

Book Review

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Daniel Nemser. 2017. *Infrastructures of Race: Concentration and Biopolitics in Colonial Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Spain's American empire has the sordid reputation among political theorists as the birthplace of the modern "camp." During Cuba's war of independence, the story goes, infamous General Valeriano "The Butcher" Weyler innovated the technologies and policies of population concentration and surveillance that subsequently were deployed in many contexts across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Daniel Nemser's *Infrastructures of Race*, however, illustrates that this technology was not a late-colonial development; rather, the matrix of space and power that gave rise to the camp grew out of four centuries of Spanish domination. In excavating this deeper history in the context of colonial Mexico, Nemser aims to demonstrate not only how imperial rule was effected through spatial infrastructures, but moreover, how the racial caste system was produced and reproduced through these mechanisms.

Nemser intends *Infrastructures of Race* to correct the field's penchant for analyses of "how contemporaries perceived identity, how bodies were marked, how otherness was represented" (4). These histories, he insists, address the "surface" phenomena of race—ideologies that float above, while justifying, harsher realities. This is a mischaracterization of what has been a particularly sophisticated area of colonial Latin American historiography in the last three decades, one in which scholars have seldom lost sight of power and exploitation. Nonetheless, Nemser has a point, and it is a valuable contribution to the field: to wit, race is not an idea, but a structure. Following this, Nemser wants scholars to center our accounts of racialization on the material realities of domination and primitive accumulation and how the racial caste system was constituted as a social reality.

The book is anchored by four case studies that illustrate "the infrastructures of race, or the material systems, that enable racial categories to be thought, ascribed, and lived" (4). Here, infrastructure takes on a double meaning: on the one hand, Nemser emphasizes how race is produced through the built environment and the ways that human infrastructures, such as districts, roads, buildings, utilities, fade into the background of life and thereby become naturalized. On the other hand, race itself becomes a sort of infrastructure, dissolving into barely conscious assumptions and perceptions that undergird social, political, and material life. While many works on colonial institutions

and spatial imaginations elaborate how the built environment *reflected* the caste system, *Infrastructures of Race* insists on a dialectical development of both race and the physical structures of empire.

The chapters each stand on their own and illustrate one of a four-part typology of imperial placemaking: centralized towns, disciplinary institutions, segregated districts, and general collections. In his particularly valuable first chapter, Nemser reassesses the sixteenth century policy of congregating Mesoamericans of the former Triple Alliance (i.e., the Aztec empire) into *pueblos de Indios*. Nemser argues that this spatial tactic did not *evince* the emerging notion of *Indian*, but brought it into lived experience in ways that became basal and habitual. He traces the gradual disintegration of the *altepetl*, the pre-Columbian sociopolitical entity that structured much of daily life, as Nahuas were forcibly concentrated into Spanish-designed towns. As *altepetl* identities weakened, the new political infrastructure “set in motion the transformation of indigenous social relations and the consolidation of a new racial [Indian] subjectivity” (62).

Nemser’s second and third case studies examine the policing of mestizo bodies within disciplinary space of the Colegio de San Juan de Letrán and the 1692 food riots in Mexico City. The latter, in particular, provide a new lens on how race and space were reconstituted during the 300-year duration of Spanish rule in colonial Mexico. Historians have interpreted the riots as a milestone in a slow process by which caste identities lost traction, blended, and dissolved into one another as (urban) Indians, low-class Spaniards, mestizos, “Negros,” and everyone else except the elite became lumped together as part of the *plebe*. Postriot efforts to secure the capital city by resegregating the population were built upon this new distinction, which in the eighteenth century would go on to serve Bourbon-era programs of social reform. Nemser argues, however, that “perhaps the Plebe is better understood not as a category that encompasses many races and thus constitutes a ‘mixed’ group, but as a collective embodiment of ‘mixture’ itself” (104). Differently racialized than prior forms of population segregation, the *plebe* signified a surplus, mongrel, monstrous population to be contained.

Nemser overstretchers in the final chapter, which unfortunately distracts from rather than contributes to his overall project. Here he examines the Royal Botanical Gardens in Madrid and Mexico City to illustrate the totalizing vision of Bourbon-era imperial science and the spatial/infrastructural segregation of life—in this case plants according to Carl Linnaeus’s binomial system and later, Alexander von Humboldt’s topographic imagination. Following Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, Nemser intends to demonstrate how the spatial/racial dynamics of Spanish imperialism contributed to the paradigmatic nineteenth-century concept of “life itself,” that is, life as the object of science and governance. But the connections are strained and not quite there. Coeval events elsewhere in New Spain would have usefully advanced the book’s purpose: specifically, the advent of reservations (*establecimientos*) to concentrate and surveil “peaceful Apaches” and other unconquered indigenous groups in the northern borderlands (Babcock 2016). In ways complementing yet differing from earlier colonial developments, the *establecimientos* constituted racial identities through spatial infrastructures where all wildness could be confined and policed. The field would have benefited handsomely had Nemser followed his analysis to this and/or other important precedents for settler colonialism.

The forms of population control and racialization cited above were neither sadistic nor gratuitous; rather, as Nemser usefully foregrounds time and again, these were calculated projects for maintaining domination in the service of a regime founded on expropriation. Less satisfying in this analysis, though, is a sense of what precisely we mean when we talk about race in early Spanish imperialism. María Elena Martínez's brilliant genealogy of how the medieval concept of blood purity was repurposed into the caste system demonstrates just how inchoate race as a conceptual possibility was in the early modern period (2008). Future scholarship, hopefully, will continue the effort to understand how spatial practices produced the many varieties of difference and identity under Iberian rule.

References

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