Spanish perspectives, Weber’s book is a masterful work by a master craftsman.

Despite (or because of) Spain’s deserved reputation for imperial violence, Spanish leaders by the late 1700s were aiming to reform their policies. Touched by Enlightenment notions of education and scientific method, they “hoped to bring about progress” among the Indians along their outskirts of empire (p. 2). Of course there were differences of opinion—should Indians be exploited or integrated—and inconsistency in policy application. Some Spanish representatives even denied a history of colonial cruelty, claiming instead a heritage of assimilation, inclusion, conversion, and intermarriage, rather than conquest. Nonetheless, the Bourbons sought to establish administrative structures to deal with unconquered Natives, who seemed equally ready for battle or

trade with Spain. For its part, Spain was prepared to accommodate and pacify Indians—though merchandise and missionaries—although war remained an option.

In order to create appropriate policies, the Spanish compiled observations of the independent Indian nations—from the Patagonians of southern Argentina and the Araucanians on the southern edge of Chile to the Tlingits and Nootkas of Alaska—who were perceived to be at the earliest stages of human development, close to a state of nature. These Indians served, thus as “specimens” (p. 31) of human origination and natural law, and as “symbols” (p. 31) of “idealized or demonized” (p. 46) otherness, to be used as contrasts for European mores and institutions.

In either case, “enlightened Spaniards argued that even the basest barbarians deserved humane treatment” (p. 47). However, the borderland indigenes were already at odds with Spanish authority, honing their military skills and organization against Spanish encroachments. None of these Indians—Comanches, Apaches, Pampas, etc.—developed states, and they could not defeat Spaniards in long-term warfare; however, they were formidable adversaries, difficult to defeat or rule. Having already gained Spanish goods, such as horses and firearms, and having already developed grudges against Spaniards for seizing Indians for servitude, the Bárbaros were easier to love in theory than in practice. What was Spain to do with these transformed Natives?

They could be missionized: converted by any and all means, placed under the control of clerics and soldiers, made spiritual, rational, and compliant servants of church and state. Then they could be granted secularized freedoms, apart from their tribal alliances, and pointed toward acculturation. This process had mixed results, including widespread death, cultural disintegration, and economic dysfunction among the converts and their offspring. Indians resisted, cooperated with, and adapted to the program of missions, and between church and state there were uneasy relations. By the nineteenth century it was clear that the mission goal of “creating men had proved to be a difficult and inexact science” (p. 137).

Perhaps war was a more effective means of pacifying Natives. At the least Indian captives might be uplifted by contact with civilized captors. In reality, however, organized violence rarely had the enemy’s welfare at heart. Conflict tended to “devastate Indian communities” (p. 145) and led Spaniards to “support or promote the complete annihilation of Indian groups” (p. 151). Spain’s offensive wars proved incapable of wiping out their frontier foes, especially when they were armed with ammunition supplied by other Europeans. Spanish troops were spread thin in the hinterlands, and even defensive forts protected only those Spaniards who lived directly around them. Instead, Spaniards in the borderlands lived in fear of Indian attacks, and for good reason.

What of trade? Native consumption of Spanish goods might bolster the colonial economy, and it could make unconquered Indians dependent upon Spaniards, through the development of needs (for products such as alcohol) and debts. In practice, Indians demanded gifts before entering trade relations. They “interpreted graciously given gifts as signs of good faith” (p. 192). For them, trade was a form of alliance, even a type of kinship. In short, “Spanish trade goods and gifts, then, became powerful lubricants for smoothing relationships, and in

some areas their use ushered in a period of relative peace that lasted until the wars of independence in the 1810s” (pp. 192-193).

Spain aimed for dominion over its borderlands, and in competition with other European powers it could not rely on papal edicts from the fifteenth century to secure its territories. Hence, Spain entered into treaties with the Bárbaros, regarding them either as independent nations or as vassals, in order to gain land titles. For their part, frontier Indians proved skilled at playing one European state off others and taking advantage of inconsistencies or Spanish policy in the interplay of ambiguous sovereignties.

One can gain the impression of impermeable boundaries between Spaniards and Indians; however, Weber devotes a chapter to “crossed borders” (p. 224) between the two realms, focusing on “cultural intermediaries” (p. 224) such as captives, traders, deserters, outcasts, sexual partners and their offspring, who became “detrified” (p. 240), “neither savage nor Spaniard” (p. 247), people of mixed ethnicity who became—over time—a “more robust ‘new species’” (p. 255) within New Spain.

When the national revolutions took place in the early nineteenth century, both insurgents and royalists sought to gain Indian support. In the creation of post-colonial societies, liberals and conservatives alike idealized and condemned Indians as symbols of their other selves. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Indians had become once again distant outsiders to national identity, although they were, theoretically, equals before the law. Indians were seen, once again, as “irredeemable” (p. 276), and national leaders “found it convenient to forget Spain’s successful eighteenth-century *détentes* with societies of independent Indians and looked instead to Spain’s sixteenth-century conquests as useful models” (pp. 276-277).

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