



The New Conquest History

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Abstract

Our understanding and perceptions of the conquest period in Latin American history have been profoundly altered by the scholarship of the past twenty years. The traditional triumphalist narrative of the Spanish Conquest focused heavily on the conquistadors in Mexico and Peru, and emphasized the inevitability and rapidity of military victory, religious conversion (the Spiritual Conquest), and colonization. The revisionist New Conquest History – which emerged in part from a renewed emphasis on archival and paleographic work and in part from the New Philology, a school of scholarship based on the analysis of colonial-period primary sources in Mesoamerican languages – complicates that narrative by emphasizing multiple protagonists and accounts, new source materials, the roles and interpretations of indigenous and black men and women, and the examination of understudied regions of the Americas.

Introduction

Our understanding and perceptions of the conquest period in Latin American history – primarily, but not exclusively, the early sixteenth century – have been profoundly altered over the past two decades. The traditional triumphalist narrative of the Spanish Conquest is still reiterated in print, but scholars have now thoroughly problematized, complicated, and replaced it with alternative narratives. The heavy emphasis on the Spanish conquistadors in Mexico and Peru, on the inevitability and rapidity of military victory, and on the success of the Spiritual Conquest, has given way to a revisionist examination of old sources and an unearthing of new ones.

The result is a focus on multiple protagonists and accounts, new archival materials, the roles and interpretations of indigenous and black men and women, and the exploration of understudied regions of the Americas. The centrality of indigenous Mesoamericans in this revisionist scholarship reflects the fact that it emerged to some extent from the New Philology, a school of scholarship based on the analysis of colonial-period primary sources in Mesoamerican languages. But it is not merely a subset of the New Philology, and arguably deserves its own moniker. The phrase “The New Conquest History” (the NCH for short) may have been coined by Susan Schroeder, in a paper given in 2000; whether this is true or not, the phrase has stuck and Y2K functions well as a symbolic milestone in the development of the NCH school.¹

Developmental Stages

The development of the NCH can arguably be delineated in many ways, so I have chosen a simple three-part structure with somewhat contrived milestone markers of 1990 and 2000. The resulting three developmental stages are: the centuries of conquest history and historiography that led up to 1990; the formative period of the 1990s; and the decade since 2000, when the NCH coalesced as a recognizable school.

First, a comment on the terms “New” and “Conquest.” Any school of scholarship claiming to be “New” will provoke questions about its newness. To some extent, every field is characterized by a mixture of new scholarship that recycles old ideas and well-worked sources, and new scholarship that is genuinely new – original, innovative, possibly even paradigm-shifting. On the other hand, take this hypothetical experiment: two graduate students or scholars from another discipline spend a month reading up on Spanish conquest history, one restricted to work published before 1990, the other with access to work written up to the present; the latter’s sense of the field would surely be different enough to conclude that something “New” had without doubt occurred since 1990. Not everyone will agree; but surely, and ironically, the questioning of the terminology reflects the revisionist spirit that propels the NCH forward.

As for “Conquest,” the term is weighed down with the baggage of the traditional narrative of the sixteenth century, enshrined in phrases such as “The Conquest of Mexico” and “The Spanish Conquest” – phrases that privilege Spanish perspectives and assumptions, and invoke military victory. However, this is all well known, to the extent that unpacking the term is no longer of much interest. The baggage is assumed; the term is a shorthand point of reference to a time-period and a complex historiography. The NCH’s redefinition of “Conquest” is, in a sense, its very purpose and the sum of its books and articles.

The first stage – pre-1990 – is too vast to be easily summarized or fleshed out with a comprehensive bibliography, especially as it begins in the 1520s (or, arguably, the 1490s). But, simply viewed, it contains the corpus of writings that built up the traditional tale of conquistadors and friars. In her essay on “The Genre of Conquest Studies,” Schroeder describes these as “The Epic Spanish Conquest” and “The Spiritual Conquest.” The one gave us the core Conquest narrative, laid out in the sixteenth century by the likes of Hernando Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, repackaged in the nineteenth century for modern readers by the likes of William H. Prescott, and perpetuated into the present century by numerous “pop” histories and documentary films. The other, “The Spiritual Conquest” – a phrase made famous by Robert Ricard with the various editions of his study of the Franciscans in Mexico, starting in 1933 – is a perspective that likewise survives today in textbooks and the popular media. Both are, loosely speaking, triumphalist, with “the Spanish and spiritual conquests taken for granted.”²

In the decades before 1990, what were the studies that anticipated the NCH, planting seeds in scholars’ minds and making subsequent developments possible? The list of such books is arguably a long one, and in the end something of a personal choice. But for many people it would surely include James Lockhart’s *The Men of Cajamarca* (1972), Karen Spalding’s *Huarochirí* (1984), and Inga Clendinnen’s *Ambivalent Conquests* (1987). The first introduced us in detail to conquistadors who were not “famous,” who were neither swashbuckling heroes nor Black Legend villains, but recognizable as human beings. The second showed how a micro-regional study that reconstructed indigenous history before, during, and after the conquest could be a way to turn the conquest upside down. The third made a groundbreaking effort to see multiple sides to a complex conquest event – multiple Spanish sides, and an indigenous side too. All three anticipated NCH approaches to a degree that they arguably inspired them.

In her essay on genres of conquest studies, Schroeder described two recent trends, that she called “Loser History” and “The Indians as Conquerors.” She did not confine them to the 1990s, and her frame of reference was specifically Mesoamerica. But for our purposes the two trends nicely illustrate the second stage of NCH development during that decade. Schroeder defined “Loser History, or the Conquest of Mexico as a Nonevent” as

a questioning of the triumphalist narratives of the conquest by both re-reading Spanish sources and reading Nahuatl sources for the first time (or at least translating and analyzing them properly for the first time). The trend centered on seeing “The Indians as Conquerors” emerged from a similar treatment of sources. By the end of the 1990s it was getting difficult to take anything about the conquest “for granted”; the NCH was taking shape.

There are probably a dozen key works that characterize this stage of the NCH, and – as in the pre-1990s formative stage – their selection comes down to some personal choices. So I shall restrict my discussion to a few that in my view made a difference. For example, the presentation in Miguel León-Portilla’s *The Broken Spears* of Nahua perspectives on the 1519–21 conquest war in Central Mexico had been used for thirty years in the classroom and as a scholarly reference. But it had also been misused and abused, largely because of the way in which these sources were presented. In *We People Here* (1993), Lockhart took the potential of *The Broken Spears* and fully realized it, creating a scholarly edition that became a cornerstone of the NCH. Combined with other sources of inspiration, *We People Here* made possible various wings of the new historiography. For example, Matthew Restall’s *Maya Conquistador* (1998) drew on Lockhart’s example, while also drawing on the Mayanist studies of the final years of the NCH’s formative stage – especially Victoria Bricker’s *Indian Christ*, *Indian King* and Clendinnen’s *Ambivalent Conquests*. The title of Restall’s book came from a phrase to which a Yucatec Maya nobleman himself laid claim in a Mayan-language document. But the phenomenon soon turned out to be more widespread; Michel Oudijk found it in Oaxaca, for example, publishing his findings in a series of outlets that culminated in his 2000 monograph.

Meanwhile, several other genres of studies were contributing to the creation of the NCH. One was the genre of monographs on Spanish-indigenous relations in the colonial period that had the effect of opening new windows on the conquest period (Rebecca Horn’s *Postconquest Coyoacan* was but one). Another was work by art historians that did not simply apply the methods and assumptions of traditional Early Modern European art history, but approached colonial Latin America – primarily, at this stage, colonial Mesoamerica – on its own terms. Examples that come to mind are Jeanette Peterson’s *Murals of Malinalco* (1993) and Barbara Mundy’s *Mapping New Spain* (1996). Others who contributed to the significant role that art history was coming to play in the NCH, but whose focus was mostly pre-Columbian or whose major publications came after the 1990s, included Elizabeth Hill Boone, Cecelia Klein, and Dana Leibsohn. The notion that scholars of South America were a part of the debate – and I would argue that such an inclusion is crucial to the maturing of the NCH – was highlighted by the important work of Carolyn Dean; in a set of publications culminating in *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ* (1999), Dean showed how the Inka nobility mobilized pre-Conquest and European symbols to help maintain social status through the seventeenth century.

A final additional genre relevant here was that of new work on the Spiritual Conquest. This work, like that on Spanish-indigenous relations and art historical studies, tended to be as much or more about colonialism than about the conflicts that preceded it. But I would argue that such work contributed to our understanding of how the conquest and colonial periods overlapped in meaningful and revealing ways, often thereby opening up new insights into the conquest experience. With respect to the Spiritual Conquest, the foundational work was Louise Burkhart’s *The Slippery Earth*, which was actually published in 1989 but I’m including it here as a 1990s publication – for the sake of this essay’s argument, and because its impact was compounded and cemented by Burkhart’s subsequent essays and books.

Since 2000, the foundational works of the NCH have been built upon in ways that are still very much being realized. Arguably the most significant book to the NCH's development in the last decade is the collection of essays edited by Laura Matthew and Michel Oudijk, *Indian Conquistadors* (2007). Its detailed exposure of the *primary* roles of Nahuas and other Mesoamericans allies in Spanish conquest campaigns have forever altered our perception of the period. Some of the volume's contributors are part of a growing group of scholars whose impact on the field has already been felt via articles and essays, an impact that will be more significant when the monographs are in print; examples include future books by John Chuchiak and by Laura Matthew (2012), and David Tavárez's newly published monograph (2011).

Such scholars are noteworthy for their paleographic skills, as sixteenth-century archival sources tend to be far more challenging than later materials. It is thus significant when a veteran scholar such as Ida Altman, rather than resting on her laurels, dives deep into early sources to produce a new conquest monograph that fleshes out a traditional narrative-driven structure with NCH features – from a lively and careful juxtaposition of multiple Spanish sources to a fine-grained appreciation of indigenous perspectives (Altman 2010; also see her archive-driven 2007 article).

Another wave of contributions came from art historians. Important monographs were published by Florine Asselbergs (2004), Lori Diel (2008), and Dana Leibsohn (2009), and a monograph by Amara Solari is forthcoming, anticipated by her recent article in *The Art Bulletin* (2010). Various ancillary projects featuring art historians include the spectacular multidisciplinary volume on the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan edited by David Carrasco and Scott Sessions (2006). Scholars of literature have also made contributions – examples are books by Rolena Adorno (2007; Adorno and Pautz 1999), Kathleen Ann Myers (2007), and Carlos Jáuregui (2008).

In *The Slippery Earth*, Burkart showed how a close reading of sources in Nahuatl, as well as in Latin and Spanish, could reveal how Catholic concepts were understood by Nahuas – thereby shifting the field's focus from anatomizing “conquest” to dissecting how new Catholicisms were created. In the two decades since, scholars of various disciplines have been wrestling with the new-found complexity of the Spiritual Conquest – ranging from reappraisals of previously studied cases and sources (such as Don 2010) to efforts to build further on Burkart's legacy (such as Mark Christensen's soon-to-be-published 2010 doctoral dissertation comparing Nahua and Yucatec Maya Catholicisms, using native-language sources). Arguably a cutting-edge subfield of the study of the colonial period (as opposed to the conquest period), Spiritual Conquest scholarship is now seeing a florescence (as exemplified by such monographs as William Hank's *Converting Words*, 2010); how much such work contributes to the NCH remains to be seen.

Last but certainly not least, regions outside Mesoamerica have increasingly become part of the corpus of NCH historiography, both through attempts to synthesize regional studies and articulate broader patterns (such as Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*) and through forays into the conquests of regions traditionally seen as marginal; examples are Kris Lane's innovative *Quito, 1599* (2002), Lane's work on Vargas Machuca (2008 and 2010), Michael Francis's work on both Colombia (2007) and Florida (still in progress), and Jorge Gamboa's epic study of the how Muisca lords adapted to the conquests in Colombia to become colonial *caciques* (2010). Such work does not simply apply the methods and lessons learned in the most-studied regions, but suggests new ways of looking at those regions. A vivid example comes from outside Spanish American completely; Alida Metcalf's emphasis on “go-betweens” in the Portuguese conquests in early Brazil

inspires scholars to look again at how intermediaries of every kind influenced the course of invasions throughout the hemisphere (Metcalf 2005).

Defining Contributions

In the decade from Y2K to 2010 the perspectives of the NCH gained cohesion around five core approaches/methods.

The first approach is one of *revisitation*; it involves re-reading or revisiting the established Spanish sources, most of which are published (and many of the best-known narratives have been in print since the early sixteenth century). The purpose of this revisiting is to see through the conventions of genre, political and personal agendas, and other problems of the text. We need not dismiss a well-worn old favorite like Bernal Díaz's *True History*, but we can no longer use it without better understanding it.³ The goal here is to break through the constructed image of Spanish motivations and experiences as monolithic, homogeneous, and leading inevitably to *the conquest*.

The second approach is built upon the skills of *paleography*; more specifically, it is to uncover new or understudied archival sources in order to expand our understanding of Spanish conquest activities, and thereby further break down old conquest images. Tens of thousands of pages of archival sources sit in Seville awaiting the scholar's eye, many of them the folios of *probanzas de mérito* written by conquistadors and left unread for centuries. Very little of this early material has survived in the Americas, for various reasons (the nascent nature of bureaucracy in the first colonial decades vs. the demand for paperwork in Spain, the humidity of the New World vs. Spain's dryness, and possibly the relative political stability of Spain vs. that of some regions of Latin America). It remains unstudied or understudied to a degree that stuns our colleagues in fields such as U.S. history – until they see a photocopy of a *probanza* and realize that the hurdle is not just winning the time and funds to spend months in Seville, but the investment in acquiring paleographic skills. Ironically, the success of the New Philology drew students away from traditional paleography; but both students and established scholars are now making that investment, and it may not be too soon to proclaim that paleography is back.

The third approach/method of the NCH is to focus on new *protagonists*, to discover hitherto-ignored participants in the conquest drama, from forgotten Spaniards to long-ignored women to black conquistadors and early settlers of African descent to native peoples of all kinds. To some extent this emerges from the first approach described above, but more obviously it stems from the second; new sources reveal new people. The more one searches for the unknown (as opposed to feeling for the stepping stones of familiar names), the more likely one is to discover and bring to life individuals whose roles in the conquest era had remained buried with them for centuries.

Of the new protagonists brought to life by NCH scholarship, most of the attention has probably gone to *natives*, the indigenous, “Indians” (even these issues of terminology are rendered moot by the NCH, because scholars can now be more specific in their use of labels and refer, for example, to Nahuas or – even more specifically – to the Quauhquechollans). This is partly because the NCH emerged out of the New Philology. I would argue that it is not a subset of it, as too many of the NCH contributions are not New Philology works (i.e. they are not based on the analysis of native-language sources). But without the New Philology, the NCH would not exist, in that it would not be identifiable as a “school” of scholarship; there would still be new and important scholarship on aspects of conquest history, but it would not reach the critical mass of method, discovery, and mutual influence that the NCH is now reaching.⁴ The significance of the indigenous thread to the

NCH is also partly to do with substance, with what has been discovered. Much of this work does more than just present the “Indian” view. It analyzes indigenous perspectives with all their complexities and contradictions, often – but by no means exclusively – using native-language sources. We are now beginning to see that the existence of such a character as a “Maya conquistador” was just the tip of the iceberg of a massive native diaspora and intricate indigenous involvement in the processes of the conquest.

Fifthly and finally, the NCH method is to break out of the *boundaries* of discipline and geographical area, going beyond Central Mexico to explore everywhere from Georgia to Guatemala to Esmeraldas, and going beyond ethnohistory’s traditional disciplines of History and Anthropology to include Art History, Geography, Literature, and so on. To be sure, these explorations sometimes serve to confirm well-known patterns, but they do so with new evidence and protagonists, and just as often they expose a new pattern or aspect of the conquest experience. Crossing boundaries, like the other approaches/methods of the NCH, gives us new stories as well as new ways to tell old stories (to paraphrase Kevin Gosner).⁵

I have reduced a multifaceted development to five terms in ways that clearly oversimplify and dumb down – revisitation, paleography, protagonists, natives, and boundaries. But if this characterization of the NCH fosters objections and debate then it has served its purpose. The NCH is, after all, undirected, organic, unconnected to any specific program or institution; it is “decidedly gestalt-like” (in George Lovell’s words)⁶; it is only a “school” of scholarship if we argue that it is, and argumentation is the lifeblood of any historiographical development with a pulse.

To pursue the lifeblood metaphor for a moment longer: in the end, the beating heart of the NCH – its living contribution to all the fields to which it is tied – is the rescuing of individual people from the obscurity of the past. Individuals who were not necessarily conquistadors, or even Spanish, or even men, let alone famous, but whose names can now be written and whose lives can be revealed – even if the revelation is fragmented, the glimpse fleeting. Such people have been “encased in the mortar of *History*” (in Nancy van Deusen’s words); the function and effect of the NCH is to chip away and remove that mortar.⁷

Examples of such people proliferate in the NCH literature. They include women long lost to history, such as Catalina, a Pipil slave taken from El Salvador to Peru and then to Spain, as well as women not lost to history, but long misunderstood, like Malintzin, who at last is now emerging as a real historical figure rather than a distorted metaphor; let’s hope that Catalina de Erauso is soon given similar treatment.⁸ They include men who were once famous, but their renown waned as their place in the conventional narrative of conquest became less sure – men such as Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, whose life is now being seen in a new light. And they include men who never had a role in that narrative, but whose experiences are now being reconstructed for the first time – men such as Sebastián Toral, a black conquistador of Yucatan, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean at least three times in his life, and Francisco Oçelote, a Nahua warrior who fought first against the Spanish invaders in Mexico and then with them in the invasion of highland Guatemala.⁹ It is individuals such as these, brought to life by scholars of the conquest era, who are in turn giving life to the New Conquest History.

Short Biography

Matthew Restall was educated at Oxford and UCLA, and is now Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Latin American History at Penn State. His areas of specialization are colonial

Yucatan and Mexico, Maya history, the Spanish Conquest, and Africans in Spanish America. He has received NEH and Guggenheim fellowships. Since 1995 he has published some 40 articles & essays and 15 books, including *The Maya World* (1997), *Maya Conquistador* (1998), and *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (2003). His recent books include two edited volumes, *Beyond Black and Red* and *Black Mexico* (2005 and 2009), and two co-authored volumes – *Mesoamerican Voices* (2005) and *Invading Guatemala* (2007), published in Penn State Press' new *Latin American Originals* series. He is editor of this series and co-editor of *Ethnohistory* journal. His latest monograph, *The Black Middle: Africans, Mayas, and Spaniards in Colonial Yucatan* (2009), won the Conference on Latin American History's prize for the best book on the history of Mexico. His newest books are 2012 and the End of the World: The Western Roots of the Maya Apocalypse (with Amara Solari) and Latin America in Colonial Times (with Kris Lane) (both 2011).

Notes

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¹ Although the opinions in this essay remain mine, my comments have been influenced and aided by the three-hour discussion at the roundtable panel "What is the New Conquest History?" held at the meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory (ASE) in Ottawa, in October 2010. The panelists were John Chuchiak, Kevin Gosner, Kris Lane, George Lovell, Laura Matthew, Matthew Restall, David Tavárez, and Stephanie Wood; extensive audience participation included contributions by William Barnes, Elizabeth Hill Boone, Louise Burkhart, Sarah Cline, James Córdova, Owen Jones, Matthew Padrón, Jonathan Truitt, and Nancy van Deusen; comments by Robert Haskett were read to the panel and audience.

² Susan Schroeder, 'Introduction: the Genre of Conquest Studies', in Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (eds.), *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 9.

³ This includes better understanding how a text like Díaz's has been used and abused over the years; see the fine revisiting done by David Carrasco in his edition of *The History of the Conquest of New Spain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

⁴ See Matthew Restall, 'A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History', *Latin American Research Review*, 38/1 (2003): 113–34. This article is fast becoming outdated and does not anticipate the NCH.

⁵ Comment made by Gosner at the ASE discussion in Ottawa.

⁶ Comment made by Lovell at the ASE discussion in Ottawa.

⁷ Nancy van Deusen, 'Diasporas, Bondage, and Intimacy in Lima, 1535 to 1555', *Colonial Latin American Review* 19/2 (2010): 268.

⁸ On Catalina, see van Deusen, 'Diasporas', p. 254; on Malintzin, see the various publications by Frances Karttunen, 'Rethinking Malinche', in Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, (eds.), *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 291–312 and Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2006). On Erauso, see *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World*, Michele and Gabriel Stepto (trans.) (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

⁹ On Jiménez de Quesada, see J. Michael Francis, *Invading Colombia: Spanish Accounts of the Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada Expedition of Conquest*, Latin American Originals 1 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2007). On Toral, see Matthew Restall, *The Black Middle: Africans, Mayas, and Spaniards in Colonial Yucatan*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6–16. On Ocelote, see Restall and Florine Asselbergs, *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahuatl, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars*, Latin American Originals 2 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2007), 82, 85–94, 98; Ocelote is also discussed in Laura Matthew's forthcoming monograph.

¹⁰ This is by necessity a select bibliography. It does not include, for example, doctoral dissertations or many recent studies that discuss the conquest but primarily focus on the colonial period. The inclusion of Spanish-language publications is minimal, not comprehensive. I have primarily listed works referenced in the discussion above, with a handful of other works not mentioned but included in the interests of making the list more useful to readers.

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