

Introduction

During the eighteenth century, far-reaching debates took place about how to write the history of the New World and its peoples. Today, we treat the testimony of past historical actors with skepticism, because we assume that individuals are unaware of the “deeper” historical forces ordering their lives and perceptions. It is a tenet of the historical profession that only time affords observers the distance to discern the linguistic, economic, political, and cultural structures that configure our lives. Rather than separating “primary” from “secondary” sources as the first, most basic methodological step, historians in practice first draw a distinction between published and archival documents. To historians, published sources are the conscious narratives of individuals and communities and therefore document forms of self-delusion or artful rhetorical manipulation. Archival documents, on the other hand, catch historical actors off guard. Historians treat published and archival accounts as “unwitting witnesses,” forcing from them evidence that these witnesses did not originally intend to yield. Historians are trained to read sources “against the grain,” refusing to take the testimony of the past at face value. This book seeks to show that these modern (and postmodern) historiographical sensibilities originated in the eighteenth century in seemingly obscure epistemological disputes.

As new critical techniques for creating and validating knowledge came of age in Europe, some scholars began to call into question the authority and reliability of the sources that historians and chroniclers had traditionally used. Authors set out to read sixteenth-century Spanish accounts of the Indies in the light of contemporary social science, and the testimony of the first European witnesses to the New World suddenly lost credibility. These accounts, authors argued, contradicted many of the laws of social development. This approach was pioneered by editors of travel compilations, who were confronted with scores of old, new, and forged accounts of exotic lands. The new art of reading also coincided with the rise of the “philosophical traveler,” who, unlike his counterparts in the past, was not satisfied with collecting tales

Introduction

of wonder. Philosophical travelers consciously sought to avoid the perceptual distortions that besieged untrained witnesses, while drawing significant lessons about the human societies and nature of the places they visited. These new forms of weighing and assessing the value of sources and witnesses were, in turn, closely related to the rapid development in the eighteenth century of the "bourgeois public sphere." In it, the male critic sought to assert his authority and credibility in the marketplace of ideas unsoiled by feminine emotions and unswayed by powerful patrons.

But the accounts left by conquistadors, pirates, merchants, and missionaries were not the only sources European historians had used to reconstruct the past of the New World. They had long relied on indigenous writings produced by the highland societies of Mesoamerica and the Andes. Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, these sources lost most of their previous appeal in Europe and began to be collected rather for what they had to say about the development of the human mental faculties. Whereas, in the past, chroniclers had relied on information stored in Inca quipus and Aztec and Mayan codices to reconstruct Amerindian dynastic genealogies and migrations in European historiographical idioms, eighteenth-century European scholars now became interested in sources in nonalphabetic scripts as evidence from which to piece together the history of progress of the mind. Spaniards had long regarded New World quipus, logograms, and pictograms as primitive scripts. Yet sources written using these scripts were the backbone of most sixteenth-century accounts of the American past. In the new European histories of writing of the eighteenth century, however, scripts became tightly linked with the worth and credibility of the information they stored. By and large, it was conservatives seeking to bolster the credibility of the Bible who penned the new evolutionary histories of writing. As they cast doubt on the alternative chronologies stored in Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms, these European writers invented evolutionary and teleological histories of writing, along with evolutionary scales of trust, that profoundly affected the historiography of the American continent.

The call to scrap both sixteenth-century European accounts of the New World and indigenous narratives stored in nonalphabetical scripts was complemented by a search for new historiographical techniques and new types of evidence. Systems of writing, for one thing, became material evidence that could help conjecturally reconstruct past migrations and developments. Grammars, fossils, mountains, animal behavior, and the distribution of fauna and flora were used as well. The deployment of such new techniques

and evidence led to bold new hypotheses about the history of the Americas. The humidity of tropical America, its distinct animal species, and the alleged primitive and degenerate character of the Indians and Creole settlers (particularly Spanish American ones) was held to confirm that the continent had either witnessed catastrophic geological convulsions or recently emerged from the waters. Although casting Indians and Spanish American Creoles (people of European descent born in America) as effeminate degenerates was hardly novel, the scope and reach of the new historical narratives were impressive.

Such negative portrayals of the nature and peoples of the Americas forced authors to reevaluate antiquated humanist depictions of Amerindian societies. In the early seventeenth century, authors such as the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616) had depicted Inca society as resembling that of ancient Rome, but the new accounts of the eighteenth century began with sustained critiques of the errors of perception to which facile classical analogies led. It was only in the early nineteenth century, however, that Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and other writers came not merely to reject the use of classical analogies but also to offer new ones. A new more positive, less skeptical, European historiography of the New World was inaugurated with von Humboldt, largely because ancient Amerindian societies now appeared as Asian, “oriental” polities.

The reaction in Spain to these new historiographical developments was one of ambivalence. On the one hand, the lure of “modernity” moved many authors to reject traditional Spanish historiography on the land and peoples of the New World. On the other hand, Spaniards understood that questioning of the credibility of Iberian sources could not be dissociated from the Protestant assault on Spanish colonialism that had begun in the late sixteenth century in the wake of the Dutch revolt. In this context, eighteenth-century Spanish historiography on the New World became first and foremost a reconstruction of self-identity. To be sure, patriotism had long exercised the imagination of Iberian scholars, but in the eighteenth century, patriotism was balanced by calls to renovate the economy and culture of Spain, which allegedly had fallen behind the rest of western Europe.

Spanish historiography on the New World proved aggressively critical much earlier than that of the rest of Europe. From the 1740s on, writing a new history of America became the central preoccupation of one of the new institutions for cultural renewal created by the Spanish Bourbons, the Royal Academy of History. But for all the consensus about the need to do away with

Introduction

outdated chronicles and unreliable accounts, and for all the anger against misleading northern European characterizations of the “Spanish mind,” authors could not agree on much else. At least three different paradigms for writing a new history emerged in Spain over the course of the century. Paradoxically, non-Castilian scholars led all these schools, demonstrating perhaps that the provinces were more interested in crafting a “Spanish” identity than the Castilian core. Valencians, Aragonese, Asturians, and Catalans were at the forefront of the movement to write new, patriotic, yet critical, histories of America. Of these schools, the one led by the Valencians Gregorio Mayans and Juan Bautista Muñoz left behind the most lasting imprint by bringing about the consolidation of all Spanish colonial historical records under a single roof in the Archive of the Indies.

In the Spanish American colonies, the call to write a new history was equally aggressive. Yet the new histories in Spanish America were significantly different from those that appeared in Europe, including Spain. Spanish Americans, to be sure, were intent on offering alternative narratives to those developed in Europe, ones in which Amerindians and Creoles did not appear as degenerate and effete. In doing so, however, Spanish American writers also articulated a powerful and creative critique of Eurocentric epistemologies. A product of the Spanish American Enlightenment as well as of baroque culture, patriotic epistemology exposed the shortcoming and limitations of Europeans who sought to write natural histories of the New World and its peoples. If eighteenth-century northwestern Europeans invented the persona of the philosophical traveler, contemporary Spanish American authors took this construct apart. Creole-clerical authors—native-born religious and secular priests—proved to be creative and daring in this respect.

Patriotic epistemology reflected the longings of the Creole upper classes in Spanish America to have “kingdoms” of their own. It was a clerical, aristocratic discourse that created and validated historical knowledge along a sliding scale of credibility, which, in turn, was linked to racial estates and nested social hierarchies. Surprisingly, the heroes of Spanish American authors were ancient or sixteenth-century Amerindian historians. The historiographical shortcomings of the past stemmed from the inadequate use made of good Amerindian sources, the patriotic epistemologists argued: earlier histories had either relied on the misleading testimony of colonial Amerindian plebes or misinterpreted reliable accounts by precolonial or early colonial Amerindian nobles. Distinguishing between the testimony of upper-class Amerindian informants and that of commoners was central to the new Spanish American historiography. Mestizos—those of mixed Amerindian,

African, and European ancestry — were perceived as a threatening presence that blurred boundaries, and their testimony was seen as worthless.

By and large, the story I am about to tell has remained untold. Moreover, although this book is about debates on how to write the history of the New World, it omits the historiography produced in the British American colonies. Compared to the vast amounts of scholarship put forth by Spanish American Creoles, British colonial historiography appears negligible and derivative. That this has not been recognized before is unsurprising. In northern European and Anglo-American consciousness, Spain and Spanish America have been cast as “backward” ever since the seventeenth century.

This book has taken more years to write than I care to admit. Most of its sources lie in manuscripts scattered on the two sides of the Atlantic. To study them, I visited scores of archives and libraries in England, France, the United States, Spain, and Mexico. I carry away many pleasant memories of my travels, but the intellectual journey of discovery has also been challenging and heart-wrenching.

The book began as an effort to locate the “dispute over the New World” in the context of more recent literature on the history of science. The “dispute,” discussed by Antonello Gerbi (1955), was the celebrated debate between, among others, the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon (1707–1788), and the British American Creole Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). In the process of studying the dispute, however, I came across the writings of Spanish Americans who, like Jefferson, replied to the negative views of the Americas advanced by Buffon and his followers.

At the time, I was seeking to escape the gravitational pull of my past. I had migrated from Ecuador to the United States, not by choice but forced by geopolitical developments in Central America and the northern Andes that among other things wiped out a generation of my peers, many of them friends and deeply original thinkers. Seeking to escape my own ghosts, I left a career in medicine and a passionate commitment to social justice in Latin America. In the United States, I embarked on a new path, one characterized by solitary research on the esoteric and unashamedly Euro- and Anglocentric field of the history of science. It took some years of healing and learning for me to be ready to face Latin America again. Unexpectedly, my research on Buffon brought me back to the region, for I found soul mates in the Spanish American Creoles who sought to respond to the French naturalist, particularly those Jesuits who after careers of youthful religious zeal at home had turned to a life of scholarship in exile in Italy.

Introduction

As I sought to expand Gerbi's account, I became interested in studying the contradictions and tensions of Creole consciousness, poised between an external world characterized by European arrogance and a world within riven by the tensions of secular social injustice and racism. How could the Spanish American clerical elite embrace indigenous history as their own? Were their ideas simply a passive reworking and manipulation of European ones, as I had long been taught? What was colonialism all about?

After spending a year abroad in Spain and Mexico and collecting reams of what then seemed indigestible and useless information about natural history, the social sciences, and historiography in the eighteenth century, I discovered that, for all its insights, Gerbi's account of the "dispute over the New World" did not address a fundamental aspect of the debate: upon whose sources and authority to write the history of the Americas? Ever since then, I have been working out the details of this fundamental question. And a study that was initially intended to be in the history of science became a history of New World historiography.

In Chapter 1, I identify and describe a new art of reading that appeared in northern Europe sometime in the mid eighteenth century and that was used to dismiss sources and testimonies that had long been used to write the history of the New World and its peoples. Unlike Renaissance arts of reading, this new art did not privilege eyewitnesses. As part of larger scholarly debates about the probability of miracles, some authors began to argue that testimonies needed to be judged by their internal consistency, not by the social standing or learning of the witnesses. The link between these complex epistemological debates and the historiography of the New World, I contend, should be found in two closely related yet distinct places: the philosophical traveler and a peculiar new genre of compilations of travel accounts that I have called philosophical. I also argue that this critique of traditional sources led to the search for new forms of evidence, and ultimately to the writing of conjectural, "philosophical" histories of the land and peoples of America in which evidence from linguistics, natural history, ethology, and geology took precedence. The new historiography challenged traditional European historiographical assumptions about the histories of the peoples of the New World, particularly the Inca and Aztec empires, which had long been depicted as polities resembling ancient Rome.

Chapter 1 contributes, therefore, to what Lorraine Daston has called "historical epistemology," a new field that traces the social and cultural roots of such new early modern categories as "facts," "experiments," and "objectivity."

It suggests that our modern (and postmodern) historiographical sensibilities might have originated in seemingly peripheral debates in the eighteenth century. In this light, the New World was as significant in eliciting the fundamental tenets of contemporary historians as it was in shaping the economies of the Atlantic world.

Chapter 2 continues some of the themes of Chapter 1, particularly those related to the history of credibility and authority, but from the perspective of debates over literacy and writing. I argue that Amerindian sources also lost credibility over the course of the eighteenth century in Europe. This was a radical new departure, for in the past Europeans had accepted indigenous sources written in nonalphabetic scripts at face value. To be sure, this chapter takes issue with current scholarship, such as that of Walter Mignolo (1995), that maintains that Europeans in the Renaissance, particularly Spaniards, looked down upon indigenous scripts and writings as worthless and primitive. Notwithstanding Spanish views of Mesoamerican codices and Inca quipus as primitive, sixteenth-century chroniclers and historians went out of their way to retrieve the information stored in Amerindian sources. Moreover, these authors did so despite their awareness that indigenous historical narratives were biased, contradictory, and written for the purpose of legitimating local rulers and bolstering ethnic pride. As scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began to chum out evolutionary theories of writing, however, this Renaissance take on Amerindian sources and scripts unraveled. My narrative confirms many of the views of Stephen Toulmin (1990), who has argued that the so-called Enlightenment reversed the more generous and tolerant views on diversity held by Renaissance humanists.

The new histories of writing were intimately linked to emerging evolutionary scales of credibility. When conservative scholars such as Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) invented histories of writing, they discredited sources written in nonalphabetic scripts, because ancient Egyptian and Chinese sources and chronologies challenged the authority of the Bible. In the process, nonalphabetic scripts such as those of the highland Mesoamerican and Andean peoples became firmly linked in the European imagination with primitive, unreliable observers. In the eighteenth century, European scholars collected and studied Mesoamerican codices and Inca quipus to demonstrate the evolution of mental faculties in conjectural and philosophical histories of progress.

Chapter 3 deals with the reception in Spain of many of these historiographical developments and is based largely on archival material. I argue that Spain took the lead in the effort to do away with old sources and narratives on

Introduction

the American past and in the process created many new institutions. One of the main preoccupations of the Royal Academy of History, founded in the early eighteenth century, was the writing of new, critical natural and civil histories of the New World. Many of the developments in historiography attributed to Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) were first elaborated in Spain during passionate historiographical debates on how to write a new history of America. Spanish authors privileged primary sources (which they called “public”) over printed sources, which they thought biased and written to support specific agendas. Such emphasis on the study of public documents led to the creation in the 1780s of the Archivo de Indias, one of the largest archives of Spanish colonial documents ever assembled.

I also argue that the Spanish Enlightenment was a patriotic movement. Resistance to the cartoonish representation of the “Spanish mind” by other Europeans and the realization that colonial empires were lost or won by those who controlled the description of lands and peoples moved authors to call urgently for the renewal of Spanish historiography, cartography, and botanical studies. Intellectuals became adamant about the need to produce new histories of colonization and discovery, and to control the naming of American plants and places, if the empire of Spain was to survive. But despite all the effort and resources invested in the eighteenth century in writing new histories of America, the record of publication in Spain was dismal. Rivalries among different corporations and groups of courtiers, usually representing different geographical regions, condemned most such writings to the obscurity of private and public archives, where many of them are still patiently awaiting publication.

In Chapter 4, I move to the New World, particularly to the viceroyalty of New Spain, where most antiquarian debates took place. I argue that Spanish American historiography on the New World was anything but conservative. Every bit as much as the Europeans, Spanish American authors sought aggressively sweeping historiographical renewal. Moreover, they showed themselves exquisitely aware of the epistemological underpinnings of the new northern European historiography, and by the mid eighteenth century, they had begun to produce forceful epistemological critiques of this literature. A form of patriotic epistemology emerged that highlighted the limited ability of outsiders ever to comprehend the history of America and its peoples.

Patriotic epistemology was not only aimed against outsiders, however, but also against commoners. Spanish American authors, by and large, were Creole clerics who came to regard the precolonial and early colonial Amerindian upper classes as their own ancestors, but concomitantly despised

plebeian mestizos and Amerindians. Patriotic epistemology was the discourse of a patrician class that evaluated sources according to the social standing of witnesses. Creole clerics argued that the history of America had been misinterpreted because early European authors lacked the linguistic tools and the practical knowledge of Native Americans to understand the sources and to evaluate and weigh their credibility.

Chapter 5 continues the analysis of the vast new scholarship on the history of America and its peoples that appeared in Spanish America during the second half of the eighteenth century. Through an analysis of three separate antiquarian controversies, I maintain that the Spanish American Enlightenment was a deeply original and creative movement, and was not limited simply to mirroring or contesting European ideas. Moreover, I seek to characterize the Baroque in the Spanish colonies by its emblematic view of nature. In the Baroque understanding, religious images and Mesoamerican scripts held arcane symbolic meanings and were used as Neoplatonic seals. This characterization of the Baroque departs from earlier ones, including that of José Antonio Maravall, who depicts the Baroque as the product of an exuberant, hybrid, yet deeply conservative imagination that flourished in the seventeenth century.¹ In my interpretation, however, the Baroque was both an aggressively modern movement, always in search of radical renewal (in that it was willing to cast textual authorities aside), and a Neoplatonic discourse that sought to read and deploy images to control the sacred powers of nature, which in Spanish America lasted well into the early nineteenth century.

Methodologically, this book follows key insights of postcolonial scholarship. I assume that all sorts of submerged voices dwell in the body and margins of texts, which can nevertheless be recovered through techniques of rhetorical analysis pioneered by postmodern literary critics. I also assume that the emphasis in traditional historiography on identities as oppositional binaries (i.e., colonized-colonizers; Amerindian-European) misses many of the actual interactions (“hybridities”) that characterize colonial situations. Third, inasmuch as I take individual as well as national “identities” to be contingent (socially constructed) and contested, I indulge in painstaking reconstructions of historical contexts. Fourth, I believe that asymmetrical power relations, colonial or otherwise, are usually imagined in gendered terms. Fifth, I assume that colonies and metropolises cannot be studied in isolation, and that their historical trajectories are informed by their mutual interactions. Finally, I seek to break loose from the North Atlantic paradigms of progress and modernization underlying *all* national historiographies.²

Introduction

There is, however, another element to add to this list. In an age of globalization, in which universities encourage students to take courses on Latin America to gain exposure to “Non-Western” peoples, I assume that the tradition that locates the “West” somewhere adjacent to the North Atlantic is amusingly pompous. It is not my intention here to offer alternatives to traditional definitions of the “West,” although I believe that by encapsulating its essential dimensions in concepts as abstract and quaint as “rationality,” “democracy,” and “individual freedom,” these definitions are rendered useless. Nor is it my intention simply to claim closer cultural proximity to “continental” Europe for Latin America than for the United States.³ My intention is rather to challenge stereotypes and superficial characterizations.

The reader of this book has most likely been socialized into constructs that assign non-Western attributes to both Latin America and Spain, where the Inquisition purportedly stifled all novelty and people have ever since been condemned to derivative and second-rate intellectual pursuits. It is my contention that the term “West” in “America” (another pompous term in the inventory of the same cultural geography that has the West bordering the North Atlantic) works its magic through negation, policing the boundaries of what is appropriate for others to study. In the case of the subjects discussed in this book, these boundaries have made it difficult for historians even to consider the possibility that voluminous and even pioneering scholarship (by Western standards) on epistemology could have been produced in Spain and Spanish America in the eighteenth century. These boundaries have also, so to speak, rendered many academics in the United States intellectually “color-blind”: just as the physically color-blind substitute gray for the color absent from their visual palettes, these academics dismiss those pursuits that blur our sharp mental cultural geographies as either improperly Latin Americanist or not sufficiently Europeanist. The unspoken assumption is that Latin Americanists should not be writing the intellectual history of the West, on the one hand, and Europeanists should not be meddling with the “Third World,” on the other, where only stories of strife and exploitation are worth chronicling. After a few years of teaching Latin American history in universities in the United States, I have learned that the public expects from historians of the region cautionary tales of revolutionary violence and, if socially conscious, stories of cunning peasants resisting treacherous oligarchs. I am a storyteller of a different kind, who believes that there ought to be other tales for the public to consume.