

Heidrun Mörtl, Josef Raab, and Olaf Kaltmeier (Eds.)

De/Colonization in the Americas: Continuity and Change

De/Colonización en las Américas: Cambios y continuidades

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Continuity and Change

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Introduction: Colonialism, Coloniality, and Decolonization in the Americas

HEIDRUN MÖRTL, JOSEF RAAB AND OLAF KALTMEIER

Its history of colonialism is one of the main defining features of the Western Hemisphere. A group of Vikings under Leif Eriksson had probably explored the Atlantic coast of North America toward the end of the 10th century and had established the first European colony in the Americas in Newfoundland. But those efforts did not have any lasting effects. When Christopher Columbus landed in Guanahani in 1492, though, events took a very different turn. While Eriksson's knowledge was lost, Columbus used the communication revolution unfolding in his times in order to market his "discovery." He consciously put his success in the context of the conclusion of the Reconquista and of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Having convinced Queen Isabel and King Fernando with the golden ornaments, the brightly colored parrots, and the captive Indians he brought back from the far-away lands he believed to be part of Asia, Columbus set off for a second voyage with enthusiastic royal support in 1493. This is when he founded the first European colony in the Western Hemisphere that was to trigger lasting changes. Although the settlement of La Isabela on the island of Hispaniola was only inhabited for about five years, the Americas would never be the same. As Charles C. Mann argued, "By founding La Isabela, Colón initiated permanent European occupation in the Americas. And in so doing he began the era of *globalization*—the single, turbulent exchange of goods and services that today engulfs the entire habitable world" (6, italics in the original).

Even the name 'America' stems from colonial times. It was only with the publication of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* [*The New World*] in 1502/03 that Europeans started to understand the extent of the newly discovered lands in the far west. Together with Columbus's letters of a decade earlier, Vespucci's account heightened European desires for profit, land, and souls. What followed were centuries of competition for the resources and opportunities of the Americas. As Herbert Eugene Bolton reminded his audience in his 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association,

[f]or some three hundred years the whole Western Hemisphere was colonial in status. European peoples occupied the country, transplanted their cultures, and adapted themselves to the American scene. Rival nations devised systems for exploiting natives and natural resources, and competed for profit and possession. Some of the contestants were eliminated, leaving at the end of the eighteenth century Spain, Portugal, England, and Russia as the chief colonial powers in America. (448-449)

While Spain and Portugal were the only European colonial powers that established permanent settlements in the Americas in the 16th century—mainly in South America and the Caribbean—other nations followed their example. “At the dawn of the seventeenth century,” Bolton notes, “North Europe and France began to found permanent colonies in the Caribbean and on the North American mainland” (450). Motivations for colonialism ranged from economic and financial gain, political rivalries, crises and shortages in Europe, and a desire to missionize to religious freedom and utopian designs.

The Americas’ colonial legacy is a relic of the past that is continuously rearticulated and reactivated until today. “Coloniality” and “post-colonialism” signify that the Spanish conquest initiated a process of colonization of the whole Western Hemisphere by European powers that can be understood as the largest and most profound project of colonization in world history and whose consequences still affect all American nations, societies, and communities. The work of Anibal Quijano and his concept of the ‘coloniality of power’ demonstrate how cultural approaches and the world-system theory can go hand in hand (“Colonialidad”). Quijano’s central idea is to see the ‘coloniality of power’ as a machine that transforms differences into antagonistic values—modern versus traditional, white versus black. Thus the concept of cultural classification—especially racism—is of supreme importance for the understanding of the formation of the modern world. This ethnic classification is related to the system of exploitation and thus forms an integral part of the capitalist world-system. Walter Mignolo has expanded the idea of a ‘coloniality of power’ by arguing that coloniality remains ‘the darker side of modernity’ in so far as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment are conceived of as inherently European dynamics whose entanglement with coloniality is systematically silenced. In this introduction we will address three interrelated approaches—namely colonialism, coloniality, and decolonization—that also structure the debates represented in this volume.

Colonialism

In the early history of the Americas, colonialism informs nearly all aspects of life. It was practiced even before the establishment of the first European settlements (see the essay by Donna J. Nash in this volume). From the European invasion onward it established a durable matrix of power based on gender relations, racism and ethnic classifications that defined *white* and *criollo* male superiority over the indigenous and ‘African American’ as well as over Asian, Jewish, and other populations, peoples and nations (see the essay by Josef Raab in this volume). The invaders were convinced that they conquered with God—and in the case of the Iberians also with the Virgin Mary—on their side (see the essay by María Herrera-Sobek in this volume). In more recent times, the thrust to decolonize has become a major aspiration that implies the rescue and re-evaluation of native and subordinated cultures. While colonialism is all but over in the Americas, a condition of coloniality informs many present-day dynamics.