Early Colonialism in the Americas

Strangers in a strange land.
Spanish Colonialism

New Spain, Peru, and la leyenda negra.
Spanish Colonialism: The Basics

• Colonies in the Americas were used to **enrich the mother country and increase status**
  • Mercantilism → money from the colonies used to **increase the military power** of Spain

• **Plantation agriculture** to produce cash and food crops
  • **Sugar** in Cuba, Santo Domingo, other Caribbean colonies → heavy use of chattel slavery

• **Raw materials** → **precious metals**, timber, tropical produce
  • **SILVER** → discovery of the mine at **Potosi**
  • Use of **mit’a labor** to force indigenous populations into mining
  • Silver from Potosi radically **alters the economic system of the entire world**
Spanish Colonialism: Organization

• Because the American colonies were so incredibly valuable to Spain, American colonies were **centrally overseen by the Crown**
  • Very little independence → **Council of the Indies** made all official policy

• **Catholic Church** acted almost as a branch of the Spanish government
  • Immediately following the arrival of conquistadors, Spain sent Jesuit priests to convert native populations
  • Initially, **conversion was voluntary** (although highly pressured) → Jesuits studied native religion and language, and sometimes relied on **syncretism**
  • By the late 1500s, **attitudes hardened**: natives were forcibly converted and native faiths were actively suppressed → **burning of codices**
Spanish Colonies: Social Hierarchy

• Beginning in the late 1600s and early 1700s, the Spanish colonies develop a **very rigid social system**, based on ethnicity and race → **la sistema de castas** (caste system)
  - **Peninsulares** → **BORN IN SPAIN**, usually white aristocrats
    - Held all powerful and important positions in the **colonial government**, **military**, and **church**
  - **Creoles (Criollos)** → white settlers **BORN IN THE AMERICAS**
    - Owned most of the land and capital, **well-educated**, but WERE NOT eligible to serve in high government, military, or church positions
Spanish Colonies: Social Hierarchy

• **Mestizos and Mulatos**
  • People of **mixed ancestry** (mestizo: indigenous and European; mulatto: African and European)
  • Generally owned VERY LITTLE land, **worked as unskilled laborers**, servants, farmhands, or overseers
  • FREE PEOPLE, but could only hold minor positions in government, military, and church

• **Indigenous people** (indios)
  • Usually did not own land
  • **Limited legal rights and protection**

• **Enslaved people**