

# Sample critical thinking on latin america and its people

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When Europeans arrived in the "New World," they did not find a barren, uninhabited land, but rather large and complex Amerindian societies. The cultural clash that ensued would radically change both Europeans and natives. Although there was widespread collaboration on the part of native Amerindians, such as opportunistic chiefs using Europeans for their own wealth, overall the collision of cultures created more problems for Amerindians than improvements. This is evidenced by the one-sided power relationship where Europeans often exploited Amerindian populations for economic opportunities and a lust for conquest. The contact between Europeans and Amerindians detrimentally transformed native society in the realms of ecology, labor conditions, religion, and displacement.

In the realm of ecology, Europeans radically transformed the native landscape. The Europeans brought with them animals and plants that carried diseases. The Amerindian immune system had never experienced these diseases and the result was massive, widespread death. For example, in the Caribbean, the native population was nearly wiped out completely within a few generations. Elsewhere in coastal Brazil nearly 95% of the native population had been wiped out. The animals brought by Europeans had other lasting effects. The influx of new species caused havoc on local plants and animal population, which would have been disruptive of the already existent ecosystems. The Amerindians, such as terrace farming in Brazil, had come to depend on certain ecological conditions and the Europeans brought adverse changes.

For the Amerindians, the labor system created by the discovery of resources also had dire effects. The native population was a cheap and available labor

source and meant that the Europeans would not need to import expensive African slaves. However, needing the native labor supply did not mean they were treated well. The mines were a hazardous place to work with long hours and poor working conditions that left many Amerindians dead or maimed. Even when they were paid for the labor, such as the mita labor system, the salary did not cover their costs of living. Agriculture brought a similar detriment to the Amerindian population where they often toiled away on farm estates in poor conditions in exchange for meager compensation. Whereas prior to European contact there existed inequality, the level of slavery and mistreatment after European colonization was unprecedented. Another aspect of widespread change in Amerindian society was religion. The Europeans brought their conquest mentality to matters of faith and sought to get rid of native religion in favor of Christianity and a civilizing mission. This created a new frontier for religious missionaries who flocked in droves to the newly discovered lands. It was a place for opportunity for missionaries such as the Augustians and Franciscans. These individuals used the new land as a place of opportunity to build monasteries', acquire material wealth and act out religious conversions. By 1559, 160 churches and monasteries had been built in Mexico, with similar levels of production in other areas such Peru later. The natives often fiercely resisted the forced conversions and these rebellions were sometimes squashed violently. It also caused an existential crisis in Amerindian religion and disrupted their entire cosmology. They had to create a new understanding of the world now with Europeans and calamities and their old thought systems were upended. Even though Christianity did not bring only bad, it left behind the destruction of

Amerindian religiosity.

The coming of Europeans also displaced populations of Amerindians. For example, in the 1570's, Francisco Toledo condensed settlements. These resettlements changed how the Amerindian people had been living successfully prior. Prior to Toledo's restructuring of land, populations had access to different elevations of land and were able to grow a variety of crops. Therefore, Toledo is an example of an outside force imposing foreign concepts of agriculture and land management and disrupting the previous system that had worked for so long. People were forced to rebel against the reforms, leave their land or create a new way of management. While the Europeans benefitted by moving populations into more manageable, condensed units, the Amerindian people lost their way of life.

For the Europeans, the new land brought many opportunities. The riches of gold and other precious metals was one aspect of this. Europeans were able to send the precious metals overseas and create a niche in the international market. The precious metals trade created different job opportunities for Europeans, a job for the person running the mine but also new jobs such as merchants and agents that negotiated the international market on behalf of wealthy patrons. They also found the new climate useful for agriculture and new crops. Through agriculture, many Europeans came to own large estates. Through the hacienda and plantation system, Europeans were often able to secure wealth for multiple generations. The men that arrived were also able to pursue their sexual appetites and conquer native women. There were also new positions of power created for Europeans, such as the viceroy. The viceroys were acting on behalf of the king and had considerable power and

more freedom to act unrestrained than they would have had back in Europe, closer to the crown. As a result, the previous existent authority systems of the Amerindians were changed. The European authorities in the new world were able to dole out punishment and rewards for their own ends. One example of this was the Inquisition when the Holy Office of the Inquisition used an iron fist to enforce certain norms and behaviors.

Although it is difficult to make one universal statement about the Amerindian and European experience of contact, the result was obviously one-sided. The Europeans were able to attain wealth and women on the back of Amerindian natives. The discovery of precious metals made a new international market and the new land brought opportunities for European advancement politically in governorships and viceroys, but also religiously as Christian missionaries consolidated wealth and power from their conversions. Diseases ravaged the Amerindians and their old political and social systems were disrupted. If there were ever a doubt who benefitted most, one only need to look the end result. The Europeans remained entrenched in Amerindian lands for hundreds of years whereas native populations and languages had all but disappeared. There was resistance and small victories for Amerindians, but ultimately their population was left destroyed and would never again emerge the same.

## **Works Cited**

Martin, Cheryl and Mark Wasserman. Latin America and Its People. Vol. 2. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008