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Latin-American Frontiers

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LATIN-AMERICAN FRONTIERS

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Spain and her little neighbour Portugal were the first European nations to establish frontiers of settlement in the Americas. The study of these frontiers is rich in parallels and contrasts for the student of the movement of colonization in the regions of North America—where French and English frontiers expanded to produce present-day Canada and the United States, with their characteristic institutions, sectional differences, and cultural complexes. While no Turner has as yet appeared to interpret the larger implications of the far-flung pioneer areas of European settlement in “Greater America,” contributions toward such an all-inclusive thesis can be made on the basis of the evidence now available. Professor Bolton has already made important contributions towards such a synthesis. The present paper is an attempt to present a general outline of the Hispanic advance into the continents, together with some general conclusions as to the nature and influence of the frontier on the evolution of societies to the south of us. The main stages are clear. Further detail will only serve to confirm or correct our reading of the record now in hand, as the archives continue to yield their contents to systematic and persistent search. The key to a better understanding in the Americas lies in this direction. If we can find the motivating forces and the historical influences which have shaped the present pattern of peoples and relations, and properly appreciate the common experience of the conquest of the wilderness, we shall, I believe, be in a better position to bridge the gaps of linguistic, geographical, cultural, and nationalistic variations, in that, despite rivalries and differences, we have a common heritage, namely, the great American adventure—the settlement of the New World.

Spain embarked on the conquest and settlement of new lands in the “Ocean-Sea” of the West with centuries of experience in the long reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula behind her effort. Her entry into America coincided with the capture of Granada in Spain and released the trained forces of that frontier to the tremendous task of American exploration and settlement. Expert officials, completely developed frontier institutions, military methods, and a whole policy and polity, developed in the Moslem wars, were ready when that frontier was projected overseas in the astounding conquest of the Indies. The first stages, under the direction of “the Admiral” and his successors in the Greater Antilles, were characterized by violence, and destruction. Nevertheless, tropical colonies were successfully established and the whole range of useful European plant and animal life was introduced. It was a self-critical age in Spain and the mistakes made were studied and remedies applied. African slaves had to be introduced to take the place of the vanishing native in the West Indies, so a great programme to conserve the native element was initiated, which bore fruit on the continental frontiers in a high percentage of Indian survival.

From these West Indian bases the Spaniards explored in every direction, and the realities of American geography caused the dream of a short route to India to fade as the opportunity at hand became apparent. The

existence of groups of sedentary Indians who had achieved superior cultural levels gave both direction and character to frontiers of Spain on the continents. The semi-civilized Nahuas of the central valley of Mexico, with clustering lesser cultures; the Mayans of Yucatán and Central America; the Chibchas of Upland Colombia; the Incas of Peru; and the Pueblo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico inevitably attracted the Spanish conquistadores toward their centres of culture and accumulated wealth. In a series of lightning strokes, aided by surprise and the tremendous superiority accorded by steel weapons and armour, horses, artillery, and the thundering harquebus, the intruders were amazingly successful. Relatively small numbers of Spaniards under audacious leaders moved swiftly inland from coastal bases, making adroit use of "fifth columns" of dissatisfied or rival Indian groups. It should be stressed that the Indians of America played an important role in their own conquest as allies of the invading Europeans. It was common procedure, after Cortés seized Montezuma in Mexico, to capture the head of the government and paralyse resistance at the centre. From these capitals the conquest spread out under lesser leaders throughout the surrounding areas. The Spaniards, once masters, superimposed their rule and institutions from the top on the existing native social, economic, and political structures which were, in the main, undisturbed save in the field of religion where the Cross, moving in side by side with the sword, helped in a vigorous substitution of Christianity for a multiplicity of older faiths. The church may be said to have exerted a restraining and moderating influence on the conquest. Due to its influence the Indian found a definite place in the new society; Indian slavery was prohibited; and the harsh personal service features of the *repartimiento* gave way to the *encomienda*, as a mere right to collect tribute, under close supervision aimed to obviate abuses. Nuclei of Spaniards as a ruling class were floated on the great mass of the Indian population, with definite *castes* gradually emerging in between the two, as racial intermixture produced the *mestizo*, *mulato*, the *Zambo*, and other lesser combinations of the racial strains. Spanish life in all its richness was transplanted to these regions from university, hospital, and printing press to pure food laws, sale taxes, and cart roads. Out beyond lay the wide borderlands of roving tribes and exposed frontiers. After the first great exploring rush through eighty degrees of American latitude, which revealed no further Indian societies comparable to Mexico and Peru, the Spanish advance in the Americas settled down to the slower pace of the natural movement of the cattle, mining, and missionary frontiers. This process in the late sixteenth, the seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries exhibits features of frontier movement into pioneer zones of relatively unoccupied lands which offer the best comparisons with our more familiar Anglo-American frontier.

This phase of the history of Latin-American frontiers saw great captains, *Adelantados*, like proprietary governors, assume the expense of conquest and settlement in return for special privileges. The occupation of northern Mexico (Nueva Vizcaya, Nuevo Leon, Nuevo México) offers especially good examples of this frontier device. The *rancho*, mission, *presidio*, and *pueblo* are characteristic institutions used on these frontiers. Mining towns (*reales de minas*) and mining rushes to areas of new strikes are frequent phenomena observed throughout. A high degree of govern-

ment direction, in an elaborately developed system of centralized administrative control, gives these frontiers a unity lacking in comparable English or French frontiers. Each new province is entered with government permission, all expeditions are licensed, and even missionaries only undertake the conversion of Indian groups with the permission of the Crown. Frontier towns (*pueblos*) are laid out in conformance with general law, and, rather difficult to credit, frontier military posts (*presidios*) are laid out and equipped in accordance with printed specifications. In the eighteenth century the government assumed the expense of founding and maintaining defensive frontiers like California and Texas. The work of the great religious orders, such as the Franciscan and Jesuit orders, cannot be over-emphasized in the frontier mission field. Brown robes and black robes not only converted and instructed the Indian but they also served as potent agents of frontier expansion and their influence on the social and economic life of the outpost areas is pre-eminent. In their schools and churches they extended the sway and influence of Spain and left behind them lasting monuments in the persistence of the way of life they taught. Men like Father Salvatierra in Lower California, Father Kino in Arizona, and Father Serra in Upper California, were more valuable to Spain than regiments of troops. The imprint of Spain is clearly visible today in the lands they conquered—while law, language, religion, folklore, customs, and the livestock, even to methods of handling them, reflect the potency of Spain's thrust in the American south-west over which other frontiers have swept and over which another flag floats today.

Portugal, farther removed from the Moorish reconquest than Spain, also entered her field of colonizing activity in Brazil over three decades after her rival had initiated the settlement of Española. Moreover, Portugal brought to bear on her problem the knowledge gained by prior occupation of the Atlantic Islands and the building of her great trade empire around Africa to the Far East. Portugal founded coastal colonies from the Amazon to Rio Grande do Sul under a system of proprietary grants with a gradual process of royalization creating a line of crown colonies under loose central control which can be compared to that in the English colonies. In Brazil, tropical colonies, producing sugar with slave labour, clung tenaciously to the coast, save in the south, where hardy Paulista pioneers, of mixed Portuguese and Indian blood, blazed trails into the vast interior of the continent. Only the belated discovery of gold and diamonds in the provinces of Minas Geraes and Diamantina led to any great movement of frontiers into the hinterland, in the eighteenth century, following the footsteps of Jesuit and slave-hunting predecessors. Official government explorers pushed far beyond the areas of settlement and the work of these brilliant flag-bearers—the *bandeirantes* won half a continent for little Portugal before the close of the colonial period.

The wars of independence in Latin America in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the separation of the colonies of Spain and Portugal from the mother countries with the exception of Cuba and Puerto Rico. About twenty million people were involved in the change and, while Brazil remained a unit, Spanish America split into the score of nations of today, along the lines of old administrative areas of colonial days. With this change the unity of the frontier ends and, while old movements continued along the frontiers of colonial days, the central

direction and regulation disappeared. National growth was substituted for imperial policy in the new nations. Disregarding the details, one notes, in the subsequent period, a remarkable advance in the former backward agricultural areas of the Spanish Empire now released from an excessive preoccupation with mineral production. Argentina with its broad *pampa*, Uruguay with its rolling plains, and Chile with its rich interior valley and northern nitrate beds forge ahead rapidly along the same road as the Anglo-American nations to the north. The same general factors are at work here. Foreign capital and foreign immigration have been determining factors. Invention and improvement of agricultural implements, the windmill, dry-farming methods, cheap fencing material, and above all, improvement in transportation facilities—roads and railroads making markets available—have permitted the conquest of the *pampa* and similar areas. New capital and the exploitation of hitherto unused resources such as oil, open wider horizons into the future. Already Latin America has passed the hundred million mark in population while Brazil, with a greater area than continental United States, bids fair to enter on a new and brilliant phase of its history as it poises on the edge of modern industrialization. Only the lack of coal and the dangers of external conquest, which now encompass all American nations, stand between them and realization. Great modern cities like Santiago, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and Mexico City testify to the material progress which has been made.

Despite this the frontiers still exist and wide stretches of unoccupied but remote arable land beckon the frontiersman. Indeed, it might be said that while improved transportation and increased numbers of people have accelerated the pace of land occupancy they have also complicated the picture. While the pioneer fringes are shrinking in Latin America as the area of free land grows less, excessive urbanization has produced a counter-movement away from the marginal areas of earlier settlement. In addition, the opening of new frontiers has drained population away from older areas in such fashion that, together with the attraction of the great cities, the curious phenomenon of "hollow frontiers" has been produced. This is especially noteworthy in Brazil where withdrawal from the marginal coffee lands to the more profitable regions of cotton growth has left deserted strips behind the new frontier. In the tropics, especially in and around the shores of the Caribbean, progress has been less spectacular and, in general, the areas of greatest colonial development are the relatively retarded regions of today. Oil and fruit, notably the banana, have provided recent frontiers of expansion in old and backward tropical nations.

When at some future date the historian, disregarding national boundaries and with the happy possession of the full documentation, is able to write the synthesis of the frontiers of European spread into the Americas, he will be able to trace the distribution of animals, of plants, of ideas, and techniques, in addition to the advance of mere humans, free from narrowly national considerations and unworried by the roll call of old wars and colonial and imperial rivalries. A summary statement of the four centuries and a half of Latin-American frontiers must necessarily be incomplete today—but certain conclusions about them are possible in the light of available information. These are, in brief, that, unlike the Anglo-American frontiers in certain aspects and like them in others:

(1) They were established, at the outset, by men already skilled in frontier methods.

(2) A series of vast settled areas of Indian political units were quickly overrun and strong imperial governments were set up which functioned effectively over the greater portion of the land within fifty years of the discovery.

(3) There were no sea to sea movements of definite frontier lines passing through a series of physiographic regions.

(4) Only in cases like the movement into the Argentine *pampa*, the interior of Brazil, or the northward thrust from Mexico were large areas of a thinly populated character encountered.

(5) The native populations were not pushed back or destroyed but were generally subdued and incorporated into the expanding colonial society.

(6) The Latin-American frontiers were subjected to a higher degree of governmental control and supervision than comparable Anglo-American frontiers. It was, after the first stages, a planned rather than a haphazard advance.

(7) Better records were kept and when they are made available we shall have a more complete story of these southern frontiers than we shall ever possess for our own.

(8) Frontier conditions in Latin America, as elsewhere, developed individualism, self-reliance, democracy, initiative, and a willingness to experiment despite closer controls.