CHAPTER 3

From Isolation to Inclusion: Confraternities in Colonial Mexico City

Laura Dierksmeier*

Urban spaces bring together people from all walks of life. While inhabiting the same physical space, however, various groups may find themselves in very different social spaces. In other words, geographical inclusion may combine with societal exclusion. Marginalized individuals, as numerous historical studies record, pay a high price for their social isolation and are vulnerable to exploitation, psychological distress, social stigma, and crime at the hands of their cohabitants. While the responsibility to remedy these ills falls morally on society as a whole, in practice, only particularly committed individuals and institutions facilitate integration and reintegration of the excluded.

In sixteenth-century Mexico, being part of respectable society typically required being born in wedlock, a proper marriage, orderly housekeeping, financial independence, appropriate dress, attendance at mass and a customary burial. Meeting these and further expectations to ‘fit in,’ was, naturally, more problematic for those with fewer financial means, often leading to the “coupling of disadvantages” of the poor. Nonetheless, marginalization was not necessarily permanent; a renegotiation of social identities remained at times possible. Confraternities frequently acted as intermediaries between society and isolated groups, helping them improve or redefine themselves so as to partake in the collective life of the city.

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1 Andreas Gestrich et al., ed., Strangers and Poor People: Changing Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion in Europe and the Mediterranean World from Classical Antiquity to the Present Day (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Peter Lang, 2009).
2 Asunción Lavrin, Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
Taking colonial Mexico City as a case study, this chapter considers the ways in which confraternities could function as social intermediaries by facilitating the reintegration of marginalized individuals into urban society. After a brief contextualization, I examine the inception and administration of Mexican confraternities in the period immediately following the Spanish Conquest. I then consider three groups of marginalized residents within the urban context of Mexico City: prisoners of petty debt, orphans, and people with contagious diseases. These groups were chosen because their social roles proved to be fluid in terms of social mobility and status. I shall conclude with some general observations and suggestions for future research.4

The Rise of Confraternities in Post-Conquest Mexico

Social relations under the Aztec Empire had been arranged in self-sufficient city-states called *altepetl*. After joint Spanish and indigenous forces conquered the Empire in 1521, the leader of the conquest, Hernán Cortés, left these structures in place and turned them into *encomiendas*,5 controlled by Spanish *conquistadores*. The native inhabitants, who had experienced some linguistic, religious, and cultural autonomy under the Aztecs, were now expected to understand Spanish commands, embrace Christianity, and give up their past ‘idolatrous’ traditions. In addition to the disregard for the former Nahua6 nobility, women faced different social roles, as they had before been able to hold political and religious positions on par with men. In many instances, the social status and decision-making power of the Nahuas declined.7 There was, however, one notable exception: indigenous participation in Mexican confraternities.

Confraternities were among the first social institutions set up in the New World. While historians have attached much significance to eighteenth-century confraternities, the earlier colonial period has been understudied.8 This

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4 I have translated Spanish excerpts into English.
5 *Encomiendas* were landholdings in Mexico controlled by Spaniards (*encomenderos*), where indigenous people were required to work.
6 Nahua is the term used by historians to refer generally to the people living under the Aztec Empire, who often (but not always) spoke Nahuatl in addition to their respective first languages.
8 For confraternal studies focused predominately on the eighteenth century, see: Alicia Bazarte Martínez, *Las cofradías de españoles en la ciudad de México (1526–1860)* (Mexico