

## European Colonial Empires: Africa and the Americas

### Alexander Von Humboldt, German scientist and traveler, from his book, *Problems And Progress in Mexico*, c. 1800

Amongst the inhabitants of pure origin the whites would occupy the second place, considering them only in the relation of number. They are divided into whites born in Europe, and descendants of Europeans born in the Spanish colonies of America or in the Asiatic islands. The former bear the name of *Chapetones* or *Gachupines*, and the second that of *Criollos*. The natives of the Canary islands, who go under the general denomination of *Islenos* (islanders), and who are the *gerans* of the plantations, are considered as Europeans. The Spanish laws allow the same rights to all whites; but those who have the execution of the laws endeavour to destroy an equality which shocks the European pride. The government, suspicious of the Creoles, bestows the great places exclusively on the natives of Old Spain. For some years back they have disposed at Madrid even of the most trifling employments in the administration of the customs and the tobacco revenue. At an epoch when every thing tended to a uniform relaxation in the springs of the state, the system of venality made an alarming progress. For the most part it was by no means a suspicious and distrustful policy; it was pecuniary interest alone which bestowed all employments on Europeans. The result has been a jealous and perpetual hatred between the Chapetons and the Creoles. The most miserable European, without education, and without intellectual cultivation, thinks himself superior to the whites born in the new continent. He knows that, protected by his countrymen, and favored by chances common enough in a country where fortunes are as rapidly acquired as they are lost, he may one day reach places to which the access is almost interdicted to the natives, even to those of men distinguished for their talents, knowledge and moral qualities. The natives prefer the denomination of *Americans* to that of Creoles. Since the peace of Versailles, and, in particular, since the year 1789, we frequently hear proudly declared, "I am not a Spaniard, I am an American!" words which betray the workings of a long resentment. In the eye of law every white Creole is a Spaniard; but the abuse of the laws, the false measures of the colonial government, the example of the United States of America, and the influence of the opinions of the age, have relaxed the ties which formerly united more closely the Spanish Creoles to the European Spaniards.

### Questions

1. Give a general explanation of the social organization found in the Spanish colonial empire.
2. What are the resentments between the differing social ranks predicated on?
3. Why would the government be interested in promoting European-born Spaniards over American-born Spaniards?
4. What is the author referring to when he says "the example of the United States of America" had "relaxed the ties which formerly united more closely the Spanish Creoles to the European Spaniards?"
5. Consider the whole social situation in Spain's colonial empire. Why might Spanish officials be concerned about the possibility of revolt/revolution?

## Nicolás de Guevara, a Basque miner in Potosí writes to a merchant in Spain, 1595

You will consider it something new to see a letter of mine from such remote parts, but recognizing the kinship there is between us, I wanted to take advantage of your favor on this occasion. I had a sister in the town of Belorado, married to an honorable man there named Andrés Ruiz, and my uncle Licenciado Pedro de Guevara has written to me from Madrid [saying] that she died and left four children. To help bring them up, I thought I would send, through you, 350 gold pesos, to be delivered entire in Medina del Campo [a great trading center in Spain], the charges borne as appears in the authenticated bill of lading that accompanies this. A great friend of mine called Juan de Guesala is taking the money and will be very careful to deliver it when he arrives; he is going to live in Durango, Biscay [in northern Spain] where I was born and raised. I beg you, when you receive this, to send the accompanying letter to Andrés Ruiz, and tell him that when Juan de Guesala arrives they amount will be sent to him. Since that is a land of scarcity, they are doubtless in need.

Now that I am writing to you, it seems proper to give you an account of my life. I came to Peru the year of '81 and soon came up here to the imperial town of Potosí where I have lived the whole time, occupying myself in the business of extracting silver. I have many very good mining sites in the Rich Mountain [Cerro Rico], and a mill [ingenio] where I grind the ore. I also bought the office of municipal council secretary and notary public of this town, for 42,000 ducats in cash [the equivalent of 57,900 ounces of silver]; it is the most profitable office having to do with the papers that the king our lord offers in all his realms, and as to honor, it is the best thing here. I have or am gaining a great stock of ore to process, and if it yields well, without Lord's aid, I mean to go back to Spain within three years. When I arrive, I will come to pay you my respects.

### Questions

1. Where does Guevara's wealth come from? What has he recently purchased with his wealth?
2. Once Guevara had built his fortune, what does he plan to do?
3. Why might allowing individuals to purchase government offices cause problems?
4. Based on Guevara's long-term plans, what does it seem that Spain sees the Americas useful for?

**Leo Africanus, former Muslim jurist and diplomat to the Sultan of Morocco, captured by pirates and bought by Pope Leo, who convinced him to convert to Christianity, 1526 from his *History and Description of Africa* about his travels**

They [the peoples of Kanem-Bornu] have a most powerful prince. ... He has in readiness as many as three thousand horsemen and a huge number of foot soldiers; for all his subjects are so serviceable and obedient to him, that whenever he commands them, they will arm themselves and will follow him wherever he leads them. They pay him no tribute except tithes on their grain; neither does the king have any revenues to support his state except the spoils he gets from his enemies by frequent invasions and assaults. He is in a state of perpetual hostility with a certain people who live beyond the desert of Seu, who in times past marching with a huge army of footsoldiers over the said desert, devastated a great part of the Kingdom of Borno. Whereupon the king sent for the merchants of Barbary and ordered them to bring him a great store of horses: for in this country they exchange horses for slaves, and sometimes give fifteen or twenty slaves for a horse. And by this means there were a great many horses bought although the merchants were forced to stay for their slaves until the king returned home as a conqueror with a great number of captives, and satisfied his creditors for his horses. Frequently it happens that the merchants must stay three months before the king returned from the wars. ... Sometimes he does not bring home enough slaves to satisfy the merchants and sometimes they are forced to wait a whole year. ... And yet the king seems marvelously rich, because his spurs, bridles, platters, dishes, pots and other vessels are made of gold. The king is extremely covetous and would rather pay his debts in slaves rather than gold.

#### Questions

1. From what sources does the prince of Kanem-Bornu get his wealth from?
2. Based on the sources of revenue that the prince is making use of, why might the population be so "obedient to him?"
3. Who are buying slaves from the prince?
4. What do you think that leaders like the prince of Kanem-Bornu do to the overall stability of Africa?

**Hans Sloan, from his Voyage to the Islands, 1706 describing conditions on the island of Barbados, 1706 C.E.**

“The punishments for crimes of slaves are usually for rebellions [and include] burning them, by nailing them down on the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying the fire by degrees from the feet and hands, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant. For crimes of a lesser nature gelding (castration) or cropping off half of the foot with an axe are common. These punishments are suffered by them with great constancy. For running away they put iron rings of great weight on their ankles. For negligence they are usually whipped by the overseers with hard-wood switches, till they be all bloody. After they are whipped till they are raw, some put on their skins pepper and salt to make them [hurt]. These punishments are sometimes merited by the slaves, who are a very perverse generation of people, and though they appear harsh, yet are scarce equal to their crimes, and inferior to what punishments other European nations inflict on their slaves in the East Indies.”

Questions

1. What is the most common “crimes” that slaves commit that warrant punishment?
2. What types of punishments are meted out to slaves in the West Indies?
3. How does the author seem to feel about the punishments dealt out to slaves?
4. How does the type of punishment meted out to slaves in the West Indies compare to those meted out to slaves in the East Indies?

**Bartoleme de Las Casas, *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies.* (1542)**

The Indies were discovered in the year one thousand four hundred and ninety-two. In the following year a great many Spaniards went there with the intention of settling the land. Thus, forty-nine years have passed since the first settlers penetrated the land, the first so claimed being the large and most happy isle called Hispaniola, which is six hundred leagues in circumference. Around it in all directions are many other islands, some very big, others very small, and all of them were, as we saw with our own eyes, densely populated with native peoples called Indians. This large island was perhaps the most densely populated place in the world. There must be close to two hundred leagues of land on this island, and the seacoast has been explored for more than ten thousand leagues, and each day more of it is being explored. And all the land so far discovered is a beehive of people; it is as though God had crowded into these lands the great majority of mankind.

And of all the infinite universe of humanity, these people are the most guileless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity, the most obedient and faithful to their native masters and to the Spanish Christians whom they serve. They are by nature the most humble, patient, and peaceable, holding no grudges, free from embroilments, neither excitable nor quarrelsome. These people are the most devoid of rancors, hatreds, or desire for vengeance of any people in the world. And because they are so weak and complaisant, they are less able to endure heavy labor and soon die of no matter what malady. The sons of nobles among us, brought up in the enjoyments of life's refinements, are no more delicate than are these Indians, even those among them who are of the lowest rank of laborers. They are also poor people, for they not only possess little but have no desire to possess worldly goods. For this reason they are not arrogant, embittered, or greedy. Their repasts are such that the food of the holy fathers in the desert can scarcely be more parsimonious, scanty, and poor. As to their dress, they are generally naked, with only their pudenda covered somewhat. And when they cover their shoulders it is with a square cloth no more than two varas in size. They have no beds, but sleep on a kind of matting or else in a kind of suspended net called bamacas. They are very clean in their persons, with alert, intelligent minds, docile and open to doctrine, very apt to receive our holy Catholic faith, to be endowed with virtuous customs, and to behave in a godly fashion. And once they begin to hear the tidings of the Faith, they are so insistent on knowing more and on taking the sacraments of the Church and on observing the divine cult that, truly, the missionaries who are here need to be endowed by God with great patience in order to cope with such eagerness. Some of the secular Spaniards who have been here for many years say that the goodness of the Indians is undeniable and that if this gifted people could be brought to know the one true God they would be the most fortunate people in the world.

Yet into this sheepfold, into this land of meek outcasts there came some Spaniards who immediately behaved like ravaging wild beasts, wolves, tigers, or lions that had been starved for many days. And Spaniards have behaved in no other way during the past forty years, down to the present time, for they are still acting like ravaging beasts, killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before, and to such a degree that this Island of Hispaniola once so populous (having a population that I estimated to be more than three million), has now a population of barely two hundred persons.

Questions

1. What was the population density of the islands of the West Indies like prior to Spanish colonization?
2. How does de las Casas describe the character of the indigenous peoples of the Indies?
3. How do the people of the Indies seem to feel about acquiring wealth?
4. How do "some of the secular Spaniards" describe the Indian population?
5. How did the Spanish behave once they arrived amongst the Indians?
6. What happened to the population of Hispaniola after the arrival of the Spanish?

## Questions

1. Considering the documents as a whole, what does the Spanish government seem to regard its American colonies as being useful for?
2. How are the peoples of the Americas, Indians, Africans, and European-born, regarded by Europeans themselves?
3. Consider the princes of Africa and Europe in the documents presented: What does the wealth from the European colonial adventures in the Americas seem to be being used for?
4. Consider the social and political conditions of slaves in the Spanish Empire: Why might this population be angry with the government of the Spanish Empire?
5. Consider the social and political conditions of full-blooded Spaniards born in the Americas: Why might this population be angry with the government of the Spanish Empire?
6. Consider the social and political conditions of the peoples of Africa: Why might this population be angry with the intrusion of the Europeans into Africa?
7. Consider the social and political conditions of the peoples of Africa: Why might this population be angry with the deals made between their leaders and the Europeans?
8. Do you think that the grievances of the peoples of the Americas are legitimate? How so?