



A Case for a History of Ordinary Lives

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Abstract: What is “normal” does not leave major traces. The historiography on colonial Andes is mostly based on trials and petitions, the most detailed sources that historians have to reconstruct the lives of indigenous people, since they include at least part of their voices. However, they show the perspective of native authorities, of exceptional people who wrote or initiated trials, or of people during special conjunctures, such as the rebellions. With this case, I propose sources that show the traces of the normal, especially the traces left in those places where native authorities were not important, where trials were just a few or limited to some specific events, or where the “moral economy” was not altered.

Keywords: Andes; seventeenth century; ordinary lives; indigenous peoples

How could a few hundred Spaniards oblige indigenous people of the Andes to work in their mines and haciendas? How could they force people to abandon their lands and work for the invaders? These were important questions for the Andean historiography, and they were also significant for my research. Indigenous people were the majority of the workforce in this huge mountain range in Latin America. They were also taxpayers, and since the beginning of colonial times, they learned to litigate and write petitions. Thus, there are many historical sources, although complicated to interpret because of their context of production. I am principally interested in the seventeenth century, a period of intense migration, reorganization of the colonial society, worsening of labor conditions and—sadly—fewer or less detailed documents than the previous and later centuries of Spanish domination. However, two wonderful sources are the inspiring “windows” through which I get a glimpse of ordinary lives.

During the first half of the year 1688, Gregorio de Robles, a peasant born in Toledo (Spain), went to Sevilla where he was recruited as a soldier by Captain Don Juan de Ayala, who was levying people to San Agustín in Florida. His journey lasted until 1703 and took him from the Appalachian Mountains in North America, to Caribbean islands, South American ports, and remote towns in the Andes, to the Strait of Magellan as well as to Cape Town in Africa, crossing the Spanish, Portuguese, French, British, and Dutch Empires (Gil Montero and Albiez-Wieck 2020). He traveled with priests, lived in the houses of wealthy Spaniards, engaged with French, English, and Dutch merchants and smugglers, black slaves as well as indigenous bonded laborers in silver mines. Although exceptional, his account is brief, with few details, and does not meet all our expectations.

A few years before his travel, the Peruvian Viceroy Melchor de Navarra y Rocafur, Duke of La Palata, organized a massive inspection in a territory that Robles passed through. In theory, the inspection concerned only indigenous people subjected to colonial obligations. La Palata wanted to understand why less and less forced laborers went to work in Potosí, the most important silver mine of Peru. The majority of the original documents from this inspection survived until today. It contains tens of thousands of brief life stories: it describes the clothes that some of the people used in order to change their ethnic classification and avoid their colonial obligations, disputes between indigenous laborers and their masters, migration trajectories, labor relations, relationships between people of mixed origins, and other facets of the daily grind. Both sources show parts of the life of

ordinary people—peasants, laborers, rural migrants—lives that are difficult to reconstruct, especially in a colonial context. I described Robles' account as somewhat disappointing because he did not elaborate on or discuss what he saw at length. Potosí, for example, where he stayed for a month, is described in one paragraph only. We know that he felt sorry for the laborers whose hands and feet were destroyed by the work, and that he visited the mines and the refineries. The report is brief, almost fearful, while describing the context. However, it allows us to understand how an ordinary Spaniard traveled and survived in the Americas at the end of the seventeenth century. The same occurred with the visitation: all those micro stories show how ordinary indigenous people traveled, worked, and lived.

What is considered “normal” does not leave major traces. The historiography on colonial Andes is mostly based on trials and petitions, the most detailed sources that historians have to reconstruct the lives of indigenous people, since they include at least part of their voices. However, they show the perspective of native authorities, of exceptional people who wrote or initiated trials, or of people during special conjunctures, such as the rebellions. I am looking for sources, instead, that allow the reconstruction of the majority during ordinary times, and not only from a macro perspective. I am looking for traces of the normal, especially the traces left in those places where native authorities were not important, where trials were just a few or limited to some specific events, or where the “moral economy” was not altered. I hope that those thousands of micro stories present in the inspection will make those traces visible.

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Reference

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