RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

ON THE MEXICAN MESTIZO

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No one with even a passing acquaintance with the literature on Mexican society, not to mention the rest of Spanish America, can fail to be impressed by the frequent use of the term *mestizo*.[1] Despite its ubiquity in the writings of social scientists, however, the concept of the mestizo is customarily employed in a vague fashion and usually left undefined. This is especially evident in the work of anthropologists, who for many years have been preoccupied with defining the Mexican Indian but have rarely focused their analytical powers on the mestizo. The term itself has been used rather loosely to refer to a certain group of people who presumably comprise a majority of the Mexican population,[2] a cultural pattern shared by these people and other Latin Americans,[3] and even a personality type.[4]

Ethnographers frequently refer to the communities they study as being either Indian or mestizo, but rarely do they provide enough information to allow us to decide whether these are viable identities for the people themselves or distinct cultural configurations. Usually, when used as an adjective, "mestizo" is simply a shorthand descriptive term employed by the investigator. In this context, it is little more than a catch-all designation meaning non-Indian and non-Spanish, sometimes implying as well an identification with Mexican national culture. One wonders how social scientists concerned with Mexico and its people could ever get along without the term, despite the fact that it is only infrequently used by Mexicans themselves. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán remarks: "In all cases when [Mexicans] are explicitly asked if they consider themselves mestizos, only the educated ones, that is, the intellectuals or persons who have had contact with large urban centers, agree that they are; the ordinary person is not familiar with the term or gives it another meaning."[5]

It seems clear that the term rarely, if at all, refers to a viable ethnic identity in Mexico today. When called upon to distinguish themselves from people of indigenous background, Mexicans are more likely to call themselves *gente de razón*, *gente decente*, *vecinos*, *catrines*, *correctos*, or simply *mexicanos*.[6] Yet it is obviously impossible to dismiss the concept of the mestizo altogether, for it has played an important part in the rise of Mexican nationalism, and the term itself appears frequently in historical documents, particularly those of the colonial period. This paper is not directly concerned with the current usage of the term among Mexicans themselves, nor will it deal with the concept as it is used by modern ethnographers.[7] The goal is rather to clarify the place of the mestizo in Mexican history, particularly the colonial period. While most of the data presented pertain to a single city—Oaxaca, or Antequera in colonial times—it will be argued that a similar pattern probably existed in other cities of what was once known as New Spain. The basic contention is that the historical continuity assumed by many between the colonial and modern mestizo does not in fact exist if we pay close attention to how people were racially classified in Mexican cities during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.

By far the most influential work in English that is based on this assumption is the chapter entitled "The Power Seekers" of Eric Wolf's classic *Sons of the Shaking Earth*.[8] Because Wolf's portrait of the genesis of the mestizo and his role in the making of modern Mexico has been so influential, I will use it as a foil at many points for the development of my argument. The criticism of Wolf's account, however, is not intended to belittle what I regard as a masterly synthesis of Mesoamerican culture history. Indeed, though it was written twenty years ago, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* remains remarkably current in many respects. But some of the ideas could stand revision, and this paper will attempt to show that Wolf's treatment of the mestizo now needs to be reformulated in view of recent evidence.

Wolf treats the evolution of the mestizo sector of the population as the driving force behind the major social transformations in Mexican history. Rather than attempting a serious cultural analysis of the process by which individuals of mixed Indian and Spanish background were categorized in the social structure, Wolf stresses instead the significance of the biological fact of miscegenation and the inevitable expansion over time of the racially mixed ("mestizo") population. From their origins in a rootless and unstable position beyond the pale of white Spanish colonial society, the mestizos, according to Wolf, gradually increased in numbers to the point where they overwhelmed both the whites and the Indians, the entire process coming to a head with the Revolution of 1910. He points out that from 1650 on, the mestizo sector grew at a much higher rate than the Indian sector: "In numbers the Indian has held his own, but it is clearly the mestizo who represents the future of Middle America."[9]

From our contemporary vantage point, it is difficult to argue with this statement in one sense. It is certainly true biologically, and fits with mating practices over the years as we know them. Yet, it seems, some important questions have not been asked: Were mestizos defined in colonial times in the same

way they are today? Is it valid in this case to infer ethnic and cultural processes from the biological fact of race mixture? Did individuals of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry always have a corresponding mestizo identity in the social structure? Is there indeed a demonstrable historical connection between the colonial and modern mestizo? These are questions that historical research should be able to answer.

Any effort to trace the connections between yesterday's "power seekers" and those of today is inevitably hampered by a major stumbling block: the fragmentary nature of colonial population data. Sources that provide information on the racial and ethnic divisions of the population are especially difficult to work with because they frequently contradict one another. The task before us is to compare the relative growth in the mestizo and white (Spanish) sectors, for the Indians as a group have never been serious contenders for power. For the territory of New Spain there are no comprehensive census counts that give racial divisions before 1646, and censuses from different periods do not use the same racial categories to divide the population. The best available estimate for 1646 shows that the *castas* ("mixed bloods" in general, usually divided into mestizos and mulattoes) comprised approximately 12.8 percent of the population, while the whites (including both peninsulars and creoles, or whites born in the New World) comprised 10.6 percent. The difference is not great, but especially important is the fact that only half the castas were classified in the records as mestizos; the remainder were mulattoes.[10] A century later, according to the estimates for 1742, the mestizos had overtaken the whites in numbers, accounting for slightly over 20 percent of the population (see table 1).

T A B L E 1 Population Estimate of New Spain in 1742

Classification	Number	Percent
Spaniards[a]	315,475	11.94
Mestizos	531,985	20.14
Mulattoes	187,900	7.11
Indians	1,603,220	60.70
Asiatics	2,800	0.11
TOTAL	2,641,380	100.00

Source: Peter Gerhard, *México en 1742* (Mexico City: José Porrua e Hijos, 1966), p. 17.

[a]Includes both peninsulars and creoles.

The best sources for the study of the racial composition of New Spain are the military censuses of the non-Indian and nonslave population carried out in many localities between 1791 and 1793 and now housed in the Ramos de Padrones e Historia in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. In working with the original censuses and summaries prepared from them, however, Sherburne Cook noted some curious discrepancies.[11] While the censuses themselves all employ the four categories *español*, *castizo*, *mestizo*, and *mulato*, the

summary compilations use only three: *español*, *indio*, and *mulato*. While Indians were not included in the original censuses because they (along with black and mulatto slaves) were ineligible for military conscription, the deletion of the mestizo category from the summaries is not so easily explained.

> The discrepancy in racial breakdown between the two series is puzzling. Without question the same basic enumeration is the source of both series. . . . It is quite probable that the racial grouping used by the field enumerations was reclassified by the government workers in Mexico City in conformity with their own ideas. No material change could be made in the number of Negroes or mulattoes but the various shades of white-Indian mixtures could easily be segregated in varying categories according to the anthropological, social and economic predilections of government officials.[12]

Even the two most reliable general sources on population trends in New Spain at the close of the eighteenth century disagree on the proportional representation of the castas. In his calculation for 1804, Humboldt estimated the castas to number 2,400,000, not far below his figure for the Indians. However, he was later taken to task by Fernando Navarro y Noriega, a Mexico City statistician well acquainted with population data. Navarro claimed that there were no more than 1,338,000 castas, only three-eighths the number of Indians or 22 percent of the population as a whole.[13] The two men also differed in their perceptions of the size of the mestizo group. While Humboldt, the foreigner, stressed that close to 90 percent of the castas were mestizos, Navarro, the native, claimed that Humboldt ignored the large mulatto population and estimated that

T A B L E 2 Population Estimate of New Spain in 1810

Classification	Number	Percent
Spaniards[a]	1,097,928	17.93
Castas[b]		
Mestizos	843,385	13.78
Mulattoes	495,321	8.09
Indians	3,676,281	60.05
Secular Clergy	4,229	0.07
Regular Clergy	3,112	0.05
Nuns	2,098	0.03
TOTAL	6,122,354	100.00

Source: Calculations of Fernando Navarro y Noriega, cited in Alejandro de Humboldt, *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1941), 2:26–27.

[a]Includes both peninsulars and creoles.
[b]Navarro's single figure is broken down on the assumption that mestizos accounted for 63 percent of the castas and mulattoes 37 percent.

only about 63 percent of the castas were mestizos.[14] If we apply this formula to Navarro's comprehensive population estimate for 1810, it turns out that mestizos comprised only 13.8 percent of the total—a significant *decline* in representation since 1742 (see table 2). It thus appears that racial divisions as they were culturally defined did not wholly coincide with the physical racial types produced by the miscegenation process.

Clearly, then, the use of national level statistics for the study of racial composition necessarily involves a wide margin of error. It seems preferable to work instead with local sources—such as the original censuses of the 1790s and parish records—which are more likely to reflect the racial and ethnic categories in use in particular communities. The case of colonial Oaxaca provides some interesting insights into the role of the mestizo in one important southern city.

The preceding arithmetical exercise for New Spain, though frought with difficulties, finds some confirmation at the local level in Oaxaca.[15] While no complete census figures exist for the seventeenth century, parish records (see table 3) and a tributary count of 1661[16] indicate that by 1700 mestizos comprised at best some 15 to 20 percent of the population of this city of five to six thousand people. By the time of the more reliable Revillagigedo military census of 1792, the population had tripled and reached the 18,000 mark, yet the mestizos still accounted for only about 15 percent of the populace despite the high degree of ongoing race mixture (see table 4).

T A B L E 3 Racial Composition of Marriage Partners in Oaxaca, 1693–1700

Classification	Men	Women	Total	Percent
Peninsulars	58	2	60	3.5
Creoles	258	278	536	31.2
Castizos	9	17	26	1.5
Mestizos	123	127	250	14.5
Free Mulattoes	172	174	346	20.1
Mulatto Slaves	24	14	38	2.2
Free Negroes	6	2	8	0.5
Negro Slaves	21	6	27	1.6
Caciques	8	10	18	1.0
Indians	145	176	321	18.7
Miscellaneous	3	53	86	0.3
Unidentified	33	51	84	4.9
TOTAL	860	860	1,720	100.0

Source: Archivo Parroquial del Sagrario, Oaxaca, *Libros de Casamientos*, 1693–1700. Reprinted by permission from John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978), p. 132.

T A B L E 4 The Population of Oaxaca, 1792

Classification	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Peninsulars	261	13	274	1.5
Creoles	3,041	3,640	6,681ᵃ	37.1
Castizos	433	371	804	4.5
Mestizos	1,228	1,284	2,512	13.9
Moriscos or Pardos	95	118	213	1.2
Mulattoes	911	980	1,891	10.5
Afromestizosᵇ	185	198	383	2.1
Negroesᶜ	15	12	27	0.1
Indians	2,644	2,374	5,018	27.9
Unidentified	82	123	205	1.1
TOTAL	8,895	9,113	18,008	99.9

Source: Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico City), Padrones 13 and Tributos 34, 7:51r. Reprinted by permission from John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978), p. 156.

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.
ᵃThis figure includes members of the religious orders: 138 males and 177 females. Though the census does not give their racial classifications, miscellaneous sources suggest that most were creoles.
ᵇAn artificial category not appearing in the census itself.
ᶜDoes not include most of the Negro slaves.

This means that the proportion of mestizos in Oaxaca identified as such may even have declined during the course of the eighteenth century, a trend which in this case cannot be easily explained in terms of geographical mobility. During this period the city's creole and Indian sectors increased significantly in size, and since the non-Indian population of the Bishopric of Oaxaca was quite small at this time, it is doubtful that the city's burgeoning economy of the late eighteenth century would attract *only* creoles and Indians from other areas. While the information on places of origin in the 1772 census is unreliable, a similar count done in the city of Guanajuato in the same year reveals that 77.7 percent of the adult non-Indian males were born in the city or in nearby mining villages and *ranchos*. Only among the elite, and especially among the merchant class, was there a significant degree of immigration.[17]

What, then, was happening to individuals of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry and how were they identified in the parish records and census counts if not by the term "mestizo"? Marriage records from the last decade of the seventeenth century show a considerable degree of intermarriage among Oaxaca's socioracial categories of peninsular, creole, mestizo, mulatto, and Indian, the overall ratio of mixed unions during 1693–1700 being 41.6 percent.[18] The mestizos were the most heterogeneous of all the categories, with only 37.5 percent of the grooms marrying within the group. Fully 22.7 percent married white women (creoles), 23.4 percent married *mulatas*, and 12.5 percent took Indian mates. Of

the mestiza women, 26.4 percent married peninsulars or creoles, Indian husbands were the choice of 15.2 percent, and 28.7 percent married *mulatos*. These figures suggest that the most probable explanation of the small size of the mestizo group in Oaxaca was the assimilation of large numbers of biological mestizos (and mulattoes as well) into the creole group. This process frequently occurred in cases where the children of, say, a mestizo man and a creole woman were identified as creoles. It is true that there was an additional category of castizo which could be applied to such offspring, but it was used sparingly in Oaxaca and had very limited significance. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for mestizos and others of miscegenated background to attain the status of creole during their lifetime through the accumulation of wealth or strategic alliances.[19]

These data show, then, that the standard picture of the genesis of the colonial mestizo as articulated by Wolf errs in assuming that the cultural categories used by the people themselves were in one-to-one correspondence with the biological process of *mestizaje*. The biological mestizos of mixed Spanish and Indian extraction are assumed to have been operating with a corresponding mestizo identity when, in Oaxaca at least, they often were not. Indeed, both parish and census figures show that in Oaxaca it was the white or creole population which was constantly expanding during the colonial period, not the mestizo sector. The urban Indian population was growing as well, primarily through migration from rural towns and villages. Yet the urban Indians did not "feed" the mestizo sector to the same extent that the mestizos contributed to the growth of the creole sector. As I have discussed elsewhere, Indians in colonial Oaxaca formed a more homogeneous and tightly bounded ethnic group, occupied a more uniform position at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, and were residentially segregated.[20] While some Indians undoubtedly succeeded in becoming mestizos, this was an infrequent occurrence in comparison to the extensive racial mobility among the castas.

An additional, and perhaps more important, aspect of Wolf's argument concerns the position of the urban mestizo in Mexican colonial society. The mestizo, according to Wolf, was "disinherited," "socially alienated," and "deprived of a stable place in the social order." "Such men constituted neither a middle class nor a proletariat" but "belonged to a social shadow world."[21] Again, however, the data from Oaxaca point in a different direction. Only during the sixteenth century can the Oaxaca mestizos be characterized as rootless individuals who formed an identifiable pariah group. At that time all people of miscegenated background were regarded as inherently inferior, both morally and biologically. They were categorically defined as illegitimate by the white elite.

But during the seventeenth century race became institutionalized as a status marker and mestizos, along with the mulattoes, were grudgingly accorded a place in the urban racial system. By now too numerous to ignore and too necessary to the city's economic functions to be excluded, the mestizos were incorporated into the system and conceptually ranked between the whites and the urban Indian proletariat. A 1661 census shows that in contrast to the Indians,

mestizos were not residentially segregated in Oaxaca. Many of them were concentrated in poor neighborhoods on the edge of town, but there were also substantial numbers mixed in among the whites in areas where Indian homeowners, in contrast, were totally absent.[22]

The occupations of the mestizo males are also worth noting. The late seventeenth century marriage sample referred to above yielded 132 mestizo and castizo[23] grooms, of which occupations were listed for 68 percent. Not surprisingly, the figures show very few mestizos in the ranks of the large landowners, merchants, and such high-status artisans as the gilders, silversmiths, painters, and sculptors. They were, however, well represented in the city's low-status artisan trades (especially those of the blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, tanners, tailors, and hatmakers), and belonged to racially mixed craft guilds (*gremios*). It is clear that, taken as a whole, their occupational status did not imply a socially marginal position, for many whites held similar jobs. In fact, over half of the mestizos in the sample were employed as artisans and many of them worked at the same jobs alongside creoles, mulattoes, and often Indians as well.

The marriage registers also provide some interesting figures on legitimacy rates for various racial categories of the population. They show that by 1700, 57 percent of the mestizos married in the church (the only legal form of marriage at the time) were of legitimate birth. It would seem that such conditions would make it difficult for whites to continue to stereotype all mestizos as illegitimate, particularly since 27 percent of the creoles in the same sample were born out of wedlock.

The trends just outlined continued to intensify during the course of the eighteenth century as the mestizos were further assimilated into the creole group. According to the 1792 census, only 14 of a total of 754 adult mestizo males were unemployed. Most held steady jobs as members of the city's artisan guilds, and a few managed to penetrate the ranks of the *hacendados*, professionals, and high-status artisans. Marriage records from the last decade of the eighteenth century show little change in the marrying habits of mestizo males, who remained a quite heterogeneous group although now a slightly higher percentage (25.4) took creole wives.[24] Among the mestiza brides, however, creole husbands were slightly more common than mestizo husbands. Significantly, by this time the legitimacy rate of mestizos married in church approached 90 percent, surpassing even that of the creoles and making it highly unlikely that mestizos could continue to be characterized as illegitimate any longer.

The legal boundary between creoles and mestizos had also become blurred. Mestizos were no longer categorically excluded from public and religious office if they were of legitimate birth, and most in Oaxaca were. Proof of mestizo ancestry was becoming acceptable in legal proceedings to establish one's "purity of blood" (*limpieza de sangre*), whereas a century before only direct descent from pure Spanish stock with no taint of Indian blood would do. By at least the mid-seventeenth century in Oaxaca the ongoing process of mestizaje had reached a point where it could no longer be regarded by the elite as an aberration in an otherwise "normal" system of ethnically defined "estates" of Spaniards, Indians and blacks. The white elite ceased to view the mestizos as

illegitimate misfits and incorporated them into the urban stratification and status system.

On one important point, however, I do agree with Wolf's analysis. He is right in stressing that the colonial mestizos comprised neither a class nor a culture.[25] Though they are often regarded by other writers as a distinct stratum in a hierarchy of racially defined estates or "castes," the case of Oaxaca does not wholly support this interpretation.[26] In a city like Oaxaca where race mixture was extensive and frequently legitimized by marriage and where the phenomenon of passing was endemic, it would be wrong to conceive of stratification in racial terms alone. The observed heterogeneity of the mestizos and lack of correspondence between the city's occupational and racial hierarchies suggest that economic determinants of rank were also of some importance, perhaps equally important as race by the close of the eighteenth century. But why then did racial classification continue and the mestizo category persist as an element in the colonial *sistema de castas*?

Above all, this system in Oaxaca reflected the viewpoint of the people in power—the dominant white, Spanish elite and the secular and ecclesiastic bureaucracies. Though race as a status marker was losing ground during the eighteenth century, the elite could not psychologically accept this fact without giving up its rationale for colonial domination. People at the top therefore continued to view their society in racial and ethnic terms (and classify people accordingly in censuses and parish registers), even though people of mixed racial background at the middle and lower levels saw things differently. Racial mobility was the order of the day for many castas, and the system had actually become quite fluid. Like all other colonial societies, this one was not without its fundamental contradictions. There were most likely wide differences in ideology and social values, the ideology of race being a case in point. The phenomenon of passing and the shrinking size of the mestizo group during the eighteenth century suggests that over time, race as defined from above—by government officials, priests, and white elitists—was giving way to race as seen from below. Indeed, as will be shown below, there is information that indicates that the categories of mestizo and creole were merged into one by many people at the start of the nineteenth century.

It seems highly unlikely that the Oaxaca mestizos comprised a group in the sociological sense, and their awareness of a shared identity must have been extremely weak if it existed at all. I would argue that a mestizo's racial classification in Oaxaca was situationally determined and contingent upon what he perceived as best serving his own interests in a given context. Racial identities most frequently came into play when lower-class individuals came into contact with members of the elite and official bureaucracies. These and other "racially significant" situations were, to use Harry Hoetink's phrase, "non-intimate relations between the races in superficial everyday intercourse."[27] In contrast, I suspect that racial labeling was of only minimal significance in more intimate sorts of situations where the participating individuals knew one another well.

The rigid view of the colonial elite notwithstanding, the rapidly accumulating exceptions to the normative prescriptions of the sistema de castas during

the eighteenth century show that we are dealing not with a homogeneous ethnic group or social stratum, but with a highly flexible *social identity*. A mestizo regarded his race not so much as an indicator of group membership or an ascriptive badge of self-definition within a static and rigid social system, but rather as one component of his social identity which could be manipulated and often changed. Many "mestizos" who were economically successful or were able to form strategic marriage alliances ceased to be mestizos.

It remains to be seen how the ambiguous status of the mestizo in Oaxaca compares with information from other parts of New Spain. Does Oaxaca represent a peculiar regional variant, or does it typify trends that can also be found elsewhere? While no fully comparable studies exist, what little data are available indicate that the mestizo in colonial Oaxaca probably had much in common with his counterparts in other urban areas. The parish marriage registers of the northern city of León, studied by David Brading and Celia Wu, show that in the late eighteenth century the mestizos were the smallest racial group, far outnumbered in each case by Spaniards, mulattoes, and Indians.

> The mestizos, the smallest group under consideration, betrayed a striking lack of homogeneity. The male intermarriage rate ranged from 61 percent in 1782–85 to 52 percent in 1792–93. As befitted their middle rank, about a fifth married "upwards" to Spaniards, and the remainder "downwards" to mulattoes and Indians. The ambiguous quality of mestizo status is best revealed in their womenfolk. In both samples there were considerably more mestizo women than men, and in each case about three-quarters of them married out of their ethnic category. About two-fifths chose mulattoes, and just under a fifth Spaniards. Unlike mulatto and Indian women, they were somewhat more upwardly mobile than their men. But then, granted their greater number, the suspicion exists that many may well have been mulattoes or Indians on the move.[28]

Of course, further research is needed to make any meaningful comparisons between Oaxaca ar.. León, but the ambiguity noted by Brading and Wu is certainly reminiscent of what we have seen so far. This may be highly significant since in other respects the two cities and their surrounding regions differed markedly.[29]

The small size of the mestizo population in other localities of New Spain is reflected in baptismal and marriage figures from 1821 to 1832 published by Moisés González Navarro.[30] In Mexico City, Guadalajara, Ameca, Arandas, and Hermosillo we find that there were far fewer mestizos than creoles listed in the records. Far better confirmation of this general trend comes from the 1793 censuses of New Spain referred to earlier. Aguirre Beltrán's published tallies for sixty-four different communities—both rural and urban—show that while proportional representation of mestizos does indeed vary from place to place, in virtually all the major cities the creoles always comprised the single largest non-Indian racial group.[31] A good example is the capital itself, where, according to

Humboldt, in 1793 creoles accounted for 49 percent of the population, peninsulars 2 percent, Indians 24 percent, and all castas combined only 25 percent.[32]

All of these figures suggest a strong negative correlation between degree of urbanization and the relative size of the mestizo sector. The more people and power concentrated in a given urban center, the greater the likelihood that many biological mestizos would swell the ranks of the creole group, leaving the mestizo category with proportionately fewer individuals. This is offered as a hypothesis to be tested, not a finding, for I have not systematically compared the figures controlling for city size. Generally, however, there seems to be good reason to expect that the overall pattern of intermarriage, racial mobility, and the ambiguity of mestizo status in Oaxaca was more the rule rather than the exception in urban New Spain toward the close of the colonial period. Mestizos, as they were then defined, were not multiplying by leaps and bounds, but just barely holding their own.

On the eve of independence, then, the "power seekers" were still just as white as ever and still "Spaniards" rather than mestizos. While their phenotype had certainly darkened over the years, their steady absorption of Indian and black genes did not seriously affect their social status as "whites." Indeed, it appears that the mestizos were being merged with the creoles rather than vice-versa. In Oaxaca, as pointed out, mestizos of legitimate birth were no longer stigmatized as their ancestors had once been. That proof of mestizo ancestry was now often acceptable in limpieza de sangre proceedings indicates that mestizo status was at least for some purposes functionally equivalent to white.

There is other evidence, though admittedly slim, that suggests that categories were being collapsed in a similar fashion in other regions. Three astute observers of Mexican society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries give the distinct impression that the mestizo was no longer automatically included in the culturally-defined casta (mixed) sector. In his 1820 critique of Humboldt's handling of population data, Navarro y Noriega accuses him of severely underestimating the mulatto element: "It is very important to note that among these *castas*, those of African extraction that were subject to tribute and also excluded from honorific posts can only enjoy the rights of citizenship when they prove themselves worthy by their virtue and merit. [If so] this prerogative is granted by the Córtes as provided by the political Constitution of the Monarchy in article 22. They probably approximate half a million in numbers."[33] There is nothing new in this statement, yet I think it significant that Navarro did not feel compelled to say anything at all about the legal status of mestizos.

More direct support for my hypothesis comes from the pen of the Bishop of Michoacán in 1799, Fray Antonio de San Miguel, in the *Informe del obispo y cabildo eclesiástico de Valladolid de Michoacán al rey sobre jurisdicción e inmunidades del clero americano*.

> The *castas*, descendants of the black slaves, are marked as despicable by the law and subject to tribute, which stains them indelibly. This is regarded as a stigma of slavery transmissible to even the most remote generations. Among *la raza de mezcla*, that is, among

the mestizos and mulattoes, there are many families that could be confused with the Spaniards on the basis of their color, physiognomy, and customs. But in the eyes of the law they are debased and despised. These men of color, endowed with an energetic and ardent character, live in a state of constant irritation against the whites. It is a wonder that their resentment does not more often prompt them to seek revenge.[34]

In this statement we see a curious inconsistency that further underscores the ambiguity surrounding the late colonial mestizo. The bishop begins by defining the castas as descendants of black slaves and tribute payers, thus excluding the mestizos from this group since they were eligible for neither. In the very next sentence, however, he includes both mestizos and mulattoes in *la raza de mezcla*. Finally, he suggests to us the reason for his own confusion: that many mestizos and mulattoes by 1799 were virtually indistinguishable in outward appearance from the white Spaniards.

The third and final observer I wish to mention is the Mexican critic and journalist, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, author of the novel *Periquillo Sarniento*.[35] First published in 1816, this early Latin American novel provides much insightful commentary on the social composition of colonial Mexican society (especially in Mexico City) in the final years before the war of independence. Significantly, among the many characters in the book one finds *españoles*, *blancos* (these terms are used interchangeably), *mulatos*, *lobos*, *prietos*, and *morenos*. But there are no mestizos. Lizardi sketches the opposition and combination of white and black, but the Indian's contribution to the miscegenation process is not explicitly recognized by any term. In fact, the word mestizo does not appear even once in the entire work, so far as I am aware. Could it be that by this time, the mestizos had merged to such a degree with the creoles that Lizardi could conveniently conceptualize all these individuals simply as españoles or blancos? If so, it would seem that at the time of independence the mestizos were headed for extinction.

It should now be clear why Wolf's use of the concept of the mestizo obscures rather than highlights the social formation of modern Mexican society. He writes: "Denied his patrimony by society, the mestizo was yet destined to be its heir and receiver. . . . As the mestizos filled with their own web of relationships the social void left by the Spanish overlords, they also projected into the society that harbored them a common emotional force, the passion of nationalism. . . . The mestizo emerged from his shadow world on the edges of society into the full light of day."[36] Most of all, Wolf sees the Revolution of 1910 as the source of the mestizo's "legitimacy" and access to the "levers of power." But in light of the hard evidence examined so far, these sweeping generalizations seem untenable. The phrases may be finely turned, but I think the judgment must be that they do not add up to good history. The attempt to use the mestizo as a metaphor for the formation of modern Mexican society simply doesn't work—at least not until the beginning of the twentieth century.

I do not question the close relationship between Mexican nationalism and

the concept of the mestizo as a political symbol today. It could be maintained that it is impossible to separate the two, since the terms "mexicano" and "mestizo" are now often treated as synonymous. But to trace the roots of nationalism directly to the emergence of the colonial mestizo—the crux of Wolf's argument—confuses biological mestizos as the products of miscegenation with the culturally defined colonial mestizo identity, which, as we have seen, was something quite different.

The trajectory of Mexican history shows the progressive reduction of a complex racial classification system through the elimination of the whites and mulattoes. One must not make the mistake, however, of assigning the same meaning to the surviving terms in different periods. Wolf's error is his failure to recognize the importance of the white creole as an ethnic symbol in the process of nation-building during the nineteenth century. His discussion of the "power seekers" overlooks one important point: even in the late colonial and early national periods, in order to have any hope at all of gaining access to the "levers of power" one had to be classified as white, i.e., a creole or peninsular Spaniard. The evidence from Oaxaca shows that many "mestizos" were in fact quite adept at this game.

We are left with the problem of tracing racial and ethnic change through the nineteenth century in the absence of much concrete data.[37] The legal abolition of the entire racial classification system in 1822 surely had some effect on race relations and the stratification system, though it has yet to receive detailed study. At this point we must rely on what Mexican intellectual history can tell us about the ideology of race and the mestizo during the nineteenth century. Comprehensive treatment of this topic lies beyond the scope of this article, and I merely wish to point out that Mexican "whites" were very much in evidence during these years. The first symbol of national identity to arise after independence was the creole—not the mestizo—and during the entire nineteenth century "the Indian and the mestizo, the latter lacking private property and the former unwilling to accept it, could not in any way be converted into ethnic symbols of nationhood; they were, as Pimentel put it [in 1864], strangers in their own country."[38] The *pensador* and essayist Ignacio Ramírez ("El Nigromante"), himself of Indian background, was the first Mexican writer to stress racial fusion and the pivotal role of the mestizo in Mexico's future.[39] Yet Aguirre points out that it was not until the early twentieth century that thinkers like Andrés Molina Enríquez and José Vasconcelos put the mestizo at the apex of humanity.[40]

Thus, despite the preoccupation of a few nineteenth-century intellectuals with the implications of race mixture, it appears that it was in the main the Mexican Revolution with its ideology of "power to the people" that brought the mestizo back again, and this time to center stage. The creole was transformed into a new kind of person. The revolution effectively did away with the white-Spanish-creole category and the mestizos—now officially sanctioned by the government and popular opinion—inherited the reins of power. This was no resurrection of the old colonial mestizo identity, however, but a wholly new social vision based on different premises. The colonial mestizo was a member of Hispanic society and along with the Spaniards stood in fundamental opposition

to the Indian in the ethnic sense. But the revolutionary mestizo of the twentieth century, as a symbol of national identity, is much closer to the Indian than to the whites or Europeans.

To sum up, there appears to be no direct historical thread that connects today's urban mestizos with the colonial mestizos as I have described them. In each case, both the people and the concepts denoted by the term are quite different. It is clear that the social history of Mexico cannot be interpreted in terms of any monolithic ethnic formula. What is not so clear is the fate of the mestizo during most of the nineteenth century. Until more information becomes available, we cannot be absolutely sure who were the "power seekers" of that crucial period. In any case, the investigator must take care to avoid projecting current definitions of ethnic concepts back into previous eras.

The issues addressed here are fundamentally historical in nature, and it is not my wish to exaggerate the importance of the concept of the mestizo in Mexico today. As an ethnic term, it has been replaced in large part by "mexicano" and other words that have no racial referents. With the exception of some coastal regions, racial and ethnic terms of any sort are little used in central Mexico today, Oaxaca included. When direct inquiries about the term mestizo are made, more often than not they are met with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders and the reply, "todos somos mestizos."

One of the reasons for this shrug of the shoulders is that the symbolic referent of the mestizo concept today is not race or ethnicity, but *culture*. It is a symbol of national cultural unity, not racial fusion. This shift in meaning, it seems to me, is one of the principal ideological outcomes of the Mexican Revolution and the ensuing politics of *indigenismo*. I think it fitting to close with a passage from Octavio Paz, who, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, perhaps comes closer than anyone else to capturing the essence of Mexican identity today: "The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes the son of Nothingness. His beginnings are in his own self."[41]

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 75th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., 17–21 November 1976. I wish to thank my colleagues William P. Delaney, Karl L. Eggert, and Hugo Martines, as well as three anonymous readers provided by this journal, for their comments and criticisms on earlier drafts.
2. For recent examples see Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Study of Forced Identity in Contemporary Mexico* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975); and Barbara Luise Margolies, *Princes of the Earth: Subcultural Diversity in a Mexican Municipality* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1975).
3. John Gillin, "Modern Latin American Culture," *Social Forces* 25 (1947):243–48; and "Mestizo America," in *Most of the World*, ed. Ralph Linton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp. 156–211.
4. Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

5.   Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Obra polémica* (Mexico City: SEP-INAH, 1976), p. 119.
6.   Ibid.
7.   The difference in meaning between the terms *mestizo* and *ladino* is a related topic of interest that will not be dealt with here. The latter term is most commonly used in the highland regions of Chiapas, Mexico and Guatemala. See Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Mestizo or Ladino?," *Race* 10 (1969):463–77.
8.   Wolf, *Shaking Earth*.
9.   Ibid., p. 235.
10. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México: estudio etnohistórico*, Segunda Edición (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), p. 219. I have reinterpreted Aguirre Beltrán's idiosyncratic definition of racial categories in his table 10.
11. S. F. Cook, "The Population of Mexico in 1793," *Human Biology* 14 (1942):499–515.
12. Ibid., p. 503 fn.
13. Fernando Navarro y Noriega, *Memoria sobre la población del reino de Nueva España* (Mexico City: Oficina de D. Juan Bautista de Arizpe, 1820), p. 15.
14. Alejandro de Humboldt, *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1941) 2:140; Navarro y Noriega, *Memoria*, p. 15.
15. The data that form the base for this discussion come from chapters 5 and 6 of John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978).
16. Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Patronato 230B, Ramo 10.
17. D. A. Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763–1810* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 248–49.
18. Archivo Parroquial del Sagrario, Oaxaca, *Libros de Casamientos*, 1693–1700.
19. These matters are discussed at greater length in Chance, *Race and Class*.
20. John K. Chance, "The Urban Indian in Colonial Oaxaca," *American Ethnologist* 3(1976):603–32.
21. Wolf, *Shaking Earth*, pp. 238–42.
22. Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Patronato 230B, Ramo 10.
23. Technically, *castizos* were nonwhites who derived from creole-mestizo unions. Since in Oaxaca they were very small in numbers and did not constitute a significant element in the social structure, they have been included with the mestizos in these figures.
24. Archivo Parroquial del Sagrario, Oaxaca, *Libros de Casamientos*, 1793–97.
25. Wolf, *Shaking Earth*, p. 243.
26. Lyle McAlister, in "Social Structure and Social Change in New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 43 (1963):349–70 includes the mestizos in the *casta* stratum. Magnus Mörner, in *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), chapter 5, regards the colonial mestizos as forming a distinct racial estate. For a more detailed critique of these positions see John K. Chance and William B. Taylor, "Estate and Class in a Colonial City: Oaxaca in 1792," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19 (1977):454–87; and Chance, *Race and Class*.
27. H. Hoetink, *Caribbean Race Relations: A Study of Two Variants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 21.
28. D. A. Brading and Celia Wu, "Population Growth and Crisis: León, 1720–1860," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 5 (1973):8–9.
29. Brading and Wu ("Population Growth," pp. 9, 36) point out that by the end of the eighteenth century the Indian and mulatto groups of the Bajío region were fast losing their separate ethnic identities. In Oaxaca, by contrast, there was much less intermarriage between Indians and non-Indians, and more Indian males married creole than mulatto women in the late eighteenth century. Indian identity in Oaxaca remained strong in both rural and urban settings. See Chance, "The Urban Indian," p. 628.
30. Moisés González Navarro, "*Mestizaje* in Mexico during the National Period," in *Race and Class in Latin America*, ed. Magnus Mörner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 145–69.
31. Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, pp. 226–27.

32. Humboldt, *Ensayo Político* 2:120.
33. Navarro y Noriega, *Memoria*, p. 15.
34. Quoted in Humboldt, *Ensayo Político* 2:101.
35. José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, *Periquillo Sarniento* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1976), 2 vols.
36. Wolf, *Shaking Earth*, pp. 241, 244, 246.
37. See González Navarro, *"Mestizaje"* for a brief discussion.
38. Aguirre Beltrán, *Obra polémica*, p. 141.
39. See Martin S. Stabb, "Indigenism and Racism in Mexican Thought: 1857–1911," *Journal of Interamerican Studies* 1 (1959), p. 413.
40. Aguirre Beltrán, *Obra polémica*, p. 145.
41. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 87.