

Problems in Modern Latin American
History

Sources and Interpretations

Completely Revised and Updated

EDITED BY JOHN CHARLES CHASTEEN
AND JAMES A. WOOD



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3. Becoming “Legally White” in Colonial Venezuela ♦ City Council of Caracas

Let us look now at the colonial heritage through primary sources written at the end of the colonial period. The first is a polemical report, produced in 1796 by the City Council of Caracas and directed to the king of Spain. It shows how negatively the colonial elite often reacted to the upward social mobility of the castas, those people of mixed race described by Stein and Stein. In essence, the Caracas council, made up of native-born landowners of European descent, is protesting to the Crown a recent provision—a royal cédula—whereby pardos, people of mixed Spanish and African ancestry, could buy certificates declaring them “legally white.” This transition would allow pardos to hold office, seek an education, and enjoy other privileges usually reserved for those at the top of the social hierarchy.

We assume that once a pardo is dispensed from his color he is eligible for all the functions that the laws of the kingdom would otherwise disqualify him and which have previously been reserved for the pure whites of the Indies; so that, leaving the inferior class to which he belongs, a pardo must then be regarded, with Your Majesty’s authority, as a member of the white class.

This transition is so easy that it is permitted for only a small fee; but it is horrifying to those born and residing in America for they alone know from whom they are born and they alone have the years of experience here that enable them to appreciate the immense distance that separates the whites from the pardos, those who are dominant and superior from those who are subordinate and inferior. For the pardos would never dare to believe that the equality with the white residents and natives predicated by the royal cédula would be possible were they not protected and encouraged by those who hold out to them the hope of an absolute equality with access to honors and appointments hitherto reserved exclusively for the whites, now so humiliated and insulted. This calamity stems precisely from ignorance on the part of European officials, who come here already prejudiced against the American-born whites and falsely informed concerning the real situation of the country.

From City Council of Caracas, “Informe que el ayuntamiento de Caracas hace al rey de España referente a la real cédula de 10 de febrero de 1795,” trans. John Lynch, in *Latin American Revolutions, 1808–1826: Old and New World Origins*, ed. John Lynch (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 182–87. Reprinted by permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.

One of their errors is the policy of protection for mulattoes and other infamous people, who exploit this favor by ingratiating themselves with officials.

The pardos, mulattoes, and zambos (all more or less the same in common usage) are descended from black slaves introduced into this country for labor on the land, a system dictated by necessity, though formerly criticized and now detested as inhuman. These slaves have been treated severely and harshly in order to keep them in subordination, for it is inconceivable that anyone would submit to slavery except from fear of punishment for desertion. In addition to their infamous origin, pardos, mulattoes, and zambos are also dishonored by their illegitimacy, for if they are not themselves bastards, their parents almost certainly are; and it is also likely that they have fathers, grandfathers, or near relatives who are actually slaves, in some cases with local white families. One can see in the streets a pardo or mulatto illegally dressed as a white, and he has a brother who is still a slave. Or another may put on a great show of wealth yet also have nephews and relatives who are slaves.

May it please Your Majesty to consider these questions. Is it acceptable that the white residents and native-born people of this country should admit into their class, to mix with them, a mulatto descended from their own slaves or from those of their parents, a mulatto whose relatives are still slaves, a mulatto whose birth is defaced by illegitimacy and related blemishes? Is it possible to ignore complaints when public order is threatened and Spanish rule itself is placed at risk? For let there be no doubt that the application of this royal cédula is bound to encourage the pretensions of the pardos, and to introduce a new and fatal regime, forming in America a fourth class whose continual agitation, far from maintaining allegiance, will introduce instability and division.

The ignorance of senior European officials and their prejudices against Americans are not the only defects of government. Another problem is the influence and power the pardos have acquired through the establishment of militias led by officers of their own class, a well-intentioned measure but one that experience shows will lead to the ruin of America. Incapable of resisting invasion by a powerful enemy and as there are sufficient whites for the task of controlling the slaves and maintaining internal order, the militias serve only to increase the arrogance of the pardos, giving them an organization, leaders, and arms, the more easily to prepare a revolution. At the same time they are a means of deceiving people, because an officer dressed up in his uniform, epaulettes, and sword, and with a little makeup applied to his face, frequently receives mistaken deference which goes to his head and gives him ideas. Moreover, the presence of pardo militias in the cities and villages for purposes of military training and exercises causes them to disdain the cultivation of the land and to abandon the work of agriculture to the whites and

the black slaves. Meanwhile, for their own subsistence, the pardos rely on artisan skills, but as they themselves set the price of their products they never bother to improve their work, and so with old age or any other setback they surrender themselves to idleness, begging, and poverty.

The sorry condition of this country is almost beyond belief. The European Spaniards consider it vital to occupy all the public offices, and they spend their time pressing their claims, regardless of their qualifications. The American Spaniards devote themselves to the cultivation of the land, enduring the toils and tasks of this arduous occupation; or they waste their time and talents in the vain and corrupt life of the cities, which is harmful to their interests and damaging to their reputations. The pardos and free mulattoes specialize in the mechanical skills, though now many of them despise such occupations and regard it as unseemly to be both a soldier and a shoemaker or a barber, while those with more honest ideas never escape from a low job and a life of poverty. The result of all this is that a white never takes an artisan's job for fear of being classed with the pardos. And the pardos will not work on the land so as not to mix with the slaves. In America everyone wants to be a gentleman, to hold public office, to live from government revenue, or at the cost of society, without contributing anything in return.

The city council of Caracas is not claiming that public offices should be confined to Americans and resident Europeans, for that would be another obstacle to good government, another blow to that bond of interests and knowledge needed to preserve the state. But we *are* saying that, according to the principle of alternation, there should be a division of offices between Americans and Europeans, so that they can work together to ensure that laws are adapted to the circumstances of the country, which Americans know best and have the greatest interest in protecting. Otherwise the open conflict that prevails between settlers and officials will continue, the former convinced that their rights are being ignored by prejudiced judges and that their situation is hopeless, the latter believing all the adverse features reported or imagined about Americans. This will be the end of any possibility of order, justice, and tranquility. From anxiety flows distrust, and from this follow insults and aggression; the body politic then quickly dissolves into conflicting ideas and interests, and it only needs a blow from outside for law and order to collapse.

In these circumstances the basic requisite for retaining this part of Your Majesty's dominions is the loyalty of the resident and American-born Spaniards, who, as they are married and have their property here, seek to live in peace and in the religion and obedience in which they were born. All they ask in return is that Your Majesty maintain them in the honor and traditions of their ancestors, saving them from the outrage of mixing with pardos, seeing them promoted, having them as equals, and experiencing the consequent disorder and corruption of society. In no way can it be right that the pardos,

in return for a small payment, and without previous distinguished service to the state, should pass as whites and obtain, or be eligible to obtain, the honors and distinctions proper to those who have undertaken the immense task of preserving their purity of blood by legitimate descent. It is very hard to accept that some can gain, for a negligible sum of money, what it has taken others centuries to preserve through their good character and conduct.

Your Majesty will have been informed that the country is full of mixed families; that there are many pardos who have the wealth of whites; that there are countless lawsuits over purity of blood; and that it is not appropriate to favor discrimination in America. So Your Majesty has looked to the good of your vassals and opened the door to dispensations, in order to reduce lawsuits and avoid other evils. The decision is worthy of so great a king; but in fact the reports are erroneous, superficial, or malicious. . . . The informants, moreover, have not taken account of circumstances in this country; nor have they considered the interests and rights of the mother country, which are closely bound to those of this province. The fact remains that the pardos are now granted access to the education that they have hitherto lacked and ought to continue to lack, and this is accomplished simply by means of dispensation from their inferior status. Soon classes will be swarming with mulatto students. They will try to enter the seminary; they will succeed in obtaining the city council positions; they will gain public offices and treasury posts; and they will be involved in all the public and private business of the province. The result will be resentment and retreat on the part of white and decent people, and while the pardos will be encouraged by their greater numbers, the whites will face disappointment and contempt; those families who conquered and settled this province and paid for it with their lives and labor will be finished, and loyal subjects who have preserved with their loyalty the rule of the kings of Spain will be forever forgotten. The grim day will arrive when Spain will be served by mulattoes, zambos, and blacks, whose service will be exacted by force and whose doubtful loyalty will be the cause of violent upheavals; then there will be no one, for the sake of self-interest, honor, purity of blood, and reputation, who will risk his life in calling on sons, friends, relatives, and countrymen to control the lower orders and defend the common cause as their own.

Is it really the intention of Your Majesty to place confidence and security in the hands of men who, far from looking to Spain as the center of their interests, keep their eyes on the dark people of Africa (which is where they come from), to patronize them and raise them against the Spaniards, the authors, so they say, of all their grievances? Could these new whites be more loyal than the old? Could people of African origin do better for Spain than those of Spanish origin? Who is so mistaken as to believe that the pardos do not favor the blacks through whom they are flawed, and hate the whites, to

whose class they aspire only to insult and slight them? The mulattoes look to the blacks with affection, to the whites with disgust.

Those pardos who live in towns and cities usually enlist in the militias, whose *fuero* [special legal status] exempts them from the surveillance of the only judges who could usefully apply themselves to regulating the conduct of the pardos. Their military chiefs are only concerned that they attend zealously for training and are free from interference from the ordinary magistrates, protecting them from ridicule and allowing them license to commit whatever excesses they please. For the military *fuero* in this province has become a sure asylum for every disorder and crime, as it is thought to consist in allowing the militia commander to protect the soldier at all costs. This is another cause of the insolence and presumption of the mulattoes, for no matter how shabby and sordid they look when appearing before the magistrate, they are ready to speak up for themselves and even hurl abuse, simply because they have a red militia badge in their hat.

These, then, are the pardos, some of them sunk in poverty and consequent idleness, others occupied as blacksmiths, carpenters, silversmiths, tailors, masons, shoemakers, butchers, and other trades. These can work how and when they please, they can fix their own prices, and they can deceive everyone. It is no use complaining because the civil magistrates and military judges are not interested; they view the province as an inn where they are staying for a time and putting up with the problem, in order to avoid the trouble of resolving it. From this disorder results the decline of industry, and artisans are sure of selling their products, no matter how badly made, and at a price they dictate.

The pardo artisans do not contribute the slightest amount from their earnings to the royal treasury, the city revenue, or any other institution, nor are they assessed for any charge or tax, because the whole weight of taxation falls on agriculture and commerce. In this way the mulattoes and pardos of the province, except one or two rare cases who have farm lands and live honestly from agriculture or trade, live in the greatest comfort and freedom in their small houses, working only as long as necessary for that day's bread, and declining other jobs because they consider it beneath themselves to farm the land or to work for landowners. This applies especially to those who are militia officers, sergeants or corporals. And even those who are not employees but undertake to work for a day wage are so dishonest, crooked, and arrogant, that they abandon work, make off with the advances made to them by the landowners, and leave the crops to rot and agriculture and commerce to suffer. This is a daily occurrence. They claim they are free men, secure in the knowledge that their officers will not force them to pay up, unless the creditors have some particular influence with the officers.

In addition to this immunity and freedom, the pardos have the military *fuero*, in which they take great pride at the expense of public order. They hold

positions in the militia, enjoy the honors which this confers, and receive the wages appropriate to their service. This allows them to live in idleness and sink into inertia, their only exercise their weekly or monthly training. They receive medals and pensions, a sound enough idea for rewarding merits and services and attracting others. Thus the classes are kept in their due state, and each one is given its proper honor and reward.

The mulattoes of this province, then, enjoy the benefits of society without contributing anything to its revenues and finances, or to its public and charitable institutions, in spite of the fact that they are twice as numerous as the whites. This has come about because the laws regulating the conduct of mulattoes, making them contribute, and ordering them to pay, a moderate tax to the treasury, are completely ignored, either because officials are unaware of their existence, or indifferent to their application, or ignorant of their origin.

The remedy for these ills is not to be found in dispensing them from their status, thus encouraging their arrogance and hatred for the whites. Rather they should be obliged to work on the land, to abandon their life of idleness in the cities, to improve their trades and place an official price on their products, and on all occasions to curb their arrogance. The royal *cédula* dispensing pardos from their color should be suspended, not only for these reasons but also because it can be obtained so easily and cheaply that the high regard that the pardos ought to have of the white condition and its prerogatives is diminished. In this way the state loses one of the principal means of imposing subordination and one of the most powerful ways of rewarding services that would be useful to itself and to the pardos, namely, by offering them future promotion to the class of whites in return for some great service to the state or contribution to the work of agriculture or military service.

4. A Bishop Reports on Social Conditions in Colonial Mexico ♦ Manuel Abad y Queipo

In 1799, just three years after the Caracas City Council's report, a different sort of colonial administrator sent another, far calmer, and more incisive account to the Crown. Although he wrote about New Spain (today's Mexico) and defended Church interests rather than those of the local elite of European descent, Bishop Manuel Abad y Queipo framed his argument in

From Manuel Abad y Queipo, "Representación sobre la inmunidad personal del clero," trans. John Lynch, in *Latin American Revolutions, 1808–1826: Old and New World Origins*, ed. John Lynch (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 175–80. Reprinted by permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.