Book Review

Gregorio Salinero


This work, which holds a great factual wealth, narrates and analyzes the numerous Spanish rebellions which shook Peru and New Spain between the 1540s and the 1570s. The author focuses on the process of those revolts but also on their context, the different protagonists as well as on the reactions of Spain and its representatives when confronted to those oppositions.

Through his tracing back the context, the author states that the anti-establishment movements that took place during the second half of the 16th century were more or less linked to the New Laws enacted in 1542 written and proclaimed under the influence of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Those texts aimed at protecting Natives from abuses on the part of Spanish colonists, in particular through the suppression of the encomiendas, rewards that were attributed to conquistadors for service rendered to the Crown. However, the conquerors and their descendants refused to be denied those rewards they thought they deserved.

As announced in the title, La trahison de Cortès (The Treason of Cortés), Salinero describes the causes, the proceedings and the consequences of the plot hatched by Martín Cortés — the legitimate son of the conqueror of the Mexica Empire and inheritor of his marquisate — in 1565–1566. Inspired by the rumor stating that a secret decision forbidding the transmission of encomiendas over three generations was coming to New Spain, Marquis Cortés, supported by his brothers Luis and Martín, as well as by other colonists, for the most part also inheritors of encomiendas, planned to interrupt the hearing so as to burn the document deemed unfair and to proclaim a new one which would render encomiendas permanent. Thus, the marquis would take over the power and become the sovereign of New Spain. However, he postponed his action several times and was finally denounced. In July 1566, the oidores – judges of the
Audiencia – put the conspirators under arrest before any conflict could break out. After seven years of procedure, Cortés was sentenced to pay a considerable fine and to serve in the military in Oran, but he died a free man in 1589.

Even though the title of the book announces this league as the core element, Gregorio Salinero does not deal with it before the last chapter because it is really the whole of the Spanish protest movement he analyzes. Thus, he also tackles the two most famous insurrections in Peru, namely the pizarrist rebellion (1544–1548), led by the brother of the Inca Empire conqueror Francisco Pizarro, Gonzalo, as well as the insurrection led by conquistador Hernández de Girón in 1553–1554. Salinero also mentions movements of lesser fame such as the rebellion in Taxco, New Spain, in 1550, or the one led by rebels Sebastián de Castilla, Vasco Godínez, and Egas de Guzmán in Peru in 1553 and 1554. This chronological and geographical scanning enables Salinero to conclude that those various revolts were generally linked to each other, the circulation of men triggering the propagation of ideas.

Salinero highlights another crucial aspect of the topic in La trahison de Cortés: the spirit of revolt in the Indies at that time went further than a mere protest against the New Laws. Not only does this book trace the facts in a very detailed manner, it also enables the reader to understand that those movements of disobedience were not simple rebellions led by encomenderos but clear demonstrations of the colonists’ frustration with facing incoherent peninsular politics, perceived as unfair. The author insists on the social, fiscal, and political dimensions of those insurrections. Among those men leading disobedience, encomenderos appear at the foreground, however not alone. They were supported by hidalgos aspiring to become encomenderos themselves, soldiers often destitute and idle, clerks and unfrocked priests. Most colonists felt they had been wronged or abandoned by the Crown despite the fact that they had risked their lives for it. The peninsula aimed at depriving them of their encomiendas and reducing the Indians’ tribute; it was giving more and more power to the Audiencia even though, paradoxically, the occupation of some of the functions were illegal.

In 1565 in New Spain, for example, discontent started to spread before the Cortés plot since the viceroy Velasco had disappeared for more than a year and only three members of the oidores were managing the administration. As for the pizarrists, they did not theoretically consider themselves as disobedient as they thought it was legitimate to refuse to apply those royal decisions. Indeed, the subjects of the Crown had the right to express themselves freely and some laws had been written and enacted without the delegates involved. Additionally, the rebels of Gonzalo Pizarro, who asked for the repealing of the New