

Book Reviews



Carlos A. Jáuregui and David M. Solodkow, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el paradigma biopolítico de la modernidad colonial*, Parecos y Australes. Ensayos de Cultura Colonial, Madrid / Frankfurt: Iberoamericana / Vervuert / University of the Andes, 2024, 451pp. ISBN 9788491924487. Price €46.00.

Carlos A. Jáuregui and David M. Solodkow are two specialists in colonial literature who have been researching for a decade what they consider to be different biopolitical projects implemented in the first three decades of Spanish presence in the New World. Their new book is a breath of fresh air in a Spanish publishing scene increasingly dominated by revisionist historiography. Their work offers a forceful and necessary response to recent works that have sought to minimize the consequences of, if not directly glorify, the disastrous policies implemented by the Columbus family and monarchs Isabel and Fernando, who were responsible for the extermination ($\approx$ genocide) of the Taínos, Caribs, Guanahatabeyes, and other Antillean peoples. Although this is not the main objective of the book, its rigorous analysis of a careful selection of sources opposes the contemporary revival of the old perspectives of Francoist historiography. Most notably on the alleged “indigenism” of Queen Isabel (89–90), according to the unfortunate formulation coined in 1969 by Antonio Rumeu de Armas, or the consideration of the Laws of Burgos of 1512 as precursors of human rights (143), a thesis that Fernando Suárez Bilbao continued to insist on in 2012 (in a case which was not only and ideological plagiarism, but a literal one; *El Diario*, November 21, 2016).¹

The authors also question the abundant literature, almost hagiographic in nature, devoted to the figure of Bartolomé de las Casas. For the first time, the Sevillian friar sits, so to speak, before the court of history to answer for his collaboration in the design and implementation of a “concentration camp”

1 *El Diario*, 23 November 2016: https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/rector-plagios-constatados-ultimo-companero_1_3721243.html. Last accessed 10 November 2025.

policy which, under the pretexts of paternal care and of the need to accelerate the evangelization of the natives, led in the 1510s and 1520s to the destruction of their traditional dwellings and forced them to gather in settlements where they ended up being exterminated by labor overexploitation, disease, and hunger (146). As Jáuregui and Solodkow point out, the goal of the early Las Casas was never to end colonialism or release the Indians, but rather to “patch up” (156) an initial colonial policy that was as cruel as it was unproductive. With the introduction of various biopolitical measures related to food, housing, reproduction, and indigenous diseases, Las Casas’s true objective—shared by Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, royal jurist and counselor Juan López de Palacios Rubios, and the Hieronymite friars who governed Hispaniola between 1516 and 1519—would have been to “prolong” the life of the Indians and encourage their reproduction, so that colonial domination could be perpetuated (221). With the aim of rationalizing and making colonial government more efficient, Las Casas did not hesitate, as the authors emphasize, to support measures such as the forced transfer to Cuba of the indigenous people who populated the islands considered unproductive—such as the Bahamas and Jamaica. Once Christianized and physically restored in “refugee camps” (a term that is anachronistic here), they would be forced to work in the mines (213).

Unlike what usually happens in other interdisciplinary works, where the use of conceptual and philosophical-political frameworks is nothing more than a pretext to justify ideologized historical interpretations, Jáuregui and Solodkow successfully apply Foucaultian historical-philosophical methodology to the analysis of a wide range of sources produced by all those Spanish agents and institutions (royal councils, secular clergy, missionary friars, *Juntas* of theologians and jurists convened by the Crown, *encomenderos* and other lay colonists, etc.) who between 1492 and 1521 were responsible for the *care of the life* of the indigenous Caribbean populations. At the same time, the authors draw on a wide range of concepts taken from contemporary political philosophy (positive and negative biopolitics, bare life, vampirism, etc., taken from Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Immanuel Wallerstein, Carl Schmitt, and others)² which, although deliberately anachronistic, offer a certain analytical potential for historical research and help to shed light on the vast body of documentation studied. In this sense, we can say that, while on a

2 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 1 (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

documentary level the work of Jáuregui and Solodkow does not offer anything new—that is, it does not bring to light any unpublished sources—, on an analytical level it is a work of enormous relevance due to the pertinent and original ways in which both authors interpret a wide range of already known and, for the most part, published sources (such as the *Memoriales de remedios para las Indias* written by Bartolomé de Las Casas between 1516 and 1519, which have been the subject of several contemporary editions).

The bibliography used, although not exhaustive (in particular, there is a lack of reference to specialized historical-legal works on key topics addressed in the book, notably those by Carmen Mena García, Francisco Morales Padrón, Rafael Diego Fernández-Sotelo, etc.),³ is abundant and relevant. In general terms, the overall historical overview that the authors construct in the first chapters of the book, drawing on key works by Frank Moya Pons, Esteban Mira Caballos, Enrique Otte, and Jalil Sued Badillo,⁴ can be considered highly satisfactory, moving on to a critical analysis of Lascasian *Memoriales* in the second part. The structure of the work, which follows a chronological and thematic order, is also very successful. After an introductory section devoted to presenting the complex conceptual framework of Foucauldian biopolitics (1979), updated by Agamben since the late 1990s and enriched with some specific contributions by the authors themselves, the first two chapters present a succinct description of the system of domination and the extractive economy imposed by the Crown and the Spanish conquistadors on the inhabitants of the Caribbean between 1492 and 1515.⁵ Following the unanimous confirmation of the demographic catastrophe that occurred during this period, in which the indigenous population was reduced to a few tens of thousands of individuals, the *remedial* projects analyzed in chapters III, IV, and V were conceived and discussed. Jáuregui and Solodkow focus

3 Carmen Mena García, “Lo privado y lo público en la exploración y conquista del Nuevo Mundo (hasta Felipe II)”, in *De la unión de coronas al Imperio de Carlos V*, vol. 2, ed. Ernest Belenguer Cebrià, (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 2001), 399–440; Francisco Morales Padrón, *Teoría y leyes de la conquista* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, 2008); Rafael Diego Fernández-Sotelo, *Capitulaciones colombinas (1492–1506)* (Zamora, Mich.: Colegio de Michoacán, 1987).

4 Frank Moya Pons, *La Española en el siglo XVI, 1493–1520: trabajo, sociedad y política en la economía del oro* (Santo Domingo: Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra, 1973); Esteban Mira Caballos, *El indio antillano: repartimiento, encomienda y esclavitud (1492–1542)* (Sevilla/Bogotá: Muñoz Moya, 1997); Enrique Otte, “La despoblación de La Española: la crisis de 1528”, *Iberoamerikanisches Archiv* 10, no. 3 (1984), 241–265; Jalil Sued Badillo, *El Dorado borincano: la economía de la conquista 1510–1550* (San Juan: Ediciones Puerto, 2001).

5 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France 1978–79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Agamben, *Homo sacer*.

particularly on two Lascasian projects, the *Hospital del Rey* contemplated in the *Memorial of 1516* (Chapter IV), which exemplifies how Las Casas and Spanish colonialism, going beyond “rhetorics of premodern charitable hospitality” prefigured the “biopolitical rationality” of Late Modernity and the Enlightenment (224). This historical observation serves the authors, in fact, to correct Foucault’s own Eurocentric historical perspective (28). Jáuregui and Solodkow also focus on the peaceful colonization project that Las Casas and the Dominican missionaries were able to carry out in Cumaná (on the coast of present-day Venezuela) between 1520 and 1521, although with disastrous results due to the continuous violent incursions of armed Spanish contingents that ruined coexistence with the indigenous people (Chapter VI).

The authors critically analyze the “necropolitical paradoxes” implied by a series of *remiendos* (patches)—not truly *remedios* (remedies, solutions)—that never addressed the real causes of indigenous mortality. Despite being aware of overexploitation, Las Casas always promised the kings that his projects would increase gold or pearl production (391). On the other hand, overly committed to evangelization, both Las Casas and the clergy were indifferent to the fact that the concentration of Indians in villages multiplied epidemics. The authors also appeal to the “utopianism” that Las Casas’ memorials and projects would have shared with the Laws of Burgos and other reform proposals. This seems to us to be one of the most contradictory points in the work, since Las Casas, as the memorials themselves make clear, always understood that any reform project aimed at preserving the lives of indigenous people had to reconcile this objective with safeguarding the financial interests of the Crown and of the Spanish settlers.

In short, despite some anachronisms and forced interpretations, this is a book that will undoubtedly be of interest to specialists in Las Casas and the early decades of colonial rule in America. It will also appeal to those who are new to the subject and want to gain a general perspective from approaches that are not only historical and factual. The extermination of the Antillean peoples by Christopher Columbus, the role of Nicolás de Ovando and other European governors, and Las Casas’ alternative and corrective projects conceived (in theory) to protect the lives of the Natives, have been well studied by historians tout court. Now, thanks to Jáuregui and Solodkow’s biopolitical approach these subjects are presented for the first time with great analytical depth and from an unprecedented historical-philosophical perspective.

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