Colonialism, Institutional Change, and Shifts in Global Labour Relations

de Zwart, Pim, Hofmeester, Karin

Published by Amsterdam University Press

de Zwart, Pim and Karin Hofmeester.
Colonialism, Institutional Change, and Shifts in Global Labour Relations.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66595.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66595

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2365137
Part II

Changing Labour and Land Market Institutions
Extractive Economy and Institutions?

Technology, Labour, and Land in Potosí, the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*

Rossana Barragán

Hofmeester, Karin & Pim de Zwart (eds.), Colonialism, Institutional Change, and Shifts in Global Labour Relations. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018

DOI: 10.5117/9789462984363/CH07

Abstract

The mita is frequently seen as a paradigmatic example of an extractive economic and political institution of the Spanish Empire. This chapter first provides an overview of the complex process to obtain silver, showing it is more than mere extraction. The second part delineates a complex picture of extraction based on unfree (mita) and free labour, at the same time. A close analysis of the mita reveals changes, reminding us that institutions have a transformative history. Behind the continuity of the mita, there were far-reaching changes like the emergence of an important group of self-employed workers (kajchas) who were processing ores. In the third part, labour relations are linked to the institutions of land and mine ownership within the Spanish Empire.

Keywords: institutional perspectives, silver mines, extraction, land and property

In La Virgen del Cerro, a painting of the mountain of Potosí represented as Virgin Mary, the world is in the foreground. To the right is the great Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), to the left the Pope, and behind them, in the distance,
the Inca with his sceptre. The world has been reorganized, starting from the mining of silver that gave rise to a long production chain and to global trade, allowing the connection of all the continents from the end of the sixteenth century, when Potosí accounted for between 60 and 70 per cent

1 The author of this eighteenth-century work is unknown. The painting is in the Museum of the House Mint of Potosí. There are also other anonymous paintings with the same topic.
of the entire world’s silver production. The non-mining sector – mainly comprising cochineal, indigo, wood, pearls, silk, medicinal plants, and sugar – represented 14 per cent of the total exports between 1561 and 1650, while around 90 per cent of the silver was destined for the metropolis.

Production in the Potosí silver mines boomed spectacularly, giving rise to a “silver age” (instead of a “golden age”) between 1549 and the early 1600s, followed by a decline during the long seventeenth century and a recovery between the 1720s and the 1790s. Throughout this period, the mines were worked by the indigenous population. Although the system of work was based on both unfree and free labour, the emphasis in literature, particularly from the point of view of the economic institutional perspective, is on the mita or unfree labour. The mita became a paradigmatic example of an economic and political institution of the Spanish Empire that explains the differences in “power, prosperity and poverty”, or “why some nations fail” and others do not, in the words of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. They speak in terms of inclusive economic and political institutions versus extractive economic and political institutions. The former should secure private property, an unbiased system of law, and

2 Silver fuelled the “birth of world trade”, allowing continuous and constant exchange among the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is estimated that Latin America produced approximately 150,000 tons of silver between 1500 and 1800, some 80 per cent of the entire world’s production in this period, from which 60 per cent came from Potosí’s mines in the second half of the sixteenth century. For Arturo Giráldez, global trade “emerged when all important populated continents began to exchange products continuously and in values sufficient to generate crucial impacts on all the trading partners.” Giráldez, “Born with a Silver Spoon”, pp. 31, 32, 40.

3 Assadourian, El sistema, pp. 211, 216. Garner stated, following data from Sluiter, that between 1575 and 1650, 83 per cent of silver left America: 76 per cent went to Europe and 7 per cent to the East. Garner, “Where Did All the Silver Go?”.

4 For Richard Garner, Potosí had growth (1549-1605), decline (1606-1723), revival (1724-1783), and finally decline (1784-1810). Garner, “Long-Term Silver Mining Trends”, p. 908. For Enrique Tandeter, the revival went from 1731 until 1800. The source for Tandeter is J.J. Te Paske. Even with a somewhat diminished role, towards the 1770s, Potosí accounted for 40 per cent of the silver from the Viceroyalty of Peru and after its separation from the Viceroyalty of Peru it accounted for 65 per cent of the production of the new Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. See Tandeter, “ Forced and Free Labor”, p. 100. According to Garner, the annual growth rate of Potosí was 1.8 per cent in this last period. “Output was as high in the last quarter of the eighteenth century as at any time since the middle of the seventeenth century, but it was still only half of what it had been at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century […] Without Potosí’s eighteenth century revival, both the mining economy and the general economy might have remained stalled down to the end of the colonial period, or at the very least, until the reorganization of the viceroyalty in 1778”: Garner, “Long-Term Silver Mining Trends”, pp. 910-911.

5 Acemoglu and Robinson, Why Nations Fail.
freedom to contract and exchange— a model that seems to fit the United States, a former British colony. The latter is the opposite, and applies to the Spanish colonies. This position also assumes that the exploitation of silver is an extractive process.

Acemoglu and Robinson are also very well known for their thesis about the “reversal of fortunes”, or the process by which countries that were rich became poor or vice versa. This situation too is explained by the role of institutions. The authors claim there are societies that provide incentives for investments, called institutions of private property, allowing for better economic performance. By contrast, extractive institutions concentrate power in the hands of a small elite, create risks for expropriation, and discourage investment.

In a previous work, Acemoglu, Robinson, and Simon Johnson point out that inequalities were determined not by factor endowments, as Stanley Engerman and Kenneth Sokoloff argued, but by colonial rule, the political economy of conquest, and enslavement. Very few people could disagree with this statement because colonialism, by definition, concerns unequal relationships between a colonial power and subordinated colonized territories and peoples. The issue becomes problematic when the authors introduce their examples. Engerman and Sokoloff underline the importance of two linked elements: the institutions and the concentration of wealth. They state that institutions included not only formal political and legal structures, but also culture. The Spanish practices “of awarding claims on land, native labour, and rich mineral resources to members of the elite encouraged the formation of highly concentrated landholdings and extreme inequality”, in contrast to the British colonies. The same antinomy is present in the distinction between a mercantilist model and a liberal one. The Spanish colonies fit the first model, producing predatory,

6 Ibid., p. 75.
7 Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, “Reversal of Fortune”. With regard to the mita as a clear example of an economic and political institution where forced workers could not choose (also implying the development of systems of the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow elite), see Acemoglu and Robinson, Why Nations Fail, pp. 77, 81.
8 See Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, “Colonial Origins”, and Engerman and Sokoloff, “Factor Endowments”.
10 “In contrast, small family farms were the rule in the northern colonies of the North American mainland that favored a more equal distribution of wealth, more democratic political institutions, more extensive domestic markets, and the pursuit of more growth-oriented policies than did those in the former.” Engerman and Sokoloff, “Factors Endowments”, p. 262. See also Sokoloff and Engerman, “History Lessons”. 
patrimonial states, and dysfunctional markets, whereas the British colonies are seen as liberal, with a settled population, smallholders, and free markets.\textsuperscript{11}

There are some general and specific problems in the historical institutional perspective that suggests, as we have seen, an opposition between good and successful institutions and bad and failed institutions. First, as Regina Grafe and María Alejandra Irigoin point out, the Spanish Empire is reduced to an absolutist, interventionist, centralist, statist empire that was disinclined to grant its subjects local government, whereas the British Empire in North America is depicted as having a parliamentary government and of granting self-government.\textsuperscript{12} Second, as Gareth Austin states, the thesis of the reversal of fortunes implies a compression of history horizontally (through space) and vertically (through time), oversimplifying the issue of causation.\textsuperscript{13} Third, it would be important to include the treatment and position of Native Americans\textsuperscript{14} and the question of slavery through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – particularly in Virginia and Carolina.

There are more specific issues in the accounts of the exploitation of silver, labour, and land in the Spanish Empire. Here again, the analysis is reductionist and equivocal, because Spanish colonial reality was much more complex than described by the authors. Silver is not obtained as a “fruit” ready to pick in the mines, but as ores, which have to be treated involving a long process that cannot be underestimated. In the case of labour in Potosí, we are faced with the extraction of a worldwide commodity, silver, which was based on unfree (\textit{mita}) and free labour, at the same time. A close analysis of the \textit{mita} furthermore reveals changes, reminding us that institutions have a transformative history. Behind the continuity of the \textit{mita} over more than two and a half centuries, there were far-reaching changes, obliterated in general accounts. It is also important to consider that the labour system in Potosí was partly the result of the agency of workers. Lastly,

\textsuperscript{11} Lange, Mahoney and Vom Hau, “Colonialism and Development”.
\textsuperscript{12} Grafe and Irigoin, “The Spanish Empire”, p. 243. Both have criticized New Institutional Economics and opposed the factor endowments perspective, arguing that these points of view present a simplistic portrayal of the Spanish Empire. They claim that the Spanish fiscal system did not “aim at the extraction of resources or revenues from the colonies for the benefit of the metropolis. Instead it aimed at making the colonies self-sufficient.” They opposed “extractive institutions”, which “concentrate power in the hands of a small elite” to “institutions of private property” seen as essential for investment and successful economies: Irigoin and Grafe, “Bargaining for Absolutism”.
\textsuperscript{13} Austin, “The ‘Reversal of Fortune’ Thesis”.
\textsuperscript{14} See Reséndez, \textit{The Other Slavery}. 
with regard to land, it is well known that the phenomena of large landed estates or *latifundia* was not a feature of the Spanish Empire, but much more of the post-colonial period, and that the distribution was not more concentrated in Latin America than in the British colonies, as Coatsworth points out.\(^{15}\) In the Andean region, the Indian communities disposed of their lands, and community members were recruited as part of the draft system to work in the mines (as *mita* labourers). Accordingly, work also has to be related to the new property rights for land and mines, an important topic that is not always present in labour historiography.

In the first part of this chapter, I provide an overview of the complex process to obtain silver, in contrast to the perspective that assumes it to be mere extraction. The second part delineates a much more complex picture of the different labour relationships in Potosí. I argue that there was a system of work that articulated unfree (*mita*) and free (*minga*) labour, rather than two separate categories of labourers (*mitayos* and *mingas*).\(^{16}\) In line with the taxonomy of the Global Collaboratory of the IISH, the *mita* was tributary labour during the Inca period, converted under Spanish rule into a combination of features of tributary and commodified labour. Tributary in the sense that workers were obliged to work by the state, but for private Spanish mine and mill owners.\(^{17}\) Commodified, because the *mita* workers received a wage, but also because the product of their work, silver, was at the birth of global trade.

\(^{15}\) Coatsworth, “Structures”, p. 139.

\(^{16}\) A *mitayo* was a worker in the *mita* system. Viceroy Francisco de Toledo implemented the colonial *mita* system, an Indian draft labour system in the mines, in 1573. The classic studies of Potosí and Indian labour remain, for the early period, Crespo Rodas, “La *mita* de Potosí”; Bakewell, *Miners of the Red Mountain*; and Cole, *The Potosí Mita*. For the later periods, see Buechler, *Gobierno, minería y sociedad*; Tandeter, “Forced and Free Labor”; and Tandeter, *Coacción y mercado*. For the early period, see also Platt, Bouysse-Cassagne, and Harris, *Qaraqara-Charka*. A full account of the historiography on the *mita* is not possible here. For an interesting overview, see the introduction (pp. xiv-xxix) in González Casasnovas, *Las dudas de la corona*, and Barragán “Working Silver”. One salient issue that remains under discussion is whether or not there was continuity between the Incaic and Spanish *mita* systems. Barnadas and Tandeter argue that these were two distinct systems. See Josep Barnadas, *Charcas*, p. 262, and Tandeter, *Coacción y mercado*, p. 44. Tristan Platt, in contrast, argues that “The *mita* represented a major element of continuity with the Incaico because the Incas had demanded labor rather than goods from the subjects incorporated into Tawantinsuyu”: Platt, “Señorio Aymara”. The term *minga* is a hispanization of the Aymara word *mink’a* and of the Quechua word *minq’ay* still in use today to describe an agricultural wage labourer or a person who works for payment in kind rather than money. Paula Zagalsky is preparing a book on the early *mita*. See “La mita de Potosí: una imposición colonial invariable en un contexto de múltiples transformaciones (siglos XVI-XVII; Charcas, Virreinato del Perú), Chungará, Vol. 46, No. 3., pp. 375-395.

\(^{17}\) Hofmeester et al., “The Global Collaboratory”. 
The mita itself went through important changes, which transformed it over its two centuries of existence. The analysis shows the important changes that transmuted the mita service into a payment in money. Nevertheless, the most important transformation was the emergence and consolidation of an important group of self-employed workers (k’ajchas) who were processing ores in the trapiches or rudimentary mills in the eighteenth century. For the mine owners, the k’ajchas were simply thieves who stole their ore. These self-employed workers challenged and questioned the practice, ownership, and exploitation of the ores. Accordingly, in the third part of this chapter, labour relations are linked to the institutions of land and mine ownership within the Spanish Empire. On the one hand, land access of indigenous workers explains why there was never a shift from “unfree labour” to “free labour” or a formation of proletarians. On the other hand, the importance that the self-employed acquired in the eighteenth century reveals that the workers did not completely accept the distribution of property rights, and claimed to exploit the minerals as their own right and for their own benefit.

Lastly, I address how this complex picture has consequences for the institutionalist interpretation of the Spanish Empire.

Extractivism? The industry of silver

Extractivism is a term that describes an economic model dependent on the removal of natural raw materials. This action on natural resources is perceived without any added value, in contrast to the production of manufactured goods. The exploitation of minerals is considered an example of extractivism. The case of silver from Potosí during the colonial period – the sixteenth to the eighteenth century – is a good example with which to

18 K’ajcha, the current spelling of this term, refers to the practice of mine raiding or Indians called “mineral thieves” by mining industrialists and other authorities, because they entered the mines on weekends to take ore for themselves. In documents, they also appear as cacchas, calchas, capchas, or cagechas. There are different accounts of the etymology. A 1759 document states that k’ajcha was a Quechua word, meaning the sound of the sling (honda in Spanish) thrown by the k’ajchas to scare off people who dared approach them inside the mines: “Descripción del terreno y lugares comarcanos de Potosí” (1759), in “Tracts Relating to the Provinces of Buenos Ayres and Patagonia,” 1756-1802, British Library [hereafter, BL], London, Add Ms. 17605 (hereafter cited as “Descripción”), fol. 265. A copy of this document is available at the Archivo y Biblioteca Nacionales de Bolivia. The trapiches were mills that allowed for a process of dry grinding ore.

19 Acosta, “Extractivism and Neoextractivism”, pp. 61-62. Speaking about the natural resource wealth, we found this statement: “it is not a result of a production process”: Humphreys, Sachs, and Stiglitz, “Introduction”, p. 6.
examine this perspective, because the ore went through a process requiring several months before it was transformed into pure silver. It is clear that we are dealing with an industrial process.

There were two main ways to obtain silver: through a smelting process or through amalgamation. The first was pre-colonial, and was used mainly when the ores contained high proportions of silver. In this case, the extraction process, smelting, and casting, was carried out using wind-blown furnaces (a traditional pre-Hispanic technology called huayras). Before 1585 there were around 6,000 huayras in use in Potosí.20

The amalgamation process introduced in the mid-1570s was used for more than two centuries, and was crucial when the content of silver in the ores declined. It is possible to distinguish at least six stages in this process: ore extraction, selection, trituration of minerals, amalgamation, washing of the mixed minerals, and distillation.21 In all these steps, the work was in the hands of the Indian population, some unfree and others free. The work was done in the mines in the mountain of Potosí, where they had to obtain the ores, and within the refining mills owned by Spaniards, where the ores were transformed into silver (see Image 1). Most of the Indian people working in the mines and in the mills received a name related to the activity for which they were responsible.

In the first stage, inside the mines, there was a division of work between those who cut the ore (barreteros) who were free wage workers (minga), and those who carried out the ore from the mines in leather sacks or reed baskets (apiris) who were unfree workers (mita). Immediately after, people known as palliris, who were also free workers, selected the ore. The selected ore was prepared and transported by llamas, controlled by their owners (cumiris), from the mountain to the refining mills (ingenios), where all the processes of amalgamation took place. To maximize the amalgamation of ore with quicksilver (mercury), it had to be pulverized, a task that was accomplished within the refining mills in ingenios. The ingenios were rectangular constructions that enclosed the rooms necessary for storage, the mill, and the open spaces used in the different stages in the process of converting the ore into silver.

Although there were mills driven by human power, by mules, or by horses, the water-driven mill became the centrepiece of the ingenio after

---

20 Capoche, Relación, p. 111.
21 Garavaglia speaks of five stages, to which I added one. See Garavaglia, “Plata para el Rey”, p. 129.
the 1570s. To construct them, dams and aqueducts were also necessary.\textsuperscript{22} The water was conducted through aqueducts towards the stream that ran under the mountain and through the city, becoming the industrial axis of all the water-driven mills, and what was called the Ribera of Potosí. The city’s stream was also canalized in a five-kilometre course. The water used in one refining mill was returned to the channel to be used in the next one.\textsuperscript{23}

The water-driven mills consisted, as Peter Bakewell describes them, of massive machinery: a waterwheel some eight metres (twenty-six feet) tall, with iron stamping shoes that weighed over forty-five kilograms each (and even larger after the mid-1570s). In 1603 there were forty-eight ingenios,\textsuperscript{22} in some cases the dams used existing lakes, but it was necessary to build other reservoirs in order to increase the volume of water. This work was driven by Viceroy Toledo (around 1577) using the Indian labour force. See Gioda, Serrano, and Frey, “L’Eau et l’Argent à Potosí”. In the 1580s, seven dams had already been built, and in 1621 there were thirty-two water reservoirs.\textsuperscript{23} Bakewell, \textit{Miners of the Red Mountain}, p. 13. See also Garavaglia, “Plata para el Rey”.

\textsuperscript{22} In some cases the dams used existing lakes, but it was necessary to build other reservoirs in order to increase the volume of water. This work was driven by Viceroy Toledo (around 1577) using the Indian labour force. See Gioda, Serrano, and Frey, “L’Eau et l’Argent à Potosí”. In the 1580s, seven dams had already been built, and in 1621 there were thirty-two water reservoirs.

\textsuperscript{23} Bakewell, \textit{Miners of the Red Mountain}, p. 13. See also Garavaglia, “Plata para el Rey”.
Figure 7.3  Instruments used in the oven to distil mercury according to Alonso Barba, 1640*

* Barba, Arte de los metales.
some of which had two milling assemblies (cabezas), and by 1610 there were around 140 cabezas. Unfree mita workers known as indios morteros “fed the stamps of the mill and its mortar block”.

The amalgamation could then start. Water was key to this process, and the amount of every element to be blended was the responsibility of the refiner; a Spaniard or a mestizo. The mixing in Potosí was frequently carried out using special boxes. Each box (cajón) held fifty quintales of flour (5,000 pounds) and five of salt, mercury (six to ten pounds per quintal of ore), copper sulphate (magistral), and iron. The “dough” was removed and mixed by the feet (pisada) of the free workers or mingas (repasiris) for several weeks (three weeks or more) until the mercury was completely incorporated in the mixture.

After amalgamation, the fifth stage could start. This was the washing process, which used a stream of water. The light particles were washed away, while the heavy parts of the mix – consisting of the amalgam of mercury and silver – settled, constituting the pella. Habitually, several vats and settling pools were used in series to maximize the recovery of the mercury amalgam. The pella was then squeezed into bags to obtain a solid dough.

The last stage consisted of the distillation of mercury. The dough was placed into conical shapes that were heated for eight to ten hours, until the mercury had been completely distilled. The conical silver pieces were then sent to the Mint House to pay tax (20 per cent) to the Crown.

Technology was important throughout the process, but so was the organization and division of labour. There was certainly a significant investment at the end of the sixteenth century that allowed water to be supplied almost all year, using it as power for the process of amalgamation. Undoubtedly, the division of labour was also very striking. The terminology of the different types of work that the mine demanded, such as the unfree labour of mitayos apiris (carriers), and the free labour of mingas or palliris (selectors of metal), cumuris (those that brought the ore down from the mine to the refinery), and repasiris (those that trampled the amalgam) was in native languages. This reflects the magnitude of the native population’s participation and their expertise. Last but not least, there were also shifts between different categories of workers: unfree and free.

25 Ibid., p. 139; Garavaglia, “Plata para el Rey”, p. 137.
26 Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, p. 21.
27 Garavaglia, “Plata para el Rey”, p. 137.
28 Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, p. 22.
Labour relations in Potosí

Historiography has established a period prior to 1573, and a subsequent period marked by the policies of the Viceroy Francisco de Toledo. Carlos Sempat Assadourian, a historian who criticized the notion of enclave, proposed the concept of a “colonial system” that emerged with the restructuration of the economic and political space. In the mines, this involved relaunching Potosí mining, introducing technological changes, and imposing rules for the continuous provision of labour, the mining *mita*.30

During the period prior to 1574, the indigenous population carried out the extraction using their own means of production, exploiting part of the mines at their own cost31 and largely for their own benefit. They even controlled the sale in local markets.32 In other words, it seems that the Spaniards – who were the mine owners – had only a small part in the extraction and processing of ore. They assigned a certain number of *varas* (0.8 metres) in the mines to Indian workers to exploit minerals, and in exchange, the workers gave the owner part of the ores, which were sold – again and immediately – back to the same workers for the smelting process.33 Although no name has been given to these labour relations, it is clear that many workers exploited the mines in a system of sharecropping or a form of lease of the property. A single but exceptional testimony from 1551 states that the Indians of Collao wanted to obtain a “license to extract silver but without the intervention of the Spanish”.34 Starting from 1574, however, the situation would be very different.

Significant changes were introduced between 1572 and 1576 as a result of reduced production due to the scarcity of high-grade ores. The amalgamation process became the main procedure for refining, replacing the indigenous smelting and casting technique. This technology, as we have seen, required the provision of mercury, coming from the mine of Huancavelica (in central Peru), water for the refining mills, and an important contingent of labour power.

These changes led to an “almost absolute concentration of the means of production in the Spanish group” (the Spanish people) as regards both the

29 This part is based on a chapter of my book in preparation.
30 Assadourian, *El sistema*.
31 Ibid., p. 295.
32 Ibid., p. 22.
33 They were *yanaconas* and they were called by Capoche “*indios ventureros*”: Bakewell, *Miners of the Red Mountain*, p. 51.
34 In Zavala, *El servicio personal*, p. 85.
extraction and the refining process. Referring to the writings of Capoche (a Spaniard owner of some mines and mills, and one of the most valuable sources) from the sixteenth century, Assadourian considered that the indigenous population suffered from degradation because they began to be subordinated to a wage system. Capoche wrote that “the invention of [the procedure of amalgamation with] quicksilver deeply saddened them [...] as it deprived them of their profit, and the only possibility they had to sustain themselves and to pay their rent was with daily paid labour, having owned all the past wealth”.

The constant supply of *mita* labour was based on an old and sophisticated Inca system of work organization. The term *mita* in Quechua and Aymara languages means “turn” or “to work in their turn”, and was used for different kinds of labour that people carried out for the state or their authorities. The *mita* in the mines involved an Indian population of upwards of 14,000 males between eighteen and fifty years of age coming (with their families) to work in Potosí from different villages in seventeen provinces. This magnitude in the mines was certainly new. The people had to go to the mines and mills of Potosí for a period of one year under the leadership of local Indian authorities (*caciques* or *curacas*), directed by *mita* captains (first six and later eleven) who were also Indians working under the control of Spanish authorities.

From the beginning, the *mita* raised the problem of “personal service”, that is, the tension between the freedom of the Indians considered (as was any subject under the Spanish Crown) as vassals, and the obligation to work in the mines, considered as a sign of unfree men. Coercion was based on two articulated reasons. First, in name of the public good, and more specifically, the importance of the industry for the economic support of the monarchy. In 1647, in his book *Política Indiana*, the jurist Juan de Solórzano Pereira suggested that the princes had coercive powers over their vassals whenever the latter understood that this was for the universal good. Second, the obligation that the members of the republic, all vassals of the Crown,

---

35 Assadourian, “La producción”, p. 32.
36 Capoche wrote the *Relación general de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* (1585) that described Potosí after 1545. He himself was involved in the production of silver.
37 Assadourian, “La producción”, p. 29.
38 In the background of these considerations were the debates in the early sixteenth century about the colonization of America and the situation of Indians. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, influenced by Aristotle, asserted that Indians were not capable of self-government and could be subjected to bondage or slavery, while Bartolomé de las Casas was opposed to this position.
had to help each other much like the parts of a human body. In this context, the Indians were considered the feet of the republic.\footnote{Solórzano Pereira, \textit{Política indiana}, pp. 46 and 77.}

The conditions of the \textit{mita} work were clearly defined. First, the 12,000 to 14,000 workers (\textit{mita gruesa}; the number could change from one year to the other) were divided into three regiments of labourers (\textit{mita ordinaria}) to allow shifts between them. Second, every \textit{mitayo} or labourer had to work for one week and not work during the following two weeks (those not working were considered to be resting or in “\textit{huelga}”). On the third week, they had to start working again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.1</th>
<th>Regiments and shifts of work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st week</td>
<td>2nd week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st regiment of labourers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd regiment of labourers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd regiment of labourers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-working:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time the \textit{mita} labour was organized,\footnote{Assadourian, \textit{El sistema}, p. 298.} there was a change from the payment of tax in kind to a cash tax system, which obliged the indigenous population to be more involved in the trading circuits (sale of products), and the sale of their labour in mines and in agricultural companies.

The \textit{mita} workers (or draft labour) were one part of the labour system of Potosí and the others were the \textit{minga} workers. Both received a salary, and in this sense both were wage workers. To the extent that the \textit{mita} was considered as unfree labour (it was obligatory work organized by the state) the \textit{mingas} appear in literature as free labour. This opposition between “free” and “unfree” is not completely appropriate, however, because the etymology
of minga is related to workers paid by the day (like jornaleros) and because they might have been less “free” than we thought. The research that I have been carrying out has led me to establish that we should speak of a single system of work, particularly for the eighteenth century, the mita-minga system, instead of two separate and opposed categories of labourers. In order to understand this proposal, we need to consider again the coexistence of the three regiments of labourers and the rhythm of work. The labourers who were not working as mitayos or unfree workers could be engaged in other enterprises during the two weeks that they were not working. Some sources indicate that the free workers or mingas were hired precisely from among the men who were “de huelga”, for example, the mitayos. If so, free workers or mingas could also be unfree workers or mitayos. In other words, there was a combination of different labour relations realized by the same people in different weeks and months.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.2 Workers’ changing between different categories in a month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unfree labour Freelabour Freelabour Unfree labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitayo 1st week Minga 2nd week Minga 3rd week Mitayo 4th week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking into account the relationship between the mita and the minga workers has important consequences. If the mita system consisted of three shifts combined with the work of the mingas, it becomes clear that we cannot study mitayos without studying mingas and vice versa. Nor can we conclude that there was a transition from a system of unfree labour to a system of free labour, because the two were completely intertwined. The ensemble as a whole can thus be understood as a system that combined a low-wage

41 Bakewell used the term “forced workers” and draft system for the mitayos, although he reminds us that the word in Quechua means a turn at some task: Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, p. 197. The opposition between forced work labour and free labour (“trabajo forzado” versus “trabajo libre”) comes from Tandeter, “Forced and Free Labor” and Tandeter, Trabajo forzado. See also note 16.
42 Cole, The Potosí Mita, pp. 9, 12, 14. Wages were four reales (half a peso) per day plus ore compared with 3.5 reales for mitayos and 4.5 reales per day plus coca for refining, and compared with 2.75 for mitayos. Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, pp. 123-124. Even Tandeter (who states that the mitayos were worse off than slaves) recognizes that initially mitayos’ work as mingas during their rest weeks compensated for the week of hard work as mitayos at low wages. In 1793, Sanz, the governor of Potosí, explained that the mitayos could choose in their weeks of rest to work where they wanted, in the mines, in the refineries, or in other jobs, earning from 4 to 8 reales per day. “Sobre la mita de Potosí”, Archivo General de la Nación [hereafter, AGN] Colonia Gobierno 1488, Quaderno No. 1, f. 89-90.
corvée or mita with the well-paid minga work. Lastly, as Peter Bakewell argued a long time ago, if all the mingas came from the mita ordinaria, minga labour then became “informally obligatory”.43

Mitayos (corvée workers) and minga workers (workers paid by the day) were present from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, but the continuity of terms can obscure changes that are analysed in the next part.

**Changes in the mita: Behind its continuity, *Indios de faltriquera, Indios colquehaques***

The number of mitayos was reduced from 14,000 – established by Toledo in 1573 to 1575 – to no more than 4,000 by the end of seventeenth century (a decline of more than 70 per cent), and to around 3,000 in the eighteenth century44 (Graph 1). Several factors may have contributed to this decrease, such as disease and bad working conditions, but internal migration was certainly one of the main causes.45 The flight of people from their villages to other places and provinces was one of the easiest ways to escape from the mita.

Another important change was the fulfilment of mita obligations through cash payments, or the “metamorphosis of the mita”. According to Jeffrey Cole, the changes were so great that the system was totally different from that in Toledo’s time. In this new arrangement, already present in early 1600, the mitayo workers paid money to avoid going to the mines, subsidizing the hiring of mingas to take their place. The terms used to name this situation are *Indios de faltriquera* and *Indios colquehaques*, with some differences between them. “Indio de faltriquera” literally means a “pocket Indian” and refers to the payment received by an employer to replace the draft worker or mitayo, although the money was not always used to hire their replacements.

44 The mitayos or workers were nevertheless only 3,199 each year instead of 17,000: Decree of Viceroy Castelfuerte, 1736: Tandeter, “Forced and Free Labour”, pp. 102-103.
45 Thanks to studies by Sánchez-Albornoz, Assadourian, and Saignes, we know that these migrations were part of indigenous strategies to escape from the mita, by settling in other towns and communities as “outsiders” (forasteros) or in landed estates (haciendas) as tenant labourers (yanaconas). See Sánchez-Albornoz, *Indios y tributos*; Assadourian, *El sistema*; Saignes, *Caciques*. There was, then, a far-reaching redistribution of the Andean population, which took place fundamentally in the seventeenth century. This is the process of “forasterización”. The forasteros were more numerous than the “originarios” or people born in the community who would pay tribute and go to the mita. The forasteros paid just tribute. The authorities tried to include the forasteros into the mita, particularly in 1683, with the Viceroy of La Palata, but they did not succeed.
Indios colquehaques (also called tasa-runas, or colque-runa-haques), meaning people who have “money”, were those who gave an amount of money to their caciques or the authorities, in order to avoid going to the mines to work as mitayos or to help to pay for the runaways of the mita from their villages. They were without doubt the wealthiest members of their communities.

To pay money in order to avoid working in Potosí would mean that the labour corvée was transformed into a monetary corvée, implying an important monetization of the members of the Andean communities through other market mechanisms. The amount paid in money also implies important economic and social differentiations within communities.

Payment in cash that grew over time could be an attractive option for employers, who could divert these sums to other economic activities. It is estimated that half of mita obligations were met through payments of silver and the other half through personal labour, with one-eighth or one-ninth of the annual draft obligations not met at all in the seventeenth century. This meant that the substitute minga could expect a higher wage than the mitayo. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, it seems that payment

---

46 Qullqijaqi, Hispanicized as colquehaque; literally, in Aymara, “money people”, colque runa in Quechua.
47 See also Sánchez-Albornoz, Indios y tributos.
50 Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, pp. 121, 123-125.
in lieu gradually disappeared due to the critiques that this practice received in the second half of the seventeenth century, and to the upturn in mining activity starting from 1730.\textsuperscript{51}

The practice of appropriation of minerals by workers existed throughout the Americas under different names. In Potosí it goes back to the early days (after 1550), when almost all the metal that was exploited and cast passed through the hands of the workers. At the end of the sixteenth century, after the technological transformations and the introduction of wages, the workers were allowed to enter the mines for their own benefit from Saturday to Monday morning. In the eighteenth century, these workers were known as \textit{k’ajchas}. Nevertheless, the terms \textit{k’ajchas}, and the \textit{trapiches} associated with them, were not listed among the most important mining terms and definitions in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{52} This could mean that the practice was not as widespread as it became later on. Three facts reveal that we are faced with a new labour relationship, which was established in the mines and continued for a long time. In 1751 and 1752, more than 2,000 \textit{k’ajchas} succeeded in their opposition to the local authorities who were trying to expel them from the Potosí mines. This situation triggered intense discussions and disputes between miners and local and regional authorities in Potosí over the following years.\textsuperscript{53} Another indication is that – probably due to the number of people and the quantity of silver that they sold – from 1754, the bank that used to buy the ore (Banco de Rescates, which became Banco San Carlos), separated the provenance of silver into two categories and groups: on the one hand the Gremio de Azogueros (mining guild), the traditional Spanish and Creole owners of the mines, on the other hand, the \textit{trapicheros}, \textit{k’ajchas} and workers outside the provinces.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{trapicheros} were the owners of the rudimentary mills, and the \textit{k’ajchas} could work in the \textit{trapiches} (in a kind of sharecropping), but could also own one of them. Finally, a series of reports and visits speak about them, especially from 1760 onwards.

\textsuperscript{51} In 1793, the Governor of Potosí, Sanz, replying to the Discourse against the mita (The Discourse is in AGN Colonia Gobierno 1488. Quaderno No. 1. Sobre la mita de Potosí; Ricardo Levene published this document in \textit{Vida y Escritos de Victorián de Villava}, Pruse, S.A.: Buenos Aires, 1946), explained that the “abuse” that existed before was also due to the fact that at that time the mines were only exploiting the waste and remains that had accumulated (AGN Colonia Gobierno 1488. Quaderno No. 1. Sobre la mita de Potosí, f. 89-90).

\textsuperscript{52} Llanos, \textit{Diccionario}.

\textsuperscript{53} See Barragán, “Working Silver”.

\textsuperscript{54} See Annexes, Table I, Buechler, \textit{Gobierno, minería y sociedad}, vol. 2, p. 473. There were also complaints against the governor-corregidor Santelices, blaming him for authorizing the recognition of the \textit{k’ajchas}. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 297.
K’ajchas, trapiches, and trapicheros, entailed the emergence of workers’ independent activity for their own benefit, meaning that they no longer worked for someone else. The k’ajchas were producing ore while the trapicheros were refining it. In 1759 a trapiche was described as the place of grinding ore by large rocks, as opposed to the massive machinery consisting of a trituration mill and a water mill of the traditional ingenio or refining mill (ore mill).

The inspection of the trapiches of 1761-1762 shows that they were experiencing a boom: of the total of 220 trapiches, some forty had been established over the previous two years while only twenty-two were more than fifty years old. Most of them – ninety-four trapiches (42 per cent) – began operation between 1742 and 1758, though only sixty-four had permission given by the authorities.

Some historical sources indicate that the people working in the trapiches were related to people working in the mines and could, in some cases, be the same. A document pointed out clearly that the “yndios trapicheros” were also employed as k’ajchas, pongos (Indian supervisors of work inside the mines), palliris (workers collecting ores in the piles of discarded material), and barreteros (pick workers and faceworkers) inside the mines.

The log books of the San Carlos Bank, which show the sale of silver to the bank by the trapicheros and k’ajchas on the one hand, and by the azogueros on the other, present new and important information. We know that the azogueros were limited in number. In fact, for 1762 there were only

---

55 In some cases they could have some agreements of sharecropping although we do not have the evidence.
56 The trapiche consisted of two large stones, the first one- to two-metres long, the upper surface of which was worked flat and upon which another stone called a flying wheel rested and moved fast enough to grind the ore. The “Descripción” stated that one or two workers placed an arroba (approximately 11.5 kg) of metal on the flat stone and moved the flying wheel at great speed, grinding twenty boxes a week of choice metal that was brought down from the mountain to the trapiches. The metal was then mixed with mercury and other substances in cow leather and finally washed in a large mud tub with spring or canal water. All of this work was carried out by hand with the exception of the “repaso” or mixing that involved workers stamping the mixture with their feet. “Descripción”, BL, f. 278-279.
57 Bakewell, Miners of the Red Mountain, p. 198. It seems that this stone was like the native and Inca practice of grinding ores that the Spanish called quimbalete, a boulder described as having a “half-moon shape […] to the upper, flat, edge of which is lashed a beam. The projecting ends of the beam are alternately pushed down by a worker on each side. The boulder rocks to and fro, crushing the ore placed beneath it.”
58 “Report by Saint Just on azogueros and k’ajchas”, Archivo General de Indias, [hereafter, AGI], AGI Charcas 48i, No. 19, 1763-1769.
59 Ibid., AGI Charcas 48i, No. 19.
thirty-nine of them. By comparison, k’ajchas and trapicheros reached a total of over 500 people who made more than 1,500 transactions amounting to a total of 19,628 pesos.\textsuperscript{60} In general, a large number of the k’ajchas made only one transaction (327 people or 63 per cent), so we assume that they were fundamentally regular workers in the mines who were generating additional income.

This overview allows us to understand the reasons why the k’ajchas gave rise to intense and heated debates between the different actors involved in the mines, over the competition that the practice implied for the traditional azoguero miners. The k’ajchas were not just “thieves” as the authorities considered them. They were bringing into question the legitimacy of the property.

The relationship between the labour system and the property institutions of land and mines in Potosí

In 1980, Assadourian indicated a process of land redistribution and reorganization at the end of the sixteenth century, after the destruction of the Inca state and its depopulation, which in turn led to a decline in the agricultural area. After this reorganization, the land tenure consisted of indigenous territories, communities, and other territories in which Spanish landed estates could be constituted. In the first case, the land was owned by the whole community, but within each territory, every family had its family plots of land plus community lands where there was collective management of different crops on a rotating basis for the benefit of all the households. The communities had then to ensure the process of peasant reproduction in order to allow the use of their labour force in mining, in agriculture, and in other activities\textsuperscript{61}

The establishment of boundaries for indigenous territories allowed, simultaneously, the free disposal of other lands for the Spanish Crown’s use (“realengas” land). The Royal Decree of 1591 stipulated carrying out visits to rural areas to offer land for sale. This practice began when the Spanish

\textsuperscript{60} For 1761-1762, see Libro donde se sientan los marcos que se traen al rescate de los trapicheros de esta Rivera, 1761-1764, Archivo Histórico de Potosí [hereafter, AHP], Banco de San Carlos BSC 313, f. 155. For 1788, the book title is Libro de compras de piñas de trapicheros y ccachas, AHP BSC 383. We have the same information for the azogueros: Libro donde se asientan los marcos de plata que los señores Azogueros de esta Villa traen a rescatar a este Banco y mercadería que corre a cargo del Maestre de Campo, 1759-1762, AHP BSC-360.

\textsuperscript{61} Assadourian, El sistema, pp. 294, 297, 301, 303.
Crown was hard-pressed due to the war with England, and due to the need to protect the royal fleet returning with precious metals. Glave rightly points out that from then on, the king appeared as the owner of the land. This marked “the history of expropriation of the natural resources of the Indians and of the formation of a new form of possession, ownership and exploitation of the land [...] in the hands of the colonizers”. As agricultural markets were formed, interest in owning land also increased. Legal property rights were given to the Spaniards and the indigenous people through the payment of a fee in these visits to the rural areas (composiciones). The Spaniards then became owners of ranches, farms, and estates. The indigenous population also received delineated territories, and within them, had their own authorities, and important degrees of economic and political autonomy. The Spanish Crown granted legal land rights in exchange for a sum of money. Whenever there were fiscal needs, the Crown carried out new visits that often legalized prior property land rights, and in many cases, also represented modifications to the boundaries and limits.

Although it was the king who was entitled to distribute and sell the land, the indigenous population considered it was entitled to its own land, which it requested and defended throughout the colonial period and even during the nineteenth century.

62 Glave “Propiedad de la tierra”, p. 353.
64 Glave, “Propiedad”, p. 313.
65 Ibid., p. 352.
66 The mainland visitors and compositores in the Andean region were:
1591: Obispo de Quito, Fray Luis López. Charcas: Cochabamba, Oruro, Sucre
1594: Alonso Basquez Dávila
1596: Gonzalo Gutiérrez de Figueoroa
1618-1619: Alonso Ibañez de Lobera y Alonso de la Torre: Omasuyos. La Paz, Larecaja, Pacajes, Paucarcolla, Sicasica
1647-1649: Francisco Antonio de la Masueca Alvarado: Larecaja, Cochabamba, Pilaya, Paspaya, Tomina, Misque; Joseph de la Vega Alvarado: Valle de Chillón, Chayanta, Porco, Oroncota, Mataca, Chichas; Joseph [Tello] de Meneses – Canas, Canches, Cavana, Cavanilla, Asángaro, Asillo, Chucuito, Paucarcolla
1656-1659: Gerónimo Luis de Cabrera: Laja, Guarina, Achacachi, Ancoraimes y Pucarani
1659: Fray Juan Rondón
1674: Don Pedro Luis Enriquez: Sicasica y Pacajes
1718: Juan Bravo de Rivera: Inquisivi, Sapahaqui
1724: Joseph de Lerma y Salamanca
1744: Cristóbal de Borda Palca, Lambate
See Barragán, “¿Categoría Fiscal o Categoría Social?”.
67 Barragán, “Los títulos”. See also Taller de Historia Oral Andina, El indio Santos Marka T‘ula; Gotkowitz, A Revolution for Our Rights.
The recognition of indigenous land rights was one of the pillars of the tax system and the administration of draft labour. This situation avoided the formation of an army of proletarians, who had nothing to sell other than their own labour force. Thanks to the system of agricultural and livestock ownership, they could escape from the process of proletarianization and were not obliged to sell their labour force as "free workers".

But what happened to the ownership of the mines? The legislation in the Spanish Americas maintained the legal doctrine of royal ownership of the subsoil, allowing it to be exploited by individuals in exchange for a tax on production. In particular, the rules for the mines of Potosí and Porco in 1574 established (in Ord. 1, Title 1, “On Discoverers, Records and Concessions”) the royal right: a legal principle that allowed the king to grant permissions over the mines to his vassals and subjects, whatever their situation.

This meant that the Indians could receive these grants as vassals of the king. It was also explained that the Indians could hold and exploit gold and silver mines in the same way as the Spaniards. Viceroy Toledo went even further. He granted a concession to operate a mine of sixty varas "held in common" for the caciques and for the communities destined to pay the taxes and expenses in mita labouring. The caciques were granted an additional eighty varas. This same provision applied to the ordinary Indians, although at the same time, it established that “more Indians cannot be granted concessions” without there being enough for the Spaniards. The mineral tailing was moreover designated as common property and the legal norms established that no one could prevent free access to it, prohibiting its fencing off.

What information do we have about Indians who exploited the mines on their own behalf and who were registered as discoverers receiving concessions? In 1585, Capoche listed more than ninety-three seams in the mountain of Potosí, and in each one there were a variable number of people.

---

68 The Rules of La Gasca in 1550 in Potosí sanctioned by the Audiencia of Lima; the Rules of Polo de Ondegardo in 1562, and those of Toledo in 1574, ratif ied these principles, introducing a series of regulations. Martínez, “Legislación minera colonial”, pp. 1014-1015.
69 Toledo, _Disposiciones gubernativas_, “Título I, Ordenanza I”, p. 305.
70 “Es nuestra merced y voluntad que todas las personas de cualquiera estado, condición, preeminencia, o dignidad, españoles e indios, nuestros vasallos, puedan sacar oro, plata, azogue y otros metales por sus personas, criados o esclavos en todas las minas […] que hallaren”. Ley j. Tit. XIX, _Recopilación_, vol. 2, p. 68.
from seventy-eight in the seam named Veta Rica, for example, to just one person in some other seams. Therefore, in general, there were a high number of miners recorded, over 500. At least twenty-three Indians are mentioned among them, including some Incas and other people from Cuzco and the surrounding areas.

This panorama contrasts with what we know for the eighteenth century, when there were between twenty-seven\(^{74}\) and forty-four refineries,\(^{75}\) and mill owners who also owned the mines. No indigenous people appear among these concession holders and owners.

The Carolino Code, drafted by Pedro Vicente Cañete in 1794 but never ratified, provides interesting information about the perspectives and proposals of the authorities and azogueros of that time regarding ownership and concessions. Cañete accepted that the mines could be exploited by all vassals,\(^{76}\) as indicated in the Laws of the Indies. There were, however, some clauses that restricted this unlimited access. The “miners” had to be people with more than ten years of experience and they had to be “Spaniards, mestizos or Indians or nobles without the race of blacks or mulattos”.\(^{77}\) They also had to be registered with the governor-intendants, who granted them licenses and rights\(^{78}\) to two or a maximum of three seams.\(^{79}\) There was, nevertheless, another legal norm which directly prohibited any “servant or operator of the azogueros and owners of mines and refineries” from being able to acquire their own mines or to work in a refinery in the place where they were serving.\(^{80}\) It is therefore possible to think that the Spaniards were afraid of a conflict of interests.

Consequently, although it is accepted that the Indians could be owners, none of them appear as such in this period in Potosí and the articles of the code proposed by Cañete show us that not only was the registration process complicated, but also that the Indians could be denied ownership by arguing that they had “served” or worked for a mine or refinery owner.

There was, however, as already mentioned, a tradition of relatively free access to the ores in the first decades of Potosí’s mine exploitation. Viceroy Toledo himself, who established the mita for the mines and the amalgamation process, stated in his legal norms that the owners of the

---

74 Tandeter, Coacción y mercado, 1992.
75 In 1793, see Buechler, Gobierno, minería y sociedad, vol. 2, p. 373.
76 Martiré, El Código Carolino, Tit. III., Ord. I, p. 12.
77 Ibid., Tit. II, Ord. I, p. 140.
78 Ibid., Ord. V.
79 Ibid., Tit. II, Ord. VI, p. 142.
mines ("lords of mines") were obliged to give the workers a quarter of the mine's seams as "was done until then", under the condition that they had to sell the ore that they obtained to the owners of the mines and refineries.81 The tolerance shown to the indigenous population working on Potosí, by allowing them to take ores for their own benefit during the weekends, was therefore compensation – or at least a concession – possibly introduced at the time when the population was gradually losing freer access to the ore. What appeared as permissiveness was consequently, and at the same time, an indigenous right lost in the sixteenth century. The existence of the k'ajchas in the eighteenth century means, therefore, that the ownership of the mines and the exclusive property rights of the Spanish mine owners were not completely accepted by the workers, who insisted on their rights to access the silver mines they had benefitted from since early times.

The economy of the k'ajchas and trapicheros of the eighteenth century is a clear example of a practice that had a long history, but was reaffirmed in the eighteenth century. Indigenous people could then take advantage of the mines for themselves, even if they were not recognized as the owners.

Conclusion

It is time to return to the institutional perspective and to the analysis about Potosí and the Spanish Empire. On the one hand, in the study of the economy, the role of institutions – defined by Douglass North as "the humanly constraints that shape human interaction"82 – is certainly important. On the other hand, it is equally relevant to include the experiences of colonialism and institutions, as did Acemoglu and Robinson. Nevertheless, this chapter disagrees about their perspective on the mita and on Spanish colonialism.

I began with the description of ore's transformation into silver, questioning the view of extraction that ignores processes involving technology, labour, a complex system of coordination, and expertise. It is certainly essential not to underestimate this process, because there was evidently an early silver industry that involved at least 15,000 people at the end of the sixteenth century.

Another problem in institutional literature is the construction of a dichotomy between Spanish extractive colonialism in Latin America and

81 Toledo, Relaciones de los virreyes, "Ordenanza X", p. 357.
82 North, Institutions, p. 3.
British colonialism that, in the US, produced a free market, growth, equality, and democracy. This dichotomy is thus a contrast not only between good and bad institutions, but between good colonialism and bad colonialism. In one case, coercion regarding the indigenous people is stressed, implying North America would have been a *terra nullius* with benign colonialism without Indians and without slavery.

Acemoglu and Robinson, in their famous and critically acclaimed book of 2012, wrote:

> Throughout the Spanish colonial world in the Americas, similar institutions and social structures emerged [...] The Spanish created a web of institutions designed to exploit the indigenous peoples [...] and extract all income in excess [...] for Spaniards. This was achieved by expropriating their land, forcing them to work, offering low wages for labor services, imposing high taxes, and charging high taxes [...] Though these institutions generated a lot of wealth for the Spanish Crown [...] they also turned Latin America into the most unequal continent in the world and sapped much of its economic potential.83

It is clear, now, that these statements are not false. However, they are not entirely accurate with regard to the two topics analysed here: labour and land. The authors reduce Spanish colonial reality by disregarding studies that show more complex forms of colonial institutionalism. The present case study reveals, first, that the indigenous people received title to their lands from the Spanish Crown, through their communities, and throughout the colonial period there was not a mass process of dispossession of land in the “two hundred thousand square miles” of the “largest and most onerous scheme of labour exploitation in the Spanish colonial period” as Acemoglu and Robinson have framed it.84 My hypothesis is that access to land explains why there was no transformation in the colonial period from unfree labour to free labour in almost three centuries, nor was there a process of proletarianization. Nevertheless, at the same time, the rights to the ownership of the mines were redefined and established, and although indigenous people were not completely excluded in the distribution, they were clearly reduced to a handful of beneficiaries. The great majority were converted to temporary labourers in the mines through a complex draft system of supply (*mita*) coming from different villages in the countryside within a radius of 500 kilometres.

84 Ibid., p. 16.
Second, the case study shows that *mita* was not the same throughout the colonial period. Together with the reduction in the number of *mitayos* in the seventeenth century, the custom of paying “not to go to the *mita*” was established. This meant, on the one hand, a high degree of monetization of the indigenous population, and on the other hand, growing inequality among them.

Third, the analysis of labour relations in Potosí – and their main shifts – also shows how the agency of people involved could modify the policy of the colonial government and the structure of the labour force. The emergence of the self-employed or *k’ajchas* in the exploitation and transformation of the ores is the best example of the agency of workers who were not just “resisting”, but struggling for what they seem to have considered their right to participate in the new economy for their own benefit. This is why I consider that we cannot label them as “thieves”. The *k’ajchas*, together with the *trapiches*, maintained a quasi-parallel economy that burst onto the scene with considerable energy in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Last but not least, the case of Potosí confirms what the historiography of the last few decades on free and unfree labour has shown: that unfree labour does not imply an absence of wages, that there is not always a sharp contrast between free and unfree labour, and that there are many intermediate forms between them.\(^8\) In this context, Potosí seems to be an extreme case of intermingling categories of work. Here, workers fulfilled their compulsory work for one week, being able to become “free” workers or labourers for the following two weeks. This means that people could be involved in different labour relations at different times. Unfree labour and free labour were categories related to tasks performed largely by the same people in the same month. In addition, we should not forget that the same *mitayos* were mining workers for one year, becoming peasants and shepherds again when their year of service in Potosí ended. Lastly, the *mitayos* or the unfree labour could be, to a large extent, free labourers or *mingas* and *k’ajchas*, although not all the *k’ajchas* or *mingas* could be *mitayos*.

---

\(^8\) See, in the, 1990s, Brass and Van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labor*. Marcel van der Linden wrote in that book that contrary to what Marx and Marxists have argued, unfree labour and slavery are compatible with capitalism. Van der Linden, “The Origins”, p. 503. Van der Linden stated also that the intermediate forms between different categories are fluid rather than sharply defined: Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, p. 22. Finally, Bosma pointed out that wage labour is not necessarily “free labour”: Bosma, “Dutch Imperial Anxieties”.\(^8\)
The analysis of property rights to land and seams, and the labour relationships in Potosí, show the importance of case studies that allow us to understand the complexity of the situation. However, it is not just a claim of greater accuracy. In the end, the main issue is how this analysis of silver production brings into question generalizing overviews and theoretical explanations about poverty and prosperity. Inequalities were and are undoubtedly present in Latin America, but their history and causes are not just rooted in “bad Spanish institutions”. It is worthwhile to remember that silver left Potosí for centuries to fuel the trade of the global world.

Bibliography


Acosta, Alberto, “Extractivism and Neoextractivism: Two Sides of the Same Curse”, in Miriam Lang and Dunia Mokrani (eds), Beyond Development: Alternative Visions from Latin America (Quito, 2013), pp. 61-86.

Assadourian, Carlos Sempat, El sistema de la economía colonial. Mercado interno, regiones y espacio económico (Lima, 1982).


Barba, Alonso, Arte de los metales (Lima, 1817).

Barnadas, Josep, Charcas 1535-1565: Orígenes de una sociedad colonial (La Paz, 1973).


Garavaglia, Juan Carlos, “Plata para el Rey. Tecnología y producción en el Potosí colonial”, in Juan Marchena (ed.), *Potosí, plata para Europa* (Seville, 2000), pp. 127-140.


Glave, Luis Miguel, “Propiedad de la tierra, agricultura y comercio, 1570-1700: el gran despojo”, in Carlos Contreras (ed.), *Compendio de Historia Económica del Perú. Economía del período colonial temprano* (Lima, 2009), pp. 313-446.

González Casasnovas, Ignacio, *Las dudas de la corona. La política de repartimientos para la minería de Potosí (1680-1732)* (Madrid, 2000).


Llanos, García de, *Diccionario y maneras de hablar que se usan en las minas y sus labores en los ingenios y beneficios de los metales* (1609) (La Paz, 1983).


Platt, Tristan, Therèse Bouyssé-Cassagne, and Olivia Harris, *Qaraqara-Charka: Mallku, Inka y Rey en la Provincia de Charcas (Siglos XV-XVII): Historia antropológica de una confederación Aymara* (La Paz, 2006).

*Recopilación de leyes de los reinos de las Indias*, 3 vols (Madrid, 1791).


Solórzano Pereira, Juan de, *Política indiana* (Amberes, 1703).


Tandeter, Enrique, *Trabajo forzado y trabajo libre en el Potosí colonial tardío* (Buenos Aires, 1980).

Taller de Historia Oral Andina, *El indio Santos Marka T’ula, cacique principal de los ayllus de Qallapa y apoderado general de la comunidades originarias de la República* (La Paz, 1986).

Toledo, Francisco de, *Disposiciones gubernativas para el Virreinato del Perú, 1569-1574* (Sevilla, 1986).

Toledo, Francisco de, *Relaciones de los virreyes y audiencias que han gobernado el Perú, Tomo I: Memorial, and ordenanzas de D. Francisco de Toledo* (Lima, 1867).


About the Author


E-mail: rba@iisg.nl