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Book Reviews

The Wages of Conquest: The Mexican Aristocracy in the Context of Western Aristocracies. By Hugo G. Nutini. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. xviii + 444 pp. Notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth.)

Hugo G. Nutini's eleven years of research have produced a long and dense book which traces the inception, development, and decline of the Mexican aristocracy. His study demonstrates that the Mexican aristocracy grows progressively smaller as a relative percentage of the population during the period between 1519 and 1990, representing 7 percent of the population in the sixteenth century, 2 percent of the population by independence, and only 0.3 percent by 1910. Numbers remained relatively stable from 1630, when about 1,000 families made up the creole aristocracy, to 1910, when the aristocracy included about 1,100 families. This group's history was not static, however, and membership varied. During the periods 1550-1630, 1730-1810, 1850-1900, and 1940-90, it was revitalized by new members who married into the class, supplanted old members who had fallen in status, or gained access through other changes in fortune. Thus, the Mexican aristocracy was both open and closed at different periods of time. Nutini discusses the causes of both individual and family downward and upward mobility and strategies adopted by the foremost families for guaranteeing continuity of the line.

Nutini's greatest contribution is his commitment to putting the Mexican story into a broader historical and geographic context. To this end, the author devotes about a third of the book to a summary of the development of aristocracy and nobility in Western civilization, beginning with the Greeks and Romans and touching on the Germanic monarchies in the Western Roman Empire (the Franks and Visigoths, and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes of Britain). Unsurprisingly, he finds the Mexican aristocracy to be a variant of the Spanish aristocracy. In providing the background, he also refines the historical definitions of the terms "estate" and "class," two concepts that are key to his analysis of the Mexican case.

This wider historical context is likewise useful background for understanding another contribution his analysis provides: the significance of an aristocracy's expressive mannerisms. His review of the rise of aristocracies in a broader Western context helps readers understand the importance of certain ideals and values shared by Mexican aristocrats, such as the urge to acquire vast estates and to maintain equestrian complexes. The group's preoccupation with titles and privileges, their insistence on antiquity of lineage and genealogy, and their ostentation and exaggerated refinement can be

understood as a means of maintaining exclusivity. Although membership is in constant flux, the ideology, etiquette, and fashion set by this upper strata of colonial society remain the ideal for those lower on the social scale. Ironically, the elite are themselves influenced by wider trends. In this regard, Nutini's comments regarding French influence during the nineteenth century are especially cogent.

Finally, this study of elites corrects stereotypes and contributes to theory. Nutini's work refines a few of David Brading's general assertions about the upper class (see especially pp. 269-71). He also reveals Vilfredo Pareto's analysis as having overstated the importance of renewal and elite circulation. In this respect, Nutini's study serves as a model for other Latin American scholars who too often employ a parochial and provincial approach and fail to contextualize the issue at hand and explore theoretical implications.

To this praise, however, one must add that Nutini's tome is not perfect. Occasionally one encounters factual errors, such as listing Cortés' birthplace as Cuba (p. 149). He also seems confused early in the book on the meaning of *encomienda*. At one point, he defines *encomienda* as "land in trust...which included a corresponding number of Indians" (p. 159). In three other places he confuses land and Indians and *encomienda* (pp. 146, 151, 173), but eventually corrects the concept (pp. 162 and 236). He also speaks of the "thorough conversion of the [native] people to Catholicism" (p. 144, emphasis mine), thus ignoring all the literature on religious syncretism and idolatry. Finally, he speaks of "professional soldiers" (p. 156) as conquistadors, ignoring James M. Lockhart's discussion of the "citizen soldiers" who accompanied Pizarro to Peru. In short, *The Wages of Conquest* would have benefitted from the author consulting, in addition to the many sources that support this study, a few more that would have allowed him to compare the Mexican case with others in Latin America.

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