
Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia

Cochabamba, 1550-1900

BROOKE LARSON

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ABBREVIATIONS

AGI	Archivo General de Indias (Seville)
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación (Buenos Aires)
AHMC	Archivo Histórico Municipal de Cochabamba (Cochabamba)
ANB	Archivo Nacional de Bolivia (Sucre)
BN	Biblioteca Nacional del Perú (Lima)
EC	Expedientes y Correspondencia (pertaining to the manuscript collections catalogued as Tierras e Indios and as La Audiencia de Charcas in the ANB)
EP	Escrituras públicas
f., ff.	<i>folio, folios</i> (front side of page of archival document)
ML	Mata Linares manuscript collection of the Real Academia de Historia
RAH	Real Academia de Historia (Madrid)

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COLONIALISM
AND AGRARIAN
TRANSFORMATION
IN BOLIVIA

Introduction

This book traces the evolution of agrarian society in the region of Cochabamba, Bolivia, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It explores the long-term impact of colonial rule upon the formation and development of agrarian class relationships that were defined by European principles of property ownership and reinforced by Spanish imperial rule. The central aim of the study is to show how the pressures and contradictions of colonialism and class gradually gave rise to a distinctive Indian and mestizo peasantry that eventually became a powerful protagonist in regional society. The study also explores the consequences of the emergence of this peasant sector for the nature and balance of local class relations, for peasant-state relations, and for the regional economy as a whole in the late colonial and the postcolonial periods.

The region with which the study is concerned is the former colonial province of Cochabamba, which was incorporated into the vast intendancy of Santa Cruz de la Sierra in the late eighteenth century. Located to the east of the *altiplano* (high plains) at about the seventeenth degree of south latitude, this geopolitical space had no physiographic uniformity. It represented a cross-section of the vertical Andean landscape that swept down from the snow-capped peaks of the Cordillera Oriental, bordering the eastern edge of the altiplano, past the ancient lake basins and plains lying at middle-range altitudes of some 8,500 feet above sea level, to the eastern lowland fringes of the tropical frontier. In spite of the region's ecological diversity, it was known for its fertile, temperate valleys that caught the waters tumbling down from glacial lakes in the mountain chains to the north and west. A cluster of three contiguous valleys composed the unifying feature of the region (see figure 1). Their extraordinary fertility attracted Andean cultivators from the western *puna* who sought warm, moist soil to cultivate maize and other crops that



Figure 1 The Region of Cochabamba

did not thrive in the harsher alpine environments. Later, Europeans discovered the broad expanse of irrigated bottomlands and rich pastures in these central valleys. Although the region was always strongly oriented to the western altiplano, before and after the European arrival, it gained a territorial integrity and geohistorical identity of its own over the course of the colonial centuries.

The agrarian history of Cochabamba is no more representative of broader socioeconomic trends than any other Andean region. It is not my intention to project regional patterns onto the larger canvas of colonial Peru or Alto Perú. Rather, this study is focused on three specific aims. The first is to examine the region's strategic importance in the larger context of Tawantinsuyu and later of Alto Perú. The region's unique ecological endowments in the southern Andean landscape made it a vital area of surplus grain production for the Incas and the Spanish colonizers. In the late sixteenth century, Cochabamba was famous for the maize and wheat it shipped to the silver mines of Potosí. In some ways, the region became a classic agrarian hinterland of a dominant export sector.¹ Even as its functional role of granary in Alto Perú diminished over time, the region did not lose its importance as grain supplier to the cities and mines across the altiplano. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cochabamba's grains still supplemented the tuber diet of highland Andean peasants and provisioned some of the cities of the altiplano, particularly in times of drought and dearth. Moreover, Cochabamba became an important area of Spanish, mestizo, and Andean settlement in its own right. Intensive agriculture on the bottomlands sustained a relatively dense concentration of people who lived and worked in a network of towns, haciendas, and villages that crisscrossed the central valleys and hugged the banks of the western river valleys. But for a variety of reasons, which will emerge in the course of this study, the region gradually came to supply the dominant mining sector with another commodity: the labor power of impoverished peasants seeking wage work in the mineral lodes around the beginning of the twentieth century. One purpose of this history of Cochabamba, then, is to show the changing nature of the region's integra-

1 The seminal work on the formation of the internal colonial market revolving around Potosí is Carlos Sempat Assadourian, *El sistema de la economía colonial: Mercado interno, regiones, y espacio económico* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1982). See also the important article by Luis Miguel Glave, "Trajines: Un capítulo en la formación del mercado interno colonial," *Revista andina* 1 (1983): 9-76.

tion into the larger political economy and its link to the dominant mining economy and, through it, to the world market.

The second aim of this study is to illuminate the processes of structural change over a long period of time in an area of the Andes that was thoroughly integrated into the Spanish colonial empire. Through an examination of the long-term patterns of regional change in the context of mines, markets, and state formation in Alto Perú, it reveals the powerful extraregional forces of change that seemed to suck the region into the vortex of the expanding European economy during the first century of colonial rule. But it also seeks to show how Andean people conditioned the impact of those world-historical forces and sometimes set in motion counterforces that contained or limited the erosive effects of mercantile colonial pressures at the local level; and it identifies an important source of historical change in the internecine conflicts among factions of the colonial elite, as they tried to adjust to increasing competition for Indian labor during a protracted period of economic stagnation and a weak, decentralizing state in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Thus, considerable attention is given to the processes of market and state formation during the Toledan and post-Toledan periods in Alto Perú in order to explore how Andeans and Europeans in the Cochabamba valleys responded to (and to a certain degree impinged upon) the development of mercantile colonialism in this part of the Andes.

Cochabamba is a case study of radical transformation of pre-conquest patterns of life and work during the first century of Spanish rule. The market economy penetrated deeply, giving rise to new forms of exploitation and compelling Andean peoples to accommodate or to find new strategies of resistance. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, enterprising Spanish landowners (*chacareros*) had extended their reach across much of the valley land and created a servile class of peasants dependent upon them for the means of subsistence.

But the analysis of agrarian change in this region does not end with the transformation of native peoples into inferior "Indian" peasants. The broad temporal scope of this study allows for an exploration of the dynamics of ethnic and class relationships long after the dramatic confrontation between Andeans and Europeans had ended. The formation of European-style agrarian classes during the first century of colonialism did not establish a local hegemonic order that was either static or immutable to social pressures from below. Contrary to popular images of passive peons and tenant farmers bent in