

The population of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean in the Second Millennium

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1. The Population between 1000 and 1500 A.D.

The number of people living in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean by the year 1000 is unknown. However, using archaeological and anthropological data we can locate the settled zones and draw a basic map of cultural areas (Map 1). The Mesoamerican region extended central Mexico to the north of the Central American isthmus and was, as we all know, a world of complex cultures: agriculture generated a large economic surplus, there were very important ceremonial and urban centers, and stratified societies had developed sophisticated political organizations. During the so-called “classic” period (300-900 AD) there were two major nuclei, Teotihuacan, in central Mexico and the Maya civilization in the interior of the Yucatan peninsula. After this “golden age”, followed a long cycle of decline. The urban and ceremonial centers were abandoned and invasions from the north (Toltecs and Chichimecs) arrived in several waves. New civilizations began to emerge. In central Mexico, Tula expanded during the 10th and 11th centuries and Tenochtitlan after 1325; in the Guatemalan highlands and the north of the Yucatan peninsula, new Maya kingdoms came to life. At the beginning of the 16th century, virtually the entire of the Mesoamerican region was under the influence of the expanding Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Tezcoaco and Tlacopan) or Aztec empire. The Nahua or Mexica culture therefore dominated at the time of the Spanish conquest. This is also the best-known culture because of the preservation of sources, mostly of them recorded or gathered few years after the Spanish conquest.

The archeologists have estimated the number of inhabitants in the Valley of Mexico. During the golden age of Teotihuacan (c.600 AD) a figure of 200,000 has been proposed. Three hundred years later the number barely reached 100,000 people (Parsons, 1989).

Map 1 also shows the basic types of land use practiced in the 15th century. The picture was probably similar in 1000 AD. In the Mesoamerican area agriculture was based on slash and burn techniques producing maize, beans and squashes. In the Valley of Mexico and certain zones in the Mayan area, complex irrigation systems were also used and production was highly diversified.

In the Intermediate Area, the Greater Antilles and the Venezuelan coast, slash and burn agriculture combined root crops and maize. Political organization had developed from bands and tribes to chiefdoms and confederations of chiefdoms. In the eastern sectors of the Central American isthmus and the Lesser Antilles shifting agriculture was

combined with hunting, gathering and fishing; political organization was limited to bands and tribes.

Anthropologists and agricultural economists have estimated the carrying capacity of these land use systems. The major problems are how to identify the occupied areas and how to measure the intensity of natural resources use. The figures therefore acquire some significance only on the eve of the Spanish conquest, when more data is available. In Mesoamerica, population density varied between 15 and 60 inhabitants per km² (Newson, 1987). The only exception was central Mexico. According to Sanders (Sanders, 1992) densities in this area reached an average of 127 to 148 inhabitants per km²; in Tenochtitlan, might have been as high as 500 inhabitants per km², a figure probably unequalled anywhere else in America. In the chiefdoms of the Intermediate Area and the Greater Antilles, densities varied between 2 and 8 inhabitants per km², while in the Mosquitia, the Orinoco plains and the Lesser Antilles the maximum was one inhabitant per km² and, frequently, the density was even lower.

There was thus a certain correlation between the complexity of political organization, land use systems and the capacity to generate an economic surplus, and population densities. That is the most we can say before the Spanish conquest.

2. Population on the eve of the Spanish conquest, c.1500

This subject remains highly polemical, and its implications go far beyond an intellectual numbers game. The magnitude of Indian population decline during the sixteenth-century, conditioned and shaped the formation of New World societies in the "longue durée". Woodrow Borah's statement that without the demographic disaster the character of Mexico would have been similar to that of British India, might be exaggerated; however, it highlights the true historical significance of the problem (Borah, 1989). Furthermore, this process cannot be analyzed without considering the forced arrival of about 11 million African slaves from 1500 to 1870 (Curtin, 1969; Eltis, 2000). The catastrophic decline of the Indian population, migrations and the process of racial and cultural mixing, are the basic elements that have forged American societies since the sixteenth-century.

Before presenting estimates and population figures, it is important to underscore at least in broad outline, the problems with regard to sources and documentation. The first systematic *tasaciones* of tributary Indians –the only documents that we can use as censuses- were taken several decades after the beginning of the conquest (1511 for the Hispaniola, 1548-49 for Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, and 1568-70 for the Valley of Mexico). They therefore refer to periods when substantial reductions in the Indian populations had already taken place. The wars of the conquest, unrestricted enslavement of the Indian populations prior to 1540s, the imposition of tributes and the introduction of new and lethal diseases, combined to affect the Indian populations on a large scale before the *tasaciones* were made. All discussions about the size of Indian populations at the time of contact therefore rely on extrapolation. Moreover, because of

our unequal knowledge of different regions, it is always tempting to apply the best-known patterns of the decline to areas which has been studied less.

Table 1 presents estimates of the total population of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean at the time of conquest. Map 2a shows the approximate spatial distribution of the population. 1500 AD is used as a simple temporal reference for the moment of contact, which actually took place between 1492 and 1519. The figures employed: 13 millions for the whole Mexico, including 10 millions for Central Mexico; 6 millions for Central America; and 716,000 for the Caribbean Islands, are derived from relatively recent estimations and can be considered moderate in comparison to calculations such as those of Cook & Borah (25 millions for the Central Mexico, 8 millions for the Hispaniola), and Dobyns (between 41 and 64 millions for the whole of Middle America). However, they are substantially higher than the figures proposed by authors such as Rosenblat (less than 6 million for the entire region), Steward and Kroeber (Denevan, 1992). In choosing between the different estimates two criteria were considered. On one hand, we preferred the most recent and solidly documented research; on the other hand, we also evaluated estimates in terms of “demographic likelihood”. This implies a rational examination of the implications of the estimates in terms of population densities, carrying capacity and implicit levels of mortality and fertility.

3. The population of Mexico and Central America between 1500 and 2000: the decline of the Indians and the rise of mestizos and Creoles.

Table 1 also includes estimates of total population for the years 1600, 1700, 1800, 1900 and 2000. The corresponding spatial representation can be found in maps 2c, 2c, 2e and 2f. Unfortunately, a change in the scale of the proportional circles was necessary because of the final printing size of the maps. The evolution of the Indian population of Central America is shown in detail in Table 3 and Maps 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 3f and 3g. In this case the whole series of maps was drawn using the same scale of proportional circles.

The decimation of the Indian population during the sixteen and seventeen centuries, though appalling throughout Middle America was, nevertheless, regionally differentiated. The Mexican population declined by almost 2% per annum between 1500 and 1600 and remained virtually stagnant during the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the Caribbean experienced an almost complete loss of their Indian population during the first decades of the sixteenth-century. The same pattern was repeated in Panama; by 1550, the Indian population had almost disappeared (map 3b). In the rest of Central America Indian population decline was greater than in Mexico –approximation 3% per annum during the sixteenth-century- and affected principally the present territories of Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica. In the tropical forests of the Caribbean slope of the Isthmus a few dispersed Indian populations survived. (Maps 3b-3g). The available data suggest that the Sauer hypothesis applied to Panama and the Caribbean - that the tropical forest recolonized for several centuries areas left empty by the demise of the aboriginal population (Sauer, 1969)- could also be applied to the Caribbean slope of the Isthmus.

From the eighteenth-century onwards, the populations of Mexico and Central America experienced steady growth. During the twentieth century, the rhythm of increased to a population explosion. At the same time, the racial, ethnic and cultural composition of these populations changed dramatically. Though the surviving Indian populations experienced relatively high rates of growth, they declined as a proportion of the total population. The principal population increase was in the groups of mixed race (mestizos, pardos, mulatos, etc.) referred to as “castas” in colonial documents (Rosenblat, 1954 I; Mörner, 1967). Some data concerning these changes in the socio-racial composition of the population are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

In the case of Mexico, the proportion of Indian population gradually declined to 60% in 1810. By 1900, it had fallen to 15% and by the end of the twentieth century to only 8%. However, the proportion of Indians already varies enormously during the nineteenth century. Indians were the dominant component in southern Mexico, a region which included Mixteca and Mayan populations. (Table 3D). Mestizos (with European, Indian or African mixing) had risen to about 40% of the Mexican population in 1810. The classification according to castas was abolished after Independence; no further data is therefore available after the beginning of the nineteenth-century. However, by that time the castas were culturally rather racially defined, i.e. they were no longer related to phenotype. The principal ethnic distinction that emerged was thus the differentiation between Indians (living in an Indian town, using Indian dress and speaking an Indian language) and members of the mixed castas, unified by use of the Spanish language and a “national” Creole and mestizo culture.

In Central America the process was similar to that in Mexico. Table 4 includes data derived from the Bourbon Census of 1778 and figures for the proportion of Indians in 1900. In Guatemala a large majority of population was classified as Indian (78% in 1778, 65% in 1900). El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua were intermediate cases while Costa Rica and Panama had only small Indian populations. The Spanish component (including the Creoles) was similar in all areas: between 4 and 7% of the total population. The dominant elements were therefore the so-called “ladinos”, i.e. all kinds of mixed groups. In Panama, the Afro-American component was also significant. Even the proportion of black slaves (6%) in 1778 was high compared with that in the rest of the isthmus. The proportion of Indians in the total populations remained similar in 1900 with one major exception: in El Salvador and Nicaragua the proportion of the Indians had declined drastically.

The last point to underline, are certain peculiarities in the Mexico’s population evolution during the nineteenth-century. Population growth in Mexico (0.9% per annum) was much lower than in Central America or the Caribbean. This lag in the context of Latin America as a whole had very important consequences in the course of the 19th century. Mexico, which by 1800 had the larger population in the subcontinent, was overtaken by Brazil, a country that in 1800 had only half as many inhabitants as Mexico. Among the reasons for this Mexican lag were the frequent civil wars, the loss of territory to the United States and a very low net immigration rate. Between 1910 and 1921 the Mexican revolution had a severe demographic impact: “ a demographic disaster, probably

the worst since the sixteenth century, ensued with a decade of destruction –civil war, guerrilla fighting, and banditry. Mexico’s population declined by almost 1 million instead of growing by 2 million, because the demographic pace of the last years of Porfirian rule had faltered.” (McCaa, 2000, p. 293)

4. The population of the Caribbean between 1500 and 2000: the disappearance of the Indians and the rise of Afro-American populations

In the Caribbean the virtual disappearance of the Indian population gave way to a process of resettlement by African slaves and Europeans. The 1630s marked the turning point. It has been estimated that between 1500 and 1870, 4.5 million African slaves and several hundred thousand European immigrants (according to Emmer about 590,000 from 1500 to 1800) migrated to the region (Engerman, 2000). As is well known, the context of these demographic changes was the rapid expansion of the plantation economy and the sugar exports. Within a few years, the character of the Caribbean changed radically and English colonial rule was established in Barbados, St. Kitts, Antigua, Grenada and Jamaica. France occupied Martinique, Guadeloupe, and later the western part of the Hispaniola (Saint-Domingue, later Haiti). The Spanish Antilles (Cuba, Puerto Rico y Santo Domingo) only began to participate in the plantation economy, and therefore in the massive influx of African slaves, towards the end of the eighteenth century. However, during the nineteenth century, when the slavery was coming to an end, Cuba rose to a prominent position, replacing Saint Domingue as the principal supplier of sugar on the world market.

Table 5 shows, the ethnic and legal status of Caribbean populations in 1750, 1830 and 1880. The golden era of the British and French Caribbean, in the mid-18th century was reflected in a population composed of 70% African slaves against 24% European whites and 9% free colored people. By 1830, on the eve of the abolition of slavery in the British empire (1833), the percentage of slaves had fall to 44%, while the number and proportion of free colored people had risen substantially. Furthermore in 80 years the total population of the Caribbean had increased three times. By 1880, slavery affected only 3% of the population; (in the Spanish Antilles, slavery was abolished in 1886). Although comparable data for the white population are unavailable, in the non-Spanish Caribbean, this sector was greatly reduced by emigration. Once golden age of the plantation economy had passed, the population of these islands became overwhelmingly Afro-American blacks.

During the nineteenth century an important new feature was the arrival of Asian laborers. Between 1835 and 1918 more than a half million of workers immigrated from India, particularly to the British colony of Trinidad. In addition, more than 100,000 people arrived from China and a similar number from the South East Asia and other regions (Africa, Yucatan, Portuguese Islands).

We can return now to Table 1 to consider the trends in the population growth of the Caribbean. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the rate of increase was 2% per annum. The rate subsequently declined to 1.35% per annum during the nineteenth

century and 1.66% per annum in twentieth century. The contribution of migration will be discussed later.

Another important aspect of the Caribbean populations is the fact that the plantation economy and the slave trade were closely related to the British colonies on the east coast of North America. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Caribbean plantations were an essential element in the shaping of the region that D.W.Meinig has called “Atlantic America”. By 1800, the Caribbean had a total population of more than 1.5 million people. From a racial and cultural perspective, the tropical Caribbean extended to the south of the United States. In demographic terms, that adds a further million to the black population of the Caribbean. Following Meinig, it seems appropriate to consider this important region as “Afro North America” (Map 6) (Meinig, 1986 and 1993).

5. Population growth and demographic régimes

Before the Spanish conquest all we can affirm is that there was some correlation between the complexity of political organization, land use systems and their capacity to generate an economic surplus, and population densities. Using documents from the early conquest period, Robert McCaa has formulated the hypothesis that Nahua civilization “survived, indeed thrived, by means of a high-pressure demographic system: high mortality and higher fertility with growth rates triple those of most paleopopulations, but less than one-third of post revolutionary Mexico’s pace of 2 or 3% per annum maintained since the 1930s.” (McCaa, 2000, p. 251; McCaa, 1996) A key feature of this system, in order to sustain the high levels of fertility, was the universality of marriage at a very young age (an average between 12 and 13 years for women).

The scattered data for the colonial period, concentrated mainly in the eighteenth century, points to the following characteristics. In first place, very high fertility reflected in crude birth rates of about 50 per thousand (Rabell, 1990; Cook and Borah, 1977 and 1978) and very early ages of marriage (14 to 19 years for women). Measuring mortality is more difficult because of the under-registration in annual series of burials. We have therefore measure the frequency and intensity of the demographic crises using the methodology proposed by Del Panta and Livi-Bacci (Del Panta and Livi-Bacci, 1977) in their detailed study of the Italian mortality crises. The results, from 7 Mexican parishes (1650-1817), Mexico City (1805-1917), Havana (1807-1920), and national series for Costa Rica (1755-1945) and Guatemala (1881-1920), are presented in Table 7 and Graphs 2 and 3. By way of comparison, the Italian indices (1580-1859) are also included. The Mexican parishes show indices of frequency and intensity crises three or four 4 times higher than those in Italy during the period 1580-1699. Since we know that the Mexican population was growing during the eighteenth century, and we also have evidence of the neutral effect of migration, Robert McCaa seems to be right in his hypothesis of a “high-pressure demographic system”. The frequency and intensity of crises declined during the nineteenth-century and from the beginning of the twentieth century fell to zero. This is well illustrated in the cases of both, Guatemala and Costa Rica. In Guatemala there were no crises after 1920 and in Costa Rica none after 1900.

Graph 4 presents the crude birth and death rates of Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador. The very long series of data for Costa Rica covers the period 1750-1996; for Guatemala and El Salvador we have only twentieth century data. Comparison of the three graphs illustrates the patterns of demographic transition. For most of the period, the crude birth rate is very high, oscillating around 50 per thousand. Only by 1960 in Costa Rica and by 1980 in Guatemala and El Salvador, does sustained decline begin to emerge. The crude death rate follows the birth rate closely, and surpasses it during times of crisis. Towards 1920, a sharp decline in mortality triggered the process of demographic transition.

In the Caribbean the demographic régime passed through three different phases. (Engerman, 2000, p. 519) The first was marked by the slave trade and very high levels of mortality. Population growth depended on the arrival of migrants (black slaves and white planters and indentured laborers). In the case of Jamaica during the eighteenth century, for instance, while the total population was growing fast the rate of natural decrease ranged between 1.5 and 3.7 % per annum. (Roberts, 1957, pp. 36-37) The second stage extended from end of slavery in the nineteenth-century to the 1920s. The major elements were the arrival of new migrants, mainly from Asia, and a new black diaspora along the Caribbean coast of Central America. The third phase is related to demographic transition (a decline in mortality followed by a substantial drop in fertility) and high rates of emigration to the United States and Canada. The Hispanic Caribbean follows the same patterns but with a certain time lag. In ethnic terms, however, the Afro American population is less conspicuous, due to the arrival of Spanish immigrants during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a very important process of racial mixing.

6. The occupation of spaces.

One legacy of the demographic catastrophe, during the sixteenth-century was a world of scattered settled areas and empty spaces. A famous graph designed by Pierre Chaunu compared the decline of the Indian population with the increasing numbers of sheep and oxen: “le bétail chasse l’homme” (Chaunu, 1964, p. 105).

This pattern began to change during the eighteenth-century. Most of the Caribbean Islands became crowded with plantations and sugar ingenios. In Mexico, the northern frontier of settlement steady expanded, although the desert and rugged mountains remained almost empty. On the other hand, in southern Mexico and Central America, very extended zones covered by tropical forests continued to be sparsely settled. In Central America, Spanish colonization barely affected one third of the territory from 1570 to 1800. Map 4 shows the settled areas c. 1800.

The subsequent process is well known. During the nineteenth and twentieth agricultural colonization accelerated and urban growth was rapid. The situation in 1950 is shown in Map 5. At the end of the twentieth century, the change seemed irreversible: a large majority of the population was living in urban zones, the agricultural frontier was closed and the remained zones of primary forest were considered as “protected areas”.

7. Migrations and cultural mixing.

Migrations and intensive process of cultural exchange, mixing and domination are salient features of the population history of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. After 1000 AD several waves of migration from the north transformed the ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. The Aztec empire sprang from this complex process. The Spanish conquest provoked the decimation of the Indian population giving rise to new societies from which developed the nations of the present day. The African slave trade and the rise of new imperial powers transformed the Caribbean. During the nineteenth-century new migrations from Asia and Europe added further diversity.

The great novelty in the twentieth century was emigration to the United States (Map 6 and Table 8). This process marks a new “longue durée” not yet completed. In cultural terms, it has promoted a the rapid increase of Hispanic groups inside the United States and the growing influence of North American culture in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Within the context of these profound demographic and cultural trends, operate much more visible phenomena such as free trade treaties (NAFTA, ALCA, etc.), vertiginous information exchanges and ever growing tourist traffic.

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