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**The Limits of
Racial Domination**

**Plebeian Society in
Colonial Mexico City,
1660–1720**

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patronage system. Chapter 7 analyzes the riot of 1692 and explains how plebeians momentarily broke through their restraints to mobilize for political action and why the elite was able to reassert its authority so quickly and decisively. The conclusion offers some remarks on the nature of the social order in colonial Mexico City.

I

Race and Class in Colonial Mexico City, 1521–1660

Like so many other great cities, past and present, colonial Mexico City was a study in contrasts. Stunning wealth and wretched poverty, elegance and squalor, and sophistication and ignorance all existed side by side. The capital's dark underside was inextricably woven into the fabric of daily life. The poor were not tucked away into hidden slums; they were visible—indeed, unavoidable—in the most fashionable quarters of the city. Government buildings and elite mansions did not house the rich alone: their lower levels were given over to slaves and servants. Interspersed among the checkerboard of main avenues were narrow alleyways, described as the “den[s] of thieves” who terrorized their neighborhoods day and night.¹ Mulatto street vendors plied their wares among the master silversmiths in the Calle de San Francisco, the address of highly elite families. But the fullest expression of the city's social complexity appeared at its very heart, the *plaza mayor*. Built on the ruins of the Aztec ceremonial center and surrounded by the cathedral, the viceregal palace, and the municipal buildings, the plaza demonstrated the unalterable triumph of Spaniard over Indian, the imposition of Hispanic order on a recalcitrant population. Yet the plaza's daily activities seemed to mock or even subvert these pretensions by affirming Mexico City's unquenchable ethnic diversity. In short, the elite faced a rising tide of mixed-bloods, blacks, Indians, and poor Spaniards that (in their view) threatened to submerge the city into chaos.

A complex, contradictory society had come into being with remarkable speed once Cortés had made his decision to rebuild ruined Tenochtitlán. The new city amid the waters of Lake Texcoco retained much of the majesty and allure of its famed predecessor² and achieved even greater economic and political primacy. As Ross Hassig points out, “The relative size of cities changed greatly. All the towns in the Valley of Mexico declined in relation to Mexico City. . . . Their prior importance as independent centers was undermined. They were no longer important in their own right, but only in relation to the capital.”³ Mexico City—political capital, economic center, cultural trendsetter—acted as a magnet for

travelers and immigrants, who, in turn, reinforced its status. The "flow of immigration" into New Spain had "reached flood proportions" as early as 1523.⁴ Because of their background (most were town dwellers), the urban bias in Spanish culture, and a natural desire to congregate in already Hispanicized areas, these immigrants usually settled in cities—above all, in the capital.⁵ By 1574, perhaps eighteen thousand Spaniards, about 30 percent of the colony's entire Hispanic population, lived in Mexico City.⁶ The city's inhabitants were a remarkably varied group, running the gamut from viceroy to vagabond. The colonial elite resided there, and where the wealthy lived, so also dwelled their servants and retainers, including their African slaves. The concentration of riches also provided economic opportunities for traders and craftsmen. Artisanry flourished: within a dozen years of the conquest, artisans (including weavers, tailors, carpenters, and candle makers) comprised nearly half of Mexico City's Spanish population.⁷ In 1542, the city's first artisan guild (the silk weavers' *gremio*) was officially established. By 1600, some two hundred guilds had been organized in New Spain, most operating in the capital.⁸ Commerce also engaged both the poor and the wealthy. The city's markets trafficked in Indian as well as European goods; and its merchants included not only members of transatlantic trading houses but petty dealers such as Andrés García, who bought and sold cacao, "Campeche wood, and cotton blankets and wax."⁹ Many of the city's necessities—including the indispensable food of the poor, maize—continued to be delivered by canoe, via the still extensive system of canals.¹⁰

The city's indigenous infrastructure had its human counterpart as well. A Spanish island in an indigenous sea—the Valley of Mexico had been the most densely populated region in Mesoamerica—the capital tried to solve its Indian "problem" through segregation. The conquistadores had marked out an area of some thirteen square blocks in the center of the city. This sector, known as the *traza*, was reserved for Spanish occupancy. In fact, from the Spaniards' point of view, the *traza* was the city. The region surrounding the *traza*, earmarked for Indian residence, formed the indigenous community of San Juan Tenochtitlán. Like many Indian villages in the countryside, San Juan had a largely traditional political organization, one that included internal subdivisions (*barrios*), a full range of Indian officials, and even a claim to tribute from subject pueblos.¹¹ But the separation of Spaniard and Indian was more than a political convenience. It reflected the conquistadores' fear and mistrust of the Indians (the *traza's* houses and churches had a fortresslike solidity, in case of native uprising); their disdain for the social and cultural practices of their conquered foes; and, above all, their desire to exploit the resources of Indian society to support a sumptuous and noble life-style, worthy of Spanish *hidalgos*. The

socioeconomic meaning of the Spanish-Indian dichotomy had been visible in Mexico City from the beginning, in the contrast between the Spaniards' "monumental public and private buildings" and "the Indians' shacks [*casuchas*] . . . which barely rise above the ground."¹²

By the seventeenth century, social and cultural diversity had become a hallmark of the capital, acknowledged (though sometimes uneasily) by residents and visitors alike. Colonial Mexico's greatest poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, wrote *villancicos*—popular lyrics for religious festivals—in both Castilian and Nahuatl as well as in broken Spanish meant to represent the patois of partially assimilated Africans.¹³ Where Sor Juana condescended, others condemned. Thomas Gage, an English friar, found the city's Afro-Mexican women charming but complained that they corrupted the already lax morals of Spanish gentlemen.¹⁴ Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, the leading Mexican intellectual of the seventeenth century, has been described by D. A. Brading as "a creole patriot who sought to endow the imperial city of Mexico with both a distinguished past and a glorious present"; nevertheless, he harbored a "thorough contempt for the Mexican populace."¹⁵ This attitude was widely shared in upper-class circles. Like a muleteer who curses and beats his beast of burden, the elite upbraided and despised (and in fact, sometimes beat) the people who were, in the final analysis, the source of their fortunes. For the colony's economic system, also centered on Mexico City, infused by the wealth of the northern silver mines and administered by the capital's mercantile elite, ultimately depended on the labor of non-Spaniards. As one seventeenth-century viceroy admitted, "It is certain that while the Indians exist, the Indies will exist."¹⁶

The evolution of labor systems is central to the history of early colonial Mexico and has been described well elsewhere.¹⁷ For our purposes, this evolution may be summarized as follows. The conquistadores had received grants of *encomienda*, the right to demand labor and tribute from designated groups of Indians. The first generation of *encomenderos* (as the grantees were known) had enormous power and prestige and enormous opportunities (not neglected) for abuse of their Indian charges. Stories of their mistreatment of the Indians, related in gruesome detail by mendicant friars and accompanied by calls for immediate reform, soon reached Spain. The friars' message fell on willing ears. It spoke to the humanitarian instincts of the crown, supposed fount of justice for its subjects. More important, it also spoke to royal fears that Mexico's *encomenderos* would convert themselves into permanent and fractious nobility. As John Leddy Phelan has noted, the friars' arguments were "in effect a smoke screen behind which the Crown could restrict the economic power of the colonists."¹⁸ Throughout the first postconquest generation, the crown tightened its grip on the colony and undermined the *encomenderos'* strength.

A "monastic Inquisition," controlled by friars, began operating in Mexico City in 1525 and directed much of its attention to *encomenderos* (who were usually accused of blasphemy). After a period of political turbulence, a governmental bureaucracy began to take shape under the first viceroy, Antonio de Mendoza (1535-1550). During his administration, the crown introduced several measures designed to reduce *encomendero* control over the Indians. The New Laws of 1542 abolished Indian slavery, forbade new *encomiendas*, and limited the succession of existing *encomiendas* to one heir. In 1549, the crown instituted a new method of labor allocation called the *repartimiento*. Under this system, government officials drafted a proportion of the able-bodied men in each Indian community and assigned them to Spanish employers for a limited period. The *encomenderos* thus lost their privileged claim to native laborers. As time passed, the crown began to carry out its policy of escheating *encomiendas* on the death of their owners. This channeled *encomienda* tributes into royal coffers, further weakening the *encomendero* class.¹⁹

Yet this system too proved unsuitable in the long run. *Encomenderos* were now merely one voice in a chorus clamoring for more workers. Public works projects, mines, *haciendas*—all depended (or so it was said) on acquiring a sufficient share of *repartimiento* labor. But as Hispanic society became larger and more complex, the Indian population diminished. Devastating epidemics—along with ecological disruption, culture shock, overwork, and the unfortunate Hispanic policy of resettling the inhabitants of dispersed villages into central communities (*congregaciones*)—had by 1605 reduced the indigenous population to perhaps 10 percent of its pre-Columbian level.²⁰ The demands of a growing Hispanic sector on a shrinking pool of indigenous workers had reached critical proportions by the turn of the century. Already in 1595, Viceroy Luis de Velasco II had expressed his fears that the conservation of the Hispanic community entailed the "oppression and destruction" of the Indians. According to another observer, by 1607, the incompatibility of the Spanish and Indian *repúblicas* had become a colonial commonplace.²¹

The crisis in relations between the two *repúblicas* triggered a basic shift in the Spaniards' utilization of land and labor. In brief, the years 1570-1630 saw a major expansion of Spanish landholding and the emergence of "free" wage laborers as an essential element in the colonial economy.²² Spanish *haciendas* and *obrajes* (textile workshops) came to dominate the production of goods and foodstuffs for urban centers. Though native subsistence agriculture still formed the largest sector of Mexico's economy, the Spanish were no longer dependent on community-based tribute and labor. As P. J. Bakewell remarks, "In the sixteenth century, the white community lived on the surplus produced by a vast number of Indians

working in a very primitive economic system. In the seventeenth, Spaniards lived on the product . . . of an economy that was in its general outline of contemporary European design."²³

Mexico City directed much of this economic reorganization. The city's reach was long, but its influence was most intense in the Valley of Mexico. Valley residents engaged in extensive land grabbing after 1570. By 1620, Spaniards owned nearly one-half of the valley's arable land. Spanish estates, of course, produced wheat for wealthy city dwellers, but they also found a market for maize among the urban poor. Mexico City's *cabildo* (municipal council) claimed in 1630 that Indians grew maize only for their subsistence needs, while the commercial supply came entirely from "rich Spaniards who have *haciendas*."²⁴ Another native product, the intoxicant pulque, also became heavily commercialized in the century after the conquest. Investigators in the 1570s found eighteen towns in the archbishopric of Mexico specializing in the sale of pulque and related products. Fifty years later, pulque marketing had become an economic necessity for many Indian villages near Mexico City.²⁵

Such integration of Hispanic and Indian economies was exceptional, however. In general, Mexico's indigenous communities resisted absorption and infiltration by the Spaniards. Despite huge population losses, the interference of priests and government officials, and disruptions caused by rapacious colonials, "many villages preserved old social boundaries or established new ones and maintained a strong sense of group identity in their adjustments to the new dependency relationships imposed by colonial conditions."²⁶ The strength of these social boundaries (reinforced by royal policies designed to protect native communities) prevented the wholesale incorporation of Indian peasants into the Hispanic economy. Indian communities, therefore, could not fully satisfy the labor demands of Spanish *hacendados*, planters, *obrajeros*, and miners.

Forced to seek alternate sources of labor, many Spanish entrepreneurs turned to African slaves. Some 36,500 slaves arrived in Mexico between 1521 and 1594.²⁷ They soon became indispensable to the plantation economy of Mexico's coastal areas, where Indian population decline had been most severe. In the overall Mexican economy, however, their impact was less significant. At the height of the African influx, black slaves comprised less than 15 percent of the labor force in Mexico's major mining centers.²⁸ The high cost of slaves (300-400 pesos for a healthy young male) put them at a disadvantage compared to wage laborers. Furthermore, the importation of Africans was erratic, and the number of slaves available rarely matched the colonials' demand. Finally, many slaves filled highly visible but relatively unproductive roles as personal servants to wealthy Spaniards. Mexico City elites valued black slaves as status symbols and were

active in their purchase: of the 20,000 blacks living in Mexico during the 1570s, 9,000 worked as slaves in the capital.²⁹

Rare and expensive African slaves provided an unsatisfactory answer to Spanish labor demands. Instead, Spaniards came to rely on a group of workers who, unlike slaves, required only a minimum outlay (a daily wage) and who, unlike most Indians, had no access to resources outside the Hispanic economy. In the end, the Spanish cities, mining camps, and estates created the solution to their own labor problems. For these Hispanic centers constituted the cradle of a new population of wage laborers, composed of acculturated Indians, poor Spaniards, and castas.

Soon after the conquest Indians began to participate, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, in the Spanish economy. Hispanicization proceeded most rapidly among the caciques, many of whom became landowners and entrepreneurs. Humbler Indians migrated to Spanish cities and mining centers, became laborers on Spanish estates, or worked as muleteers or traders.³⁰ The importance of such *naborias* or *gañanes* grew as the scope of Hispanic economic activities expanded; indeed, the development of Mexico's mining-hacienda complex would have been impossible without increased Spanish utilization of "free" Indians. In the late sixteenth century, *gañanes* outnumbered black slaves and repartimiento Indians combined in New Spain's most important mining centers. Hacendados counted on *gañanes* to form the core of resident laborers on their estates. Their successful efforts to recruit such workers doomed the agricultural repartimiento, which was abolished in 1632.³¹

On haciendas and in mining camps and cities, Indians met and mingled with (as one landowner put it) "mestizos, mulattoes, and other servants,"³² persons who, from birth, had belonged to neither the Spanish nor the Indian "republic." The history of miscegenation in Mexico antedates the conquest. Loyal Indian allies provided the conquistadores with mistresses; and after the fall of Tenochtitlán, some Spaniards established virtual harems. Although the church soon curbed such excesses, the continued sexual imbalance of the Spanish population ensured a high level of miscegenation. The crown did not object to Spanish-Indian unions if they were legitimized by marriage, and, legally or illegally, such unions took place on a wide scale.³³ As a result, the children of the earliest colonials were frequently biological mestizos. But in the first postconquest generation, these children were normally absorbed into either the Spanish or Indian culture—usually the former. Many conquistadores recognized their mixed-blood sons as heirs and seemed more worried over their illegitimacy than their racial status.³⁴

When the term "mestizo" began to appear in the late 1530s, it referred to marginal individuals—persons of Spanish-Indian descent who were not

full members of either group. Juan de Zumárraga, the first archbishop of Mexico, described them as "orphaned boys, sons of Spanish men and Indian women" who wandered through the countryside, ignorant of the law and Christianity and reduced to eating "raw meat." Zumárraga attributed their unfortunate condition to their fathers having died "in the conquest and conservation of this land" before they could be rewarded by the crown.³⁵ Since these boys lacked elite Spanish patrons, they could at best hope for marginal positions in a still-maturing Hispanic society; yet their physical and cultural traits kept them from full acceptance in Indian communities.

Thus, mestizos quickly joined Africans as New Spain's quintessential outsiders. Mexico's social structure was based on two fundamental principles: (1) the division between Spaniards and Indians; and (2) the maintenance of internal stability within each sphere. Spaniards believed that the castas threatened both principles. Biologically, of course, the castas did not really fit into either *república*. More important, they had no legitimate socioeconomic niche. The ideal community, in Hispanic political theory, was composed of faithful Christians, each performing the function appropriate to his lineage and his position in the status hierarchy.³⁶ Yet the castas had no preassigned place. They were not Spanish "citizens" (*vecinos*), nor could they claim the legitimacy of the land's original inhabitants. In short, the castas were an anomaly. Many Spaniards considered them disgusting—"low and wretched peoples."³⁷ Others virtually refused to recognize their existence. Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, a priest who visited Mexico City in 1612, failed to record the presence of mestizos (though he did mention blacks).³⁸ Even when castas could not be ignored, they tended to be treated as a rather offensive, disorderly mass. For example, an Inquisitor's description of Mexico City in 1654, after discussing the city's Spanish and Indian communities, states, "Besides the native Indians there are many plebeians such as mestizos, blacks, mulattoes, and *chinos* [Filipinos], and other mixtures, whose numbers are unknown because of their confused ranks."³⁹

As noted above, Spanish officials sometimes praised Indian laborers for their fundamental role in the colony's economy. In sharp contrast, castas were most commonly perceived as vagabonds, "lazy persons . . . who do not have a manual trade, nor property from which they can sustain themselves."⁴⁰ From the authorities' point of view, vagabonds were "idle" or "useless" (*ociosos*); they mistreated the Indians and "taught them their bad customs and idleness and other errors and vices besides."⁴¹ Vagabonds not only failed to perform a useful function in Spanish society but disrupted Indian society as well. Most important of all, they were not under firm Spanish control. While they remained outside the pale of Hispanic

society, there was no effective check on their "antisocial" behavior—behavior that might proceed beyond sporadic misdeeds to the systematic undermining of Spanish authority, perhaps even to open rebellion.⁴² Many elite observers agreed that the castas were the colony's foremost partisans of insurrection. As one viceroy confided to the king, his greatest fear was that the "mestizos, mulattoes, and free blacks" would revolt and "bring after them a large part of the Indians."⁴³

From the 1540s on, the Spanish crown became increasingly concerned with bringing the castas into line. The perception of a growing class of casta vagabonds gave impetus to the royal policy of erecting barriers between the two repúblicas.⁴⁴ In 1549, Charles V ordered that no castas should be permitted to receive encomiendas or hold public office without a special royal license. During the 1560s and 1570s, Spanish legislation attempted to segregate Indians from all other segments of the population. A 1563 *cédula*, repeated several times thereafter, forbade the residence of "Spaniards, blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos" in native villages. The crown pursued a similar policy with regard to cities. Indians were to live in their own barrios; work places and even hospitals were to be segregated.⁴⁵

By emphasizing the segregation and consolidation of the Indian república, the crown in effect assigned the castas to the Spanish community. Native villages were supposed to have only Indian inhabitants, while Spanish towns contained members of all of Mexico's racial groups. A corresponding division existed in religious matters, with mendicant friars serving Indian parishes and the secular clergy attending to the rest of the populace. In Mexico City, for instance, the preconquest barrios became the parishes of San Juan Baptista, Santa María la Redonda, San Sebastián, and San Pablo, all under Franciscan supervision; the traza parish (Sagrario Metropolitano), based in the main cathedral, administered to the needs of the Spaniards and castas.⁴⁶

This did not mean, of course, that the castas lived on an equal footing with the Spaniards. Much of the new royal legislation applied only to the former. Blacks and mulattoes, unlike Spaniards, paid tribute. The crown explicitly denied mestizos such official posts as protector of the Indians and notary public. Castas did not have the right to bear arms, an important status marker. Sumptuary legislation also attempted to define the castas' status as both non-Indian and inferior. On the one hand, casta women were forbidden to wear Indian dress (unless they were married to Indian men) on pain of one hundred lashes. On the other hand, blacks and mulattos faced confiscation of their property if they wore golden jewelry, pearls, or embroidered full-length *mantas*.⁴⁷ But colonial authorities went beyond restricting the castas' privileges; they also sought to place these anoma-

lous groups under firm Spanish control. After the mid-sixteenth century, numerous laws attempted to monitor and limit the physical mobility of castas, particularly blacks and mulattoes.

During the early colonial period, Africans were easily the most visible and feared of the castas. The Spanish had a long history of association with Africans before the colonization of Mexico, and they had developed a severe prejudice against them. In sixteenth-century Spain, "the adjective *negro* was often a synonym for evil," and blacks "were believed to be loyal, superstitious, light-hearted, of low mentality, and distinctly in need of white supervision."⁴⁸ Spanish distrust and fear of blacks intensified in Mexico, where blacks constituted a much more important minority than they did in Spain. By the early 1570s, blacks formed by far the largest part of the castas, outnumbering mestizos by more than eight to one. Furthermore, Afro-Mexicans had highly visible roles in Mexico's economy, especially in urban areas. In Mexico City, blacks and mulattoes specialized in domestic service, but they also penetrated into the skilled trades. The ordinances of the city's craft guilds indicate that white artisans feared competition from their black counterparts. When these guilds excluded specific racial groups, they almost always (until the 1590s) singled out blacks and mulattoes. Thus, in 1570, the silk spinners refused to allow blacks and mulattoes to become apprentices; a few years later, the glovers and needle makers denied black and mulatto slaves the right to take a master's examination.⁴⁹

But the Afro-Mexican threat to the Spanish did not consist solely of economic competition. The specter of slave revolts haunted colonial authorities, and for good reason. An alleged slave conspiracy to take over Mexico City in 1537 was followed by at least two more uprisings during the 1540s. Slave insurrections then spread to the northern mining areas, where blacks allied themselves with the still-unconquered Chichimec Indians. The possibility of such an alliance in central Mexico, where the indigenous population was most heavily concentrated, greatly disturbed colonial officials, to the point that Viceroy Velasco asked the king to curtail the slave trade.⁵⁰ He was aware of the interracial tension in Mexico City, which even travelers commented on: "The Indians and the Negroes daily wait, hoping to put into practice their freedom from the domination and the servitude in which the Spaniards keep them. Indians and Negroes hate and abhor the Spaniards with all their hearts."⁵¹ But the viceregal warning went unheeded, and after a period of apparent quiescence, a new series of disturbances erupted in the early seventeenth century. In 1611, fifteen hundred blacks and mulattoes staged a public demonstration, marching in solemn procession past the viceregal palace and the Inquisi-

tion building with the body of a female slave whose death, they claimed, had been caused by her owner's mistreatment. Both 1608 and 1612 saw aborted conspiracies to overthrow Spanish rule.⁵²

The measures taken in the wake of the 1612 conspiracy typify the Spaniards' twofold reaction to social disturbances. First, local authorities took immediate action designed to crush the rebellion and overawe future plotters, namely, the capture and punishment of the ringleaders. (In this case, thirty-five Afro-Mexicans were executed.) Second, the viceroy implemented legislation to forestall future rebellions. Most of these laws had been promulgated in the sixteenth century; however, they usually lay dormant until being activated (for brief periods of time) in moments of crisis. Nevertheless, they reveal the Spaniards' social prescription for dealing with the castas. Among other things, these laws (1) forbade castas to carry arms; (2) ordered blacks and mulattoes off the streets between 8:00 P.M. and 5:00 A.M. (i.e., during the hours of darkness); (3) banned gatherings of four or more Afro-Mexicans; and (4) required every free black and mulatto to live with a "known master" whom he could not leave without permission from a local justice.⁵³ In short, this body of legislation attempted to reduce Afro-Mexicans to the status of minors living under the watchful eyes of individual Spanish guardians.

At first, mestizos fared somewhat better than blacks. They did not have to pay tribute, and because of their Spanish blood, they were officially regarded as "people of reason" (*gente de razón*).⁵⁴ Efforts to bring mestizos under Spanish control were cast in paternalistic terms: the church launched programs to rescue these "sons of Spaniards . . . lost among the Indians" by gathering them into Spanish towns where they could be Christianized.⁵⁵ In the 1540s, Viceroy Mendoza, acting under royal orders, founded the Colegio de San Juan de Letrán in Mexico City. The colegio aimed at furnishing mestizos with a basic education and instruction in Catholic doctrine. Mendoza also made arrangements to house, educate, and find suitable husbands for mestiza orphans. But these institutions had very limited success: by 1579, only eighty students were attending the mestizo school, and few remained for more than one year.⁵⁶ Mexico's viceroys did little to nurture the colegio, for they shared the colonials' negative attitude toward mestizos.

As Hispanic society matured—in particular, as male colonials found it easier to marry Spanish women—the barrier between Spaniards and mestizos became less and less fluid. By 1570, illegitimate children of Spanish-Indian parentage were no longer regularly labeled "Spaniards"; instead, they were usually considered "mestizos." Indeed, as the century progressed, colonials came to regard the terms "mestizo" and "illegitimate" as practically synonymous.⁵⁷ The number of identifiable mestizos

thus grew rapidly after midcentury, and they soon became associated in Hispanic eyes with Mexico's other anomalous casta groups. Royal legislation often classified mestizos with Afro-Mexicans: prohibitory regulations typically spoke of "mestizos, blacks, mulattoes, chinos, and zambos." The Spanish-casta distinction was salient in city ordinances as well. For example, a Spaniard who used fraudulent scales for weighing meat was fined twenty pesos, while a black, mulatto, or mestizo guilty of the same infraction received one hundred lashes. Mestizos, like Afro-Mexicans, were prohibited from joining most artisan guilds.⁵⁸ In addition to recognizing the Spanish-Indian dichotomy, then, the colonials perceived a bifurcation within the Hispanic *república*. On the one hand were the Spaniards; on the other, the castas. In theory, this racial principle should have neatly split Hispanic society into two groups:⁵⁹

white	casta
Old Christians	New Christians
legitimate	illegitimate
pure blood	impure blood
honorable	infamous
law-abiding	criminal
rich	poor
noble	pebeian
nonmanual workers	manual workers

Many elements of this division did persist in the Hispanic imagination. The official stereotype of castas as illegitimate, criminally inclined, and neophytes in the faith lasted into the seventeenth century and beyond. But the complete list of opposed attributes never fully coincided. Most significant, the racial and economic aspects of the Spanish-casta division were inconsistent. In reality, not all castas were relegated to low-status occupations, nor did Spaniards hold solely prestigious positions.

A casta elite—largely mestizo in composition—first emerged in the second half of the sixteenth century. Throughout this period, Spanish officials made curious exceptions to their sweeping, increasingly severe, denunciations against mestizos. For instance, the royal cosmographer López de Velasco stated that the "greater part" of Mexico's mestizos were given over to vice, while Viceroy Martín Enríquez (1568-1580) recommended that "most" mestizos be made to pay tribute. These were not isolated or aberrant opinions; the great jurist and systematizer of colonial legislation, Juan de Solórzano y Pereira, expressed a similar ambivalence toward mestizos. He expatiated on the illegitimacy and the vices of the castas and argued that it was "unjust" to draft Indians to work in the mines while exempting mestizos and mulattoes. But at the same time, he urged that mestizos born

in wedlock be given special consideration; indeed, he regarded them as eligible for grants of *encomienda*.⁶⁰ All of these officials more or less explicitly distinguished between "typical" mestizos—illegitimate, lazy, parasitic—and the few rational, dependable "sons of Spaniards"—mestizos who acted as allies of the colonials.

Such mestizos were particularly valuable as mediators between Spaniards and Indians. They acted as interpreters and as stewards on haciendas; they obtained positions as Indian *gobernadores* (governors) and manipulated indigenous affairs to suit their Spanish patrons.⁶¹ After 1588, the crown, eager to further Christianization efforts among the Indians, allowed mestizos of legitimate birth to become priests. Some achieved respectable positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy: in 1655, a mestizo friar named Tomás Manzo was chosen to head the Franciscans' Mexico City chapter.⁶²

Few castas were this successful. But throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the castas' prominence within the Hispanic economy increased. With the continued decline of the Indian population, the colonials necessarily became more aware of (and resigned to) Mexico's racial diversity. In urban centers such as Mexico City, the Spanish-Indian dichotomy no longer provided an adequate description of society. In particular, the desired division of labor—Spanish merchants and property owners, Indian laborers, black slaves and domestic servants—rapidly eroded. By 1644, Mexico City's Indian tributary count had fallen to 7,631, implying a population of between 21,350 and 26,700.⁶³ Indians now formed a minority of the laboring class and were probably outnumbered by the castas. The indigenous population was losing ground to non-Indians, literally as well as figuratively. In the 1550s, the *cabildo* won the right to assign property in the city's Indian sectors to Spaniards, and Spanish settlement soon spread beyond the *traza*'s boundaries.⁶⁴ Charles Gibson has shown that changes in the city's ecclesiastical jurisdictions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "represented departures from the original Indian organization and corresponded directly to subsequent changes in the city's population."⁶⁵ New parishes (Santa Catalina Mártir and Santa Veracruz) extended into the Indian barrios to serve Spaniards and castas who now lived outside the *traza*. Conversely, Indians moved into the central city, attaching themselves to Spanish patrons, for whom they worked as day laborers, personal servants, bakers, and so on.⁶⁶

In some ways this process paralleled the rural movement of Indians onto haciendas, and it had a similar effect in limiting the labor supply available to other colonials. Indians employed by Spanish entrepreneurs could often evade both tribute and repartimiento requirements.⁶⁷ Spanish officials therefore sought to tap non-Indian sources of labor. In 1607, government proclamations invited "blacks, mulattoes, mestizos, and any other

people" to work on the *desagüe*, the drainage canal whose laborers usually came from repartimiento drafts.⁶⁸ Increasingly, these "other people" included poor Spaniards. A 1587 *cédula* listed Spanish vagabonds among the unemployed who were to be placed "with masters whom they may serve or with persons who can teach them a trade." Fourteen years later, a newly promulgated labor code stated that "Spaniards of a servile and idle condition" as well as mestizos, blacks, mulattoes, and zambos should be compelled to work for a living.⁶⁹

The existence of such impoverished Spaniards diminished the social distance between whites and castas. This process was accelerated by *casta* penetration into retailing, artisanry, and other trades. By the late sixteenth century, many blacks and mulattoes (free and slave alike) occupied "middleman" positions, buying—sometimes extorting—products from the Indians and reselling them in the plaza and the taverns.⁷⁰ *Casta* commercial activity spilled out into the streets, where ambulatory vendors sold pulque, fruit, bread, and all other manner of goods.⁷¹ Legal barriers did little to prevent castas from entering "Spanish" trades. During the seventeenth century, for instance, Spanish surgeon-barbers fought a fifty-year battle to stop Filipinos from practicing this profession. Yet in the end, they settled for restricting Filipinos to eight shops within the city and requiring them to make an annual contribution to the barbers' *cofradía*.⁷²

Colonial officials remained wedded to the old racial stereotypes, but they too had to recognize changing economic realities. Beginning in 1598, free blacks and mulattoes who practiced a trade were assessed two pesos annual tribute, twice the amount demanded from unskilled laborers.⁷³ Even diehards such as the Marqués de Gelves (viceroy, 1621-1624), who had an almost visceral hatred of blacks and mulattoes, could not impose a strictly racial formula on the city's employment structure. In 1623, he promulgated an ordinance requiring all castas to live with and serve Spanish masters; castas claiming to be legitimate artisans were ordered to present their credentials to government authorities. Forty-one mulatto, mestizo, and *castizo* artisans and merchants dutifully complied. (Among the artisans, eleven were masters and twenty-eight were journeymen.) What makes even this rather small number impressive is that these respondents represented only those artisans who were officially sanctioned by the *gremios*, many of which were on record as excluding castas. Although most *casta* artisans worked at relatively low-status crafts, such as shoemaker or tailor, a few had obtained entry into more prestigious guilds, for example, those of the guilders, blacksmiths, and candle makers. A mulatto named Agustín de Aguilar had even become a master gunsmith, throwing an ironic light on royal attempts to deny arms to castas.⁷⁴

But *casta* artisans were only the tip of the iceberg. Within six weeks

of the original proclamation, Gelves admitted that he had underestimated the economic contribution of the castas.

Many of the said blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos are journeymen rather than examined masters, and they assist and work for the said masters, and others are working in other crafts and occupations in which there are no examinations or overseers, living from their honest labor; this being the case, they should enjoy the same [treatment] as the examined masters, for the purpose [of the ordinance] is to prevent their vagrancy.⁷⁵

Once large numbers of castas became ensconced in the Hispanic economy, much of the city's social control legislation was rendered meaningless. Castas could not realistically be prevented from establishing their own households, from gathering in large groups and at night, or from possessing arms. Castas with buying power daily flouted Spanish sumptuary regulations. Gage's famous description of Mexico City's black and mulatto women, alluded to above, stressed their ostentatious apparel.

Nay, a blackamoor or tawny young maid and slave will make hard shift, but she will be in fashion with her neck-chain and bracelets of pearls, and her earbobs of some considerable jewels. The attire of this baser sort of people . . . is so light, and their carriage so enticing, that many Spaniards even of the better sort (who are too prone to vengery) disdain their wives for them.⁷⁶

By the early seventeenth century, the Spanish-casta dichotomy had thus lost much of its validity. Consequently, this older model tended to give way to yet another social dichotomy, based on cultural and economic rather than racial indexes. We have already seen how mestizos were divided by status and cultural affinity into a Hispanicized elite and a lower stratum grouped with Afro-Mexicans. The new model extended a similar concept to urban society as a whole, separating Mexico City's inhabitants into the *gente decente* (respectable people) and the *plebe* (plebeians). This distinction corresponded to the division in Spain between nobles and commoners and may be viewed as a response to the "Europeanization" of New Spain's economy. But, in contrast to Spain, the hallmark of the Mexican plebe was its racially mixed nature. Mexico's lower class included Indians, castizos, mestizos, mulattoes, blacks, and even poor Spaniards.⁷⁷

Elite colonials came to regard the plebe as a "vile rabble," marked by "vile customs, ignorance, and irremediable vices."⁷⁸ Throughout the seventeenth century, government officials regularly testified to the flaws and incapacities of the commoners. The Mexico City cabildo, meeting in 1624, described the *gente popular*, composed of "Indians, mestizos, blacks, mulattoes, and boys," as "irrational people." The Marqués de Cerbalvo, Gelves's successor, agreed with the cabildo's assessment.⁷⁹ Both Cer-

ralvo and the cabildo excluded Spaniards from the plebe. But they were eager to affirm colonial allegiance to the crown in the aftermath of Mexico City's 1624 riot. Thousands of rioters had stormed the viceregal palace and nearly murdered Viceroy Gelves, while the creole militia had proved unable or unwilling to come to his rescue.⁸⁰ Other elite commentators faced the problem of plebeian Spaniards more squarely. As early as 1607, Viceroy Montesclaros had complained about persons who although free of tainted blood were nevertheless "more incapable of goodness and honor than those who are that way by nature." By 1642, Archbishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza included Spaniards in the plebe as a matter of course: "[The castas] and the Indians and certain lost and villainous Spaniards . . . form the people in these Provinces."⁸¹

As the concept of the plebe evolved, qualities originally ascribed to certain racial groups became generalized to the commoners as a whole. The cabildo labeled the *gente popular*, not just Indians, "irrational people"; Montesclaros claimed that some Spaniards, as well as the castas, were "badly inclined." The very appearance of general terms such as "plebe" and "gente popular"—while decrees from Spain continued to employ standard racial labels—indicates a growing creole awareness of Mexico's racially complex lower class. Yet recognition of this fact posed psychological difficulties for the wealthier colonials. Spaniards justified their domination of Mexico—and assigned rank within the Hispanic *república*—on the basis of lineage. Now the colonial elite found itself faced with the development of a permanent underclass of plebeian Spaniards whose behavior was no more "rational" or "moral" than that of the plebe's casta members. Some creoles reacted to this embarrassing situation by minimizing the number of poor Spaniards; those who admitted their existence and importance often displayed great uneasiness. Palafox was clearly disgusted by such "villainous" Spaniards; half a century later, the Mexican savant Sigüenza y Góngora railed against "Spaniards . . . who, in declaring themselves 'saramullos' (which is the same as knaves, rascals, and cape-snatchers) and in falling away from their allegiance, are the worst of them all in such a vile rabble."⁸²

These "disloyal" Spaniards were more than a discomfiting anomaly. In elite eyes, they threatened the integrity of the Hispanic ethnic group. For, as Fredrik Barth argues, the "continuity of ethnic units . . . depends on the maintenance of a boundary,"⁸³ and at the lower end of the social spectrum, the boundary between Spaniard and casta was eroding. As will be discussed in chapter 2, poor Spaniards and castas lived cheek by jowl, ate, drank, and socialized in the same taverns, frequented the same marketplaces, and worked in the same shops. Moreover, social intercourse led easily to sexual intercourse. Given the high level of miscegenation within

the plebe; what was to prevent the descendants of Indians or even blacks from infiltrating into the Spanish group? Peninsular Spaniards already looked down on the creoles, partly because many of the latter had some Indian ancestry. Naturally, elite creoles wished to avoid (or avoid recognizing) any further "taint." They therefore needed a method of social categorization that would reinforce their sense of exclusivity. The model they developed (in part unconsciously) is known as the *sistema de castas*.

The *sistema de castas* was a hierarchical ordering of racial groups according to their proportion of Spanish blood. At its most extreme, this model distinguished more than forty racial categories, though few of these had any practical significance. The standard seventeenth-century format (there were, of course, regional variations) contained five to seven groups, ranked as follows: Spaniard, castizo, morisco, mestizo, mulatto, Indian, and black. (Castizos were the product of Spanish-mestizo unions, moriscos the children of mulatto and Spanish parents). The evolution of the *sistema de castas* is far from clear. Magnus Mörner notes that it "emerged slowly and gradually" but gives no specific dates. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán states that the *sistema* came into effect during the seventeenth century; John K. Chance believes that it was functioning in Oaxaca by 1630.⁸⁴ There are indications that the *sistema de castas* had achieved institutional form in Mexico City by the mid-seventeenth century. The parishes of Santa Veracruz and Sagrario Metropolitano began to keep separate marriage registers for the castas in 1646, and both employed the *sistema's* most common racial terms.⁸⁵ In short, the available evidence suggests that the *sistema de castas* emerged during the seventeenth century, in concurrence with, or slightly after, the *gente decente-plebe* model.

These two images of society were complementary. Both expressed the uneven fit between Mexico's racial and economic categories: all elites were Spaniards, but not all Spaniards were members of the elite. The *gente decente-plebe* model acknowledged this fact, while the *sistema de castas* attempted to diminish its significance. By imposing a strict hierarchy on Mexico's welter of racial divisions, the *sistema* assured that the "cream" would rise to the top: since poor Spaniards took their place at the apex of plebeian society, all Spaniards ranked higher than all castas. Moreover, by making finer racial distinctions among plebeians, elite Spaniards could hope to render the Spanish-casta boundary less permeable.

In theory, one's place in the racial hierarchy was based on lineage; in reality, few except for the most elite families could trace their ancestry back for several generations. The Spanish therefore stressed skin color as a guide to racial status among commoners.⁸⁶ Phenotype, of course, was not a flawless, objective standard. As Patricia Seed argues,

The laws governing the inheritance of physical characteristics . . . can produce a theoretically infinite range of colors, hair textures, and other features, but colonial Mexican society recognized only four intermediate shadings beyond the basic Black, white, and Indian. These shadings—castizo, mestizo, mulatto, and morisco—represented only a tiny fraction of the range of possible physical features. . . . The recognition of only four groups as separate depended on social selection of the relevant categories of groupings.⁸⁷

* The question of which social sector made this selection will be taken up later. But it should be noted that even elite creoles—whose interests the *sistema de castas* served—did not adopt this model in every circumstance. Simple stereotypes from the sixteenth century—about humble, pliable Indians, pernicious castas, and loyal creoles—persisted throughout the colonial period. Furthermore, as we have seen, local regulations (such as *gremio* ordinances) continued to lump castizos, mestizos, blacks, and mulattoes (and sometimes Indians) together.

Thus, the *sistema de castas* had limited applicability; it fell far short of covering every area of life. In Barth's terms, the *sistema* provided a "structuring of interaction"⁸⁸ focusing on sexual and marital relations between castas and Spaniards. Among elite Spaniards, marriage was often a weapon to promote the interests of the family. Kinship ties, centered on the extended family, were vital to the creation and transmission of wealth, status, and power in the Hispanic community. Marital alliances with the "impure" castas offered creoles few advantages. Indeed, insofar as they lowered the family's prestige, such marriages could be very damaging. Preserving creole wealth and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) required endogamy. Under the *sistema de castas*, phenotype acted as a sieve, filtering out unsuitable candidates for admission to Spanish families.⁸⁹ The colonials also hoped that such racial pride would penetrate to the non-Spanish strata, isolating the lighter-skinned groups among the castas and further lengthening the social distance between Spaniards and Afro-Mexicans.⁹⁰

The possibility of the plebeians uniting to overturn Spanish rule had long been a colonial nightmare—one that turned briefly into reality in 1624 and 1692. It is not surprising, then, that the supposed divisive effects of racial differences within the plebe were an article of faith for many Spanish officials. The Marqués de Mancera (viceroy, 1664-1673) reported that the plebeians' laziness, drunkenness, and other vices had created many disturbances in the past but that even more would have occurred if the commoners' "different shades had not also produced a diversity of inclinations."⁹¹ A racial hierarchy also helped to explain the disquieting phenomenon of "successful" (or elite) castas. If moral and intellectual qualities

were transmitted through heredity, those with less tainted, more Hispanic bloodlines should be superior to other castas; their success was only to be expected. Viceroy Mancera applied this reasoning to mestizos in general.

The mestizos, sons and descendants of the Spaniards, are no less presumptuous than the Negroes and mulattoes . . . but in a somewhat more elevated manner. Their presumption is better controlled and more subject to reason. They are proud that they have our blood in them and on various occasions have shown that they know how to carry out their responsibilities.⁹²

Mancera's comments reveal how racial labels could be used to rank the economic utility of plebeians. Elite colonials despised the "lower" trades on principle but nonetheless recognized "the virtue of employing . . . the miserable poor in the exercise of the necessary arts and offices of the republic."⁹³ Plebeians were simultaneously a threat to and an indispensable support for the established order. The elite tended to cast this dual nature of the urban poor in racial terms. On the one hand were the "honorable" poor—Spaniards, Indians, and some mestizos—who provided essential labor in their respective spheres. On the other hand were the castas, whose moral failings had already been established and who were natural scapegoats for plebeian misbehavior. For example, many observers charged that the castas' pernicious influence on the Indians caused the riot of 1692.⁹⁴

Because elite Spaniards often subsumed economic categories under racial labels, their statements about Mexican social and economic life must be treated with great caution. The brute fact, which Spanish models tended to paper over, was that most Mexico City residents, regardless of racial affiliation, lived within the constraints of severe poverty. The mechanisms that maintained this skewed socioeconomic system drew little comment at the time, but they should not be ignored by a modern investigator. To grasp more realistically the relationship between race and class in colonial Mexico, we must avoid the temptation to view ethnic or racial groups abstractly, out of the lived experiences and social context glossed over by elite commentary. In the next chapters, we will examine the plebeians' material culture, then turn to their social relations, and finally investigate their views of society and of themselves.

2

Life among the Urban Poor: Material Culture and Plebeian Society

For the modern visitor to Mexico City, choking on exhaust fumes and anxiously checking ozone levels, it may be some comfort to know that pollution, in one form or another, is an age-old problem. Insalubrity plagued the colonial city as well,¹ though seventeenth-century contaminants were far less insidious than their modern counterparts. Filth and disease advertised their presence, but city authorities, lacking adequate knowledge and technical abilities, could engineer no solution. However, the wealthy could buy themselves a measure of protection: a more balanced diet, cleaner living conditions, and somewhat better health care. The plebeians stood totally exposed.

In the colonial period, popular notions of hygiene were very primitive; city residents frequently treated public thoroughfares as private garbage dumps. Major plazas and streets had mounds of trash piled in the corners, despite "their foul odors which cause disease."² In some instances, sewage from private residences flowed into canals through open pipes. Dead animals—dogs, cats, and even horses—were disposed of in streets and canals. During periods of epidemic disease, naked human corpses sometimes lay exposed to the sun all day before being removed by the authorities.³

Mexico City's location in the midst of a lake posed an additional set of difficulties—above all, the problem of flooding. The most serious flood of the colonial period occurred in 1629, leaving the city partly inundated for five years and causing a temporary population loss of many thousands.⁴ After this disaster, the crown instituted a project to dig a huge drainage canal, the *desagüe*, thereby reducing the water level of the surrounding lakes. Work on the *desagüe* continued, on and off, for over a century, consuming millions of pesos and thousands of Indian laborers. Yet episodes of flooding recurred at intervals, notably, in 1648, 1675, 1707, 1732, and 1747-48.⁵

Besides their immediate dangers, these waters—"the common and con-