

An Interview with François Chevalier

Introduction and translation by PETER BAKEWELL *

IT seems almost superfluous to write an introduction to this interview, so familiar are M. Chevalier's name and work to historians of Ibero-America, and particularly to the colonialists in our number. He must indeed contend for the position of the best known European Latin Americanist of his generation among both North American and Ibero-American historians. His *La formation des grands domaines au Mexique. Terre et société aux XVI^e-XVII^e siècles* (Paris, 1952) is a modern classic of colonial historiography. In the past fifteen years or so, it has served as a point of departure, or of reaction, for much of the voluminous new work on colonial land, and rural society, that has appeared in Mexico, the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. M. Chevalier can legitimately enjoy one of a scholar's great satisfactions—the feeling that one's findings and ideas have been judged solid enough to be accepted as a fundamental block on which others can build new research.

As the following interview makes clear, however, *La formation des grands domaines* has been but one among many enterprises of M. Chevalier's academic life. His subsequent publications have been abundant and varied. He has been an academic administrator in the best sense of the term—encouraging the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and technique between Europeans and Latin Americans through his decidedly activist administration of the Institut Français d'Amérique Latine in Mexico City, the Institut Français d'Études Andines in Lima, and the Casa Velázquez in Madrid. His affection for Latin America emerges clearly in the pages that follow. In part it is a personal attraction; but in part, also, a manifestation of that characteristic conviction of twentieth-century French historiography that history and geography are inseparably bound. A point of particular interest of this interview is the view that M. Chevalier provides of that modern, and powerful, tradition.

* Associate Professor of History, University of New Mexico

M. Chevalier is a knight of the Legion of Honor, a corresponding member of the Spanish Royal Academy of History, and a holder of the Aztec Eagle. He is Professor Emeritus of Latin American History at the Sorbonne.

M. Chevalier, to begin, could you tell us something of your family background, your academic career, your travels, and so on?

I was born in 1914 in the center of France to a family that came originally from the borderlands between langue d’Oil and langue d’Oc. These were the northern and southern halves of France, and, in times long past, regions of differing civilization, as is still to be seen in their traditional architecture. In the north are large pointed roofs, and in the south, flatter roofs with “Roman” tiles. My wife is from the same area, and I still have strong family ties there. A first cousin owns a house and land there that have not changed hands since the seventeenth century. These regional and family links, although they have become more fragile in an urban civilization centered on Paris, nonetheless are still very much alive. Perhaps these days they are regaining strength. As a historian I am doubtless especially aware of such changes. But in recent times the phenomenon has become general, as is shown at all levels by the present vigor of genealogical and family research. We see a resurgence, indeed a reassertion, of the provinces, which signifies a return to roots and perhaps a refusal on the part of individuals to be lost in the crowd.

I am the grandson of an officer of the Engineering Corps who was decorated by Pershing himself with the Distinguished Service medal in 1918, and the son of a well-known philosopher, a friend of Bergson, but at odds with the Sorbonne of that time, who taught at the University of Grenoble. Much of my education took place in that lovely Alpine town, the former capital of a “Franco-Provençal” speaking Dauphinate. Although I am more drawn to the southern lands of France, closely related as they are to Spain, than to the north, I retain from the Alps a love of mountains, snow, and skiing—which is something that I have practiced in the solitary spaces of all the “Sierras Nevadas” near which I have lived, even in Mexico on Popocatépetl and Ixtacchuatl. It was indeed in the central Pyrenees that, in 1935, I had my first experience of Spain, in the form of the amazing village communities of Upper Aragon. They left a strong impression on me.

As a child I was already interested in history or, rather, prehistory. For example, I spent time out in the country looking for worked flints, and I collected Roman coins, which could be bought at that time for a few sous.

Despite these interests, I at first directed my studies toward an advanced scientific education; but my distaste for higher mathematics made me change course. At Grenoble I took a licentiate degree in history and geography (which in France are taught together), and after that I was successful in the entrance competition of the Ecole des Chartes [paleography and history school] in Paris. I left there qualified as an “archivist-paleographer.” When France fell in 1940, I was a second lieutenant. After I was demobilized, Spain came again to my mind. The French Ecole des Hautes Etudes Hispaniques was in the process of being reopened there, and received at the Casa Velázquez historians and others doing research on Hispanic topics. Architects and artists were also in residence there. As a result of these contacts and my general attraction to art, I still have a passion for the engravings of Goya. I was admitted to the Casa Velázquez in order to prepare a doctoral thesis.

Disillusionment brought on by the war in Europe, coupled with my admiration for the prodigious overseas enterprise of the Iberian peoples, led me to the Archivo General de Indias in Seville. In those especially hard and difficult times my work was made much easier by the help of unforgettable friends in Seville (Antonio Muro Orejón, José Antonio Calderón Quijano, Guillermo Lohmann Villena, and others); and I put together an initial collection of primary sources on the origins of the great haciendas of Mexico in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (a topic I had already chosen with the approval of my thesis director in Paris, Marc Bloch). In 1946, Professor Paul Rivet, who took an interest in my research, arranged my appointment as professor in the Institut Français d’Amérique Latine, which he had established in Mexico during the war. There, with further help from friends such as Pablo Martínez del Río and Silvio Zavala, I assembled a new and very rich collection of documents. These, along with the direct knowledge of the geographical and human setting that I was able to acquire, allowed me in 1949 to complete my doctoral thesis on Mexico. I defended it at the Sorbonne before an examining board composed of Fernand Braudel, Marcel Bataillon, Robert Ricard, and others. Sad to say, Marc Bloch was no longer alive to act as my *rapporteur* [advocate].

I went back to Mexico, soon to assume the directorship of the Institut Français d’Amérique Latine (IFAL)—a task in which I received much help from my young wife. I made great efforts to develop research activities in the Institut, principally by means of a regular *mesa redonda* on Mexican history, viewed comparatively in a world context. We studied among other themes the history of the Mexican Revolution, and, along with the late Arturo Arnáiz y Freg and Luis Chávez Orozco, invited many

people who had witnessed or taken part in the events of the Revolution to recount their memories—for example, Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama (Zapata's legal adviser), Luis León (a minister under Calles), Jesús Silva Herzog, and others. All the Mexican historians of that time took part in our activities, beginning with Silvio Zavala, José Miranda, and Jesús Reyes Heróles, as well as many North American and European visitors (among them, the statesman Pierre Mendès France, an expert in financial history). It is a pity that lack of funds prevented the publication of the proceedings of all but one of those ten or twelve years of round tables. Nonetheless, they left memories and had some influence.

I profited from that long residence in Mexico to get to know not only the whole country, in all its wide diversity, but incidentally all Central America, the Antilles (among them Haiti and the French-speaking islands), and even several countries of South America.

In 1962 I left Mexico to take up a post at the University of Bordeaux, teaching Latin American topics. At the same time I assumed responsibility for the academic direction of the Institut Français d'Études Andines in Lima (a research institution), where I spent every summer. In this way I was able to add depth to my knowledge of several Andean countries, and became more closely acquainted with Brazil and Argentina, both of which offered valuable points of comparison with Mexico.

Then in 1967 I was appointed director of the Casa Velázquez in Madrid, where I had myself been a young researcher a quarter of a century earlier. I should point out that the Casa possesses an important library on Hispanic topics; and also that it welcomes "free members," including North Americans. Besides organizing round tables in which the eminent ethnohistorian Julio Caro Baroja, José Antonio Maravall, Gonzalo Anes, and many others, took part, I assembled a multidisciplinary French-Spanish team in Seville to study the problems of southern Spain, which has more than a few points in common with Latin America. My wife was a great help to me in the artistic part of the Casa's activities.

While still in Madrid, I was elected to a new chair of Latin American history at the Sorbonne. Some of my duties in that position were performed for me by my friend and colleague at the University of Paris-Nanterre, Frédéric Mauro, while I myself regularly gave a doctoral seminar. Only in 1979 did I finally leave the Casa Velázquez to occupy my chair full time at the University of Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne). Besides offering my undergraduate courses, I also direct, in seminars, thèses "de troisième cycle," being written by French and Latin American students on topics drawn from most of the countries of the subcontinent. A number of these theses are on Mexico and Venezuelan subjects. I am also directing various "State theses," which usually take some ten years to

complete. I have recently become an emeritus professor; but since no replacement has been appointed yet, I continue with my tasks at the Sorbonne. Again, I take part in the activities of the Centre d'Etudes des Relations Internationales (in the Fondation des Sciences Politiques de Paris), in collaboration with A. Rouquié, P. Gilhodès, and other Americanists.

What personal and academic experiences influenced your graduate studies and your later career?

At the time I was working on my licentiate degree in history and geography, a teacher who particularly interested me was the geographer Raoul Blanchard. He was a specialist in the Alps. He would take us out into the countryside after having us make a careful study of local maps; and he demonstrated to us the characteristics of settlement, in particular, those of rural settlement. Another of his pupils at that time was Raymond Crist, from Los Angeles, who in due course became a professor at Gainesville, in Florida. He, in 1933, had presented a report on the llanos of Venezuela (published in Grenoble) that fascinated me. He later devoted himself to the study of the northern Andes. Circumstances led, however, to my entering the Ecole de Chartes in Paris rather than continuing with geography. The work I submitted when I left the Ecole concerned ancient rural settlement in a strongly romanized area of the Dauphiné—that of Vienne, to the south of Lyon. I had not only worked in archives, but also traversed the region on foot, seeking to recognize on the spot the oldest indigenous settlements, Roman colonizing villas (a type of hacienda), monastic farms, and so on. In Paris I had attended Marc Bloch's seminar, and had been strongly influenced by him both in person and through his books (for example, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire de la campagne française*), which combined geography with history by adding to archival research a detailed examination of the soil, the shape of fields, the arrangement of the habitat, and other characteristics of the countryside. Again, his *La société féodale* presented another dimension of history, above all by incorporating into it personal ties and family groups. This practice of on-the-spot research, which is shared by ethnology and geography itself, did not restrict me to studying any particular period of the past, either recent or ancient, since while seeking what is permanent, one must also recognize changes. Furthermore, to comprehend history implies finding points of comparison in time and space, and arriving at a familiarity with human beings and their lives that one cannot achieve solely in archives and libraries, however indispensable these may be to the historian.

Tell us, please, something of your travels, and of the places outside France that have left the greatest impression on you.

I have always liked traveling. My attraction to, and specialization in, the history of Latin America are sufficient demonstration of that. From the beginning, it also seemed to me that to know one's own country thoroughly, it was necessary to leave it. I believe now that lengthy contact with a culture different from one's own is an enriching experience. Personally, I have certainly found it to be so with the Ibero-American countries to which I shall refer shortly. Italy has always attracted me. It is the most urban country (in every sense of the term) of all—with its cities and lesser towns, all with great, monumental, and even sumptuous, squares, descending from the Roman forum and the Greek agora. There we find the ideal model of the "plaza mayor," which reappears not only in Spain, but in the smallest village anywhere from Mexico, through the Andean lands, to Argentina. I have also found much of interest in Islam, which left so clear a stamp, after that of Rome, on the south of the Iberian Peninsula. So, for instance, an attentive visit to the Moroccan town of Fez, before the changes of the past thirty years took place, enabled me to see for myself what everyday life was like in Seville during the Golden Age—very much, indeed, as it is described in a whole series of contemporary accounts. But Seville was the obligatory, if temporary, abode of all Spaniards on their way to America (with many *andaluces* among their number).

En route to Mexico in 1946, I visited New York for the first time. That was a shock. Although I was first and foremost a medievalist, I did not rush out to see the famous Cloisters Museum, as many of my compatriots did. Rather, I found myself attracted by the most novel features of that great metropolis, to which my attention had already been drawn through reading André Siegfried. In its impressive architecture, as in so many other respects, this astounding triumph of technology, which was then unique in the world on such a large scale, was already giving rise to imitation elsewhere and was clearly to leave a profound stamp on the future; but it was also a declaration and, as it were, a symbol of numerous breaks with the traditional past in the four continents. Those traditional, or even peasant, ways were still at the time very much in evidence in Europe (and even more so in Latin America); and that fact had allowed me to capture alive, precisely because the continuities were so strong, features of a considerably distant past. But the historian should be careful about such things, because peasant societies are not unchanging. History also contains abrupt changes, and it would be possible to create a past that is in part imaginary. In any case, in New York the break between past and

present (and above all the future) seemed enormous. This simple observation helped me to understand recent disequilibria, and others still to come, within the most traditional “holistic” societies.

I went, of course, to the Metropolitan Museum, where I discovered what is for me the most fantastic of El Greco’s works—that green and black painting of Toledo. At Columbia University I attended a seminar of the distinguished Mexicanist, Frank Tannenbaum, and in Washington I also visited the splendid Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress, which is so remarkable and so justly renowned that there is no need to dwell on it. With the approval of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was then the French cultural attaché in New York, I eventually set out for Mexico, using the excellent Greyhound bus line, and taking a somewhat zig-zag route that allowed me to become familiar with the interior of the continent. The distances were far greater than I had become accustomed to in Europe.

Most of my traveling has naturally been in Latin America. I have visited almost all the Latin American countries, from the Mexican Sierras and the high Andes to Amazonia and the Pampas. The only exception is Paraguay, and I hope to fill that gap some day, especially since I feel incapable of understanding the rather poorly elucidated phenomenon of Guaraní mestizaje without having a first-hand acquaintance with Paraguay’s human environment. I traveled across Mexico on a powerful Harley motorcycle. Several other journeys I made on horseback, on roads impassable to wheeled vehicles. I found them to be just as much a means of traveling through time as through space, or even more so. The relays of horses, the duties of hospitality performed by the people, the celebrations of religious brotherhoods, people’s behavior in Indian communities, and many manifestations of very old, and unwritten, law—all these often seemed to me the living representation of a past that had generally gone forever in our civilization, with its dominant urban and individualist emphases.

Recently I managed to retrace a journey first made on horseback in 1948 with Ernesto de la Torre, this time on new roads and in a car, starting from Luis González’s El Colegio de Michoacán in Zamora. Lower Michoacán “revisited” thirty-three years later revealed to me, naturally enough, profound and highly interesting differences in the behavior and the life of the people, as well as great changes in the countryside. All this traveling, of course, does not relieve me of the historian’s responsibility of studying in libraries and archives the documentation of the region in question, both before and after visiting it.

Have any particular writers, historians or others, influenced you in an important way?

I have always tended to eclecticism—finding things to learn from thinkers of quite varied, and even contradictory, tendencies. Although personally my ideas have little in common with positivism, nonetheless I admire some of the work of the Mexican and Venezuelan positivists of the beginning of this century, such as Francisco Bulnes and Laureano Valle-nilla Lanz, to mention two names little known outside their countries. At a time when scholars at the Sorbonne were writing a very dry sort of history, wrongly called “positivist,” since it rejected every notion of law and even all comparisons across space and time, a number of Latin Americans wrote a truly sociological history, which compares, interprets, and considers facts—which seeks, in sum, to achieve integration with universal history. These nonconformists, as witnesses of their times, wrote very acute analyses of men and matters of both past and present. Their conclusions were, it is true, often highly debatable. But these writers force the reader to reconsider events and facts, presuppositions of a more-or-less unconscious sort, and opinions too freely admitted as evidence. In certain respects, and with the appropriate allowances made, the Latin American positivist writers were in the line of Tocqueville and other great historian-thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Although the same trends are not to be found in Spain, where Auguste Comte had little influence, someone like Joaquín Costa would not be far from positivism in his sociohistorical research, work that still has value. Later, in 1930, the medievalist Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz gave a lecture (which was subsequently published) on the original characteristics of Spanish expansion in the New World. It was entitled “La edad media y la empresa de América” (*España y el Islam*, Buenos Aires, 1943, pp. 181–199), and had an orientation similar to Costa’s. I found it remarkable when I read it. But by that time ideas had begun to change. The review *Annales* and the mentors I have already mentioned had been among the promoters of the new economic and social history. Nowadays ideas have evolved yet further, and I myself no longer hold quite the same notions as before, as I shall explain later.

Criticism of “economism” and its excesses can be met by the strong interest, now visible in history, in the role of pure ideas and ideologies, myths, value systems, religion, and so on. I shall return to that point.

From a broader philosophical point of view, a writer like Solzhenitzyn had, and has, influence—an influence that extends to the intellectual milieu of Europe. Although his speech at Harvard in 1978 was open to dispute, I found it impressive, and helpful in allowing a clearer vision of the

faults of our Western world—which itself possibly feels some need for a “spiritual supplement,” as had been said some time before.

In France, long after the crisis of 1968 and especially among the young, one can detect a shift at various levels of thought. Perhaps what has occurred is a restatement of old varieties of conformism, along with some new ones, as a consequence of an attitude that is essentially one of protest. How could it be otherwise, among the tremendous historical mutations that we are living through these days?

Your considerable reputation as a historian is based to a large extent (though certainly not exclusively) on your studies of the colonial period. How do you yourself see the long-term consequences of the particular colonial experience for Latin America? How far has the colonial legacy been reflected in the national and republican eras?

This is a very interesting problem, but an extremely large one. Here I can give only some fragmentary answers.

As happens in all foreign invasions, the brutal contact of sixteenth-century European conquerors with native populations that were at best in the Bronze Age mainly resulted in the imposition of the law of the strongest. This was so in matters of exploitation of the land. Indians were forced to work and to give tribute; the best lands were seized; and great estates were created, for the gain of the conquerors and their creole descendants. In the nineteenth century, creoles and foreigners replaced the Spaniards. The pressure exercised by whites, and by mestizos who generally joined them, may well have been accentuated by the fall of the tutelary state, which had protected the Indians. Indeed, in most places the large estate tended to be reinforced, with latifundia often giving place to less enormous holdings, but holdings more intensively exploited. Agrarian reforms, also, have often been seen as a form of decolonization. Some of them have been relatively effective, as for example in Mexico, although they have not yielded all the economic results expected of them. But, for that matter, where has there ever been a totally successful agrarian reform?

The mining economies of Spanish and Portuguese America yielded at least 80 percent of exports to the metropolitan countries, giving rise to a close economic dependence on the part of the colonies, both because of trade monopolies (discounting contraband) and because of the monopoly on the sale of mercury, which was indispensable for refining silver. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dependence on the former metropolises shifted to a situation yielding profits to new powers—to one power, above all, in the end—which are described as “imperialist” in Marxian

vocabulary. But when countries are at very different levels of technology, is it possible that the member of the group that most lags in “performance” can wholly escape dependence? At most one can limit its excesses through massive transfers of resources and technology, taking no heed of profitability, or of narrowly defined economic rationality.

It should not be forgotten, however, that outside the formerly Spanish or Portuguese regions of slave plantations, the word “colonial” (which originates in the late eighteenth century), with its strong economic connotations, is more correctly applied to rather late expansions by the English, the Dutch, and to a degree the French. The term is not an adequate description of the inner nature of the old Spanish empire in America, which had a strong institutional component of missionary and religious activity—which in turn was clearly connected to the long Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. That six-century crusade came to an end in 1492, just before Columbus’s first voyage, and in a way it continues throughout Latin America. From that experience derives the powerful Spanish effort toward acculturation, which, up to the late eighteenth century, took precedence over economic policy. Hence also derives—and this continues to the present—the importance of religion in Spanish America, in the widest sense of the word. Religion, with its traits originating in native culture, its possible syncretisms, and its contradictory or anticlerical reactions, remains one of the typical characteristics of the Latin American subcontinent.

If you were to single out one of your books as your most important contribution to knowledge of Latin American history, which would it be? And why would you rank it above your other work?

My book *La formation des grands domaines au Mexique. Terre et société aux XVI^e—XVII^e siècles* is certainly the best known, especially since there are three editions in Spanish, and two in English with the title *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico: The Great Hacienda*. The book was written before anyone had undertaken any precise quantitative work, or had begun to represent in graphs and curves the demographic, economic, and social phenomena that it discusses. So the book is not precisely to the taste of today’s readers, although subsequent quantification, whether regional or more general, has not really invalidated any of its essential conclusions.

My history of Latin America from independence onward cost me much effort and time. It is considerably more than a textbook, even if the obligation to fit everything into a single volume made me condense my

thinking to the maximum. Some sections of the book summarize original research that has, I think, no exact equivalent elsewhere. There are such sections in Part three of the book: on the formation, and then the dissolution, of Indian communities (VI, 1, 2); *Les Caudillos* (VI, 3c); *Ordre et Progrès* (X, 4); in Colombia, Medellín, *cité juive?* (X, 1c); *L'acculturation* (X, 3); *La religion populaire et le culte marial* (XI, 3d); and so on. The epilog, which is extended in the Spanish edition, also contains original material. On the other hand, my own ideas and estimations have developed since I wrote certain chapters of the book a decade ago (for example, Part three, ch. I, and XII, 3 c), and these I should revise in a future edition.

What projects are you currently pursuing?

I have both short- and long-term publication projects under way. In the short term, my research is much influenced by the general topics of the collective works and the colloquia in which I have been invited to participate in Europe and America. In these pieces I like to deal with topics allowing long-term comparisons. I sometimes find that preparing these short works is facilitated by the orientation of theses and research of our Center on quite varied topics and countries in the Iberian world. I consider myself, of course, especially competent in Mexican matters; but lately I have become much interested in Venezuela, and have had many invitations to that country—one, recently, from UNESCO, to collaborate in a general history of Latin America.

In the medium term, and when my book on the origins of the great estates appears in a new edition (probably in Mexico), I should like to include in it an extensive introduction—far more substantial than the one I wrote in 1975—dealing with new research on this topic in the last thirty years and more. I might even add a more personal contribution, since I am at present working on a monographic study of a former large hacienda that has distinctive characteristics.

With a view to producing a new edition in French or other languages of my book on Latin America since independence, I am also obliged constantly to seek complementary material, and to recast certain chapters in accordance with new research findings and new points of view, which I shall come back to shortly. This work is directed above all to researchers and specialists, and is presented in a somewhat austere manner, with a number of rather technical passages and an extensive, although select, bibliography of sources. I should like, however, to produce another book on the same subject that would be accessible to a broader educated pub-

lic, so as to offer fuller information on the problems of Latin America. We hear and read in the media too many mistaken views about Latin America. I have been asked in France to write such a book.

Finally, I have taken travel notes and many photographs in the Iberian countries that I have lived in or visited—especially in Spain and Mexico, though in most others as well. These observations and memories, added to my knowledge of history and familiarity with the local environments, might be assembled into a book that I think would have some interest.

So I have many projects at hand. Other more distant plans also exist, and yet more may come up unexpectedly. As I write slowly, with much revision, it will take me some time to carry out even a part of my program.

What do you consider to have been your major influence on your students? And would you care to reveal to us your philosophy in selecting, training, and placing your graduate students?

Although I have been a titular University Professor for more than twenty-five years, I have long had responsibilities outside France that were not purely pedagogic. This, except in the last ten years or so, has had the effect of limiting the number of students working directly with me. I believe, however, that my book on the great Mexican estates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in its Spanish and English translations, has indirectly contributed to pointing young researchers from both North and South America toward the study of large estates and of the historical origins of agrarian problems. At present, various Latin Americans are even coming to Paris to write theses on such topics, bringing with them most of their documentation. The situation has been otherwise in Spain, where, to my knowledge, only one investigation of this sort, though an important one, has been carried out: Ramón M. Serrera Contreras's *Guadalajara ganadera: Estudio regional novohispano, 1760–1805* (Seville, 1977). This may change, especially because interesting works have been written on large landed properties in southern Spain. In short, some of my French students are interested in this problem, and some of them manage to go to Spain or to Mexico. For most of them, though, the lack of sources in Paris for the Spanish period causes them to turn to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for which we have, for instance, important regional “censos” that have really been little used up to now. Finally, the greater diversity of topics among the more advanced researchers preparing their “thèses d’Etat” does not pose problems, since they have done their principal research, or are doing it, in the countries where the sources exist, while still maintaining close contact with our research center in Paris. Our seminars are places where discussion of com-

parative history takes place—sometimes with lively debate on controversial contemporary topics.

The problem of placing qualified French graduates, even those with doctoral degrees, presents difficulties nowadays in the case of those students who are unsuccessful in the competitive *Agrégation* examination that confers the right to a post in secondary education, or in some other examination opening the way to upper levels. There is some difficulty even for present or future *docteurs d'Etat*, although a demand always arises sooner or later for the services of authors of truly original theses. Such works are, however, rare.

What do you consider to have been your greatest single satisfaction as a historian?

I find many and varied satisfactions in being a historian. It is hard to rank them. I shall mention a few of them briefly, beginning with an anecdote.

When I arrived in 1948, on horseback, and far from main roads, in a remote village of the Mexican sierras—the ancient mining settlement of Bolaños—my surprise can be imagined when I heard the parish priest say that he knew me well through a *Descripción de la Nueva Galicia* [by Domingo Lázaro de Arregui] that I had published two years before in Seville, and which he had bought in Guadalajara.

There is satisfaction also in the touching gratitude that young students sometimes show toward their professors; or in discovering that after a quarter of a century has passed, our round tables on comparative Mexican history have not been forgotten in Mexico, and that they have left good memories there. Or again, there is the satisfaction of seeing in its completed form an innovative thesis that one has had some part in guiding at the beginning. Finally, to lay hands on a first-rate document is a joy to the historian; as is also to uncover a clear connection between some aspect of the past and the grave problems of the present that one seeks to elucidate.

In addition to the satisfactions, however, one serious concern exists. In this autumn of 1983 the university year has once again begun, and I have been Professor Emeritus for a month. The decision to appoint my successor has not yet been made. Will economies and austerity planning strike at our active Latin American chair—a chair in the leading Department of History, in numbers of students and teachers, in Europe, and the second in the world (so it is said) after Berkeley? We at the Sorbonne are still unwilling to acknowledge that this is so.*

* Now (March 1984) it seems that the election of a successor will be allowed.

Would you care to single out two or three of your contemporaries, or near contemporaries, who you feel have made a particularly important contribution to our knowledge of Latin American history?

I should have to cite many more than two or three names in mentioning those who have made essential contributions to the history of Latin America. This is particularly so because important or fertile ideas about that part of the world sometimes come from historians or sociologists who do not specialize in Latin America (for example, the “frontier,” or the role of the French Revolution as a model).

At all events, I shall mention the series of works by Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah dealing with the demographic collapse of Mexico, and to a degree other areas, in the sixteenth century—and then with the slow, and much later, recovery of the population. Even if it is difficult to see through these studies to the human realities that lie behind the abstractions of numbers and sharply falling curves, they are nonetheless basic works that help to clarify many other historical problems of the islands and the mainland. These studies connect with others on the history of the prehistoric population of Mexico, and of America in general—some of them also from Berkeley, but above all from Richard S. MacNeish and his Latin American and international team. I refer above all to their discovery of the extraordinary story of the origins of maize, and of Meso-American agriculture.

For contemporary affairs, readers will doubtless be surprised to find me citing here not a historian’s contribution, but that of a researcher in the Economic Growth Center of Yale—Clark W. Reynolds, author of *The Mexican Economy. Twentieth Century Structure and Growth*. Once more I come back to Mexico, clearly the best studied of any Latin American country. I refer to the work of an economist intentionally, for Reynolds, looking beyond such problems as GNP, and economic growth, seeks to undertake a thorough exploration of the structural changes occurring in all economic sectors, agrarian reform, urbanization, industrial revolution, commerce, taxation, distribution of wealth, expansion of the tertiary sector and services, and so on. So this author goes well beyond economics in his quest for global explanations. To be sure, his book, which dates from 1970, has lost some of its immediacy from the strictly economic point of view. But, with certain reservations, it is still of interest to historians.

Demography and economy stand as indispensable foundations for history. But they are not the sole foundations, and must be extended to other realms of the social sciences, especially to political science, a discipline still being subjected to ever greater quantitative refinement at Yale. One could indeed imagine that at Yale, open-minded economists and po-

litical analysts could collaborate fruitfully with historians. Elsewhere, this is not always the case with multidisciplinary teams, and experience has shown how difficult it is to avoid certain “dialogs of the deaf” and to bring down the walls that stand between even complementary disciplines. But despite everything, results can be obtained on limited objectives.

Do you have any feelings about the directions in which our subject is moving, or any suggestions about its development?

The question poses some complex difficulties, and I can deal with it here only summarily. The history of Latin America is not autarkic; and at least in the Western world, and in France in particular, historical research seems to be affected by a tendency to modify its preferred themes, if not by a wholly new orientation. Let us take the French case. The history of ideas has always had a place of honor here, with such figures as Lucien Febvre, co-editor of *Annales*, and, in Hispanic or Latin American topics, Marcel Bataillon, Jean Sarrailh, and Robert Ricard (three of these trained as Hispanists, to be sure). For the last forty years or more, however, young apprentice historians have tended to opt for research topics in economic and social history. The influence of Ernest Labrousse was palpable here. For him, economic events in history were the major events (though not the *only* events). A little later, some influence of Pierre Vilar became evident. But above all one must point to the powerful and broad-minded force of Marc Bloch and the *Annales*—which, with Fernand Braudel, became, after 1946, *Annales. Economies. Sociétés. Civilisations*. Braudel’s personal role continued to expand for at least two decades.

These studies, with their multiplicity of graphs and curves describing price movements and other aspects of economic history, have a permanent importance. Nobody today dreams of arguing about the significance of economic matters in history, any more than there is argument about that of the common people. But some historians left the path marked out by their seniors, and went to extremes. The economic curve was pursued for its own sake; the thinking elites were totally forgotten. A purely economic approach proved insufficient to account for phenomena of which there were present, living examples. So there developed a greater interest in education, in teaching, in culture; and these were recognized as essential factors of development. Attention is now paid to “mentalités,” to politics, to the perception and interpretation of things, to symbolism, myths, ideologies, value systems, religion (and its role in the world). In the process, economic, social, political, cultural history, the history of civilizations—all history, in short—has taken on new dimensions.

These trends, in which Pierre Chaunu and François Furet, although

quite different, are leaders, are clearly visible in the new generations of historians—as, for example, in Jean Meyer in his study of the Mexican Cristeros. They are apparent, also, in the *maitrise* and thesis topics that our able young researchers suggest spontaneously, and that they carry through to successful conclusions.

Parallel tendencies had already long existed in the United States, or have become established there. In particular political science has developed somewhat further than in Europe, with research such as that of the Yale Data Studies Group. It has managed to measure, and hence achieve a more precise evaluation, not only of behavior, but through behavior, of mental or political attitudes, psychic states, beliefs, phenomena of all sorts, both individual and, above all, collective.

Despite some possibly promising signs, such developments are less clear in Latin America, where much historical work is still marked by earlier tendencies, and even more, perhaps, by more-or-less orthodox Marxist beliefs. These are notable among many students and young academics. I say “orthodox” because in France, at least, these same intellectual currents have become greatly diversified—as in the case of Althusser, for example, for whom ideology or religion are organic parts of social reality, on the same level as economics and politics.

Another trend, and one that is better known, has been a drift in research topics from the “colonial” to the contemporary. There is a degree of logic in this change if, as many believe, one of the essential aims of history is to help us to understand the present in which we live. In this respect, “regressive history” seems enlightening to me: that is, a history that goes from observation of the present, and from analysis of what we have experienced, to a search for roots in the past. I have become increasingly interested myself in contemporary history; but I remain convinced that what is modern cannot be understood in depth by anyone who thinks it possible to be ignorant of what has gone before—liberalism emerging from the Enlightenment, three centuries of Iberian empire, and native civilization. I believe, furthermore, that the long-term study of a given institution or phenomenon generally throws new light on its history—indeed, on history.

But these considerations are not to be read as exclusive. I willingly concede that innovative approaches can be applied to much more classical topics, over a limited period of time, and without apparent connection with the present (though in human affairs there are always connections with the present). A certain classicism may also be advisable if one wishes to be elected to a chair in this old Europe of ours!

In your Latin American Center what large research topics, typical of new trends, seem to you especially worth mentioning?

Several researchers associated with our Center have “thèses d’Etat” well under way. I would mention Serge Gruzinski’s research on the restructuring of Indian culture after the demographic disaster of the sixteenth century in central Mexico. Chantal Caillavet is pursuing a similarly ethnohistorical topic, the Otavalo Indians of Ecuador; and Marie-Claude Cabos is studying the intellectual world of the Peruvian Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala. Then there is the work of Anne Perotin-Wilde (who is teaching in 1983 at the University of Notre Dame) “La rencontre du fait révolutionnaire et du fait colonial: Jacobins et gens de mer dans le Nouveau Monde (1770–1830).” Then again, I should mention Marco Enríquez’s future thesis on “Le Chili de 1870 à 1896 vu par le Quai d’Orsay et le Foreign Office.” Mention of these topics must not obscure the existence of agrarian history here, as exemplified in the “thèse de troisième cycle” of Elisabeth Fonseca on “colonial” Costa Rica (now in press in San José).

But I should like to draw particular attention to a striking thesis now in press in Paris, after ten years’ preparation. This is *Le Mexique: De la société d’ancien régime à la Révolution*, by François Guerra (Maître-Assistant with me in Paris). A basis of the work is a computer file of some 8,000 individuals or “social actors” and 150,000 pieces of data between 1875 and 1930—a file compiled by a team led by Guerra at our Centre de Recherches. The author has developed a theoretical model for Mexico in this period that gives preference, over the long term, to the ideological and sociopolitical aspects of history. This casts new light on the history of Liberalism and Porfirio Díaz, and especially on the origins of the Mexican Revolution, which have so far been studied particularly from the socio-economic point of view. This advance has much in common with that achieved by François Furet for the French Revolution—which in turn followed that of Augustin Cochin (a young historian unknown to the Sorbonne at the time) at the beginning of this century.

Guerra demonstrates, in effect, a deep hiatus, lasting throughout the Porfiriato, between two essentially different worlds: on the one hand, a Liberal-Jacobin state, directed by a small minority of citizens (conscious individuals, and members of enlightened clubs or Masonic lodges), and, on the other, an enormous “holistic” society, still belonging to the Old Regime, in which the church stands in the front rank as Order. The state, therefore, finds that, without the use of force, it is unable to apply the great liberal principles of the Reforma to a “people” of whom 90 percent

are collective actors—a strongly coherent and hierarchical mass. From this difficulty emerges the government's need either to impose its decisions in an authoritarian manner in the name of a fictitious “people,” in the manner of the Jacobins in the French Revolution, or to adjust and find a *modus vivendi* with the holistic society and the church, so as to assure social peace—all the while violating the liberal Constitution of 1857, which remains in effect and is invoked as an ideal. This second course was the compromise solution adopted by Don Porfirio, who ensured his own permanence in office by relying on a pyramid of traditional loyalties and clientele. But Porfirio Díaz grew old, and as he did so he neglected to deal with the question of the succession. When the world economic crisis of 1907 arrived, exacerbated in Mexico by bad harvests, the political consensus put together by the president became a matter of debate in the name of the Constitution, and in a few months the regime floundered.

In his 850-page work, Guerra presents a model that elucidates the Porfiriato. That model, however, allows us to extend to present-day Mexico his political explanation of the Liberal-Porfirian era. After the military phase of the Revolution, in which personal ties again become a powerful force, we find the same sociopolitical problem emerging as before—alleviated, however, by the progress of a more modern, individualist society in contrast to the traditional “holistic” majority. After Obregón and Calles, the question of the presidential succession was resolved. But despite all that happened, the hiatus between the two societies has not completely disappeared. This fact helps to explain the government by single party that exists in Mexico—enlightened and relatively elitist government, with much wider social bases than those of a “brains trust” of *científicos* and a consensus of liberals rallying around don Porfirio. This innovative model may be applied in part to countries besides Mexico, whether Latin or of some other derivation, in different periods of their history. It should give rise to parallel research on the boundaries of history and political science.

The role of the historian may vary from time to time and from country to country. Could you tell us what you believe the role of historical writing to have been in the evolution of Latin America? And could you compare the role of historians in your country with that of their counterparts in Latin America, and possibly the United States?

In the Latin American countries, as in many others, including France, history has had, and still has, an essential role to play, because it touches the deepest parts of national consciousness. This consciousness rests not only on love of the land, but also broadly on a symbolic system born of a

certain historical perception of people and things in the past, and the present—a perception tied, therefore, to the dominant ideology. Taking the example of Mexico, we find that the Marian cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which represents an early form of nationalism, was later partly laicized in the cult of heroes, beginning with Cuauhtémoc or Hidalgo, and extending to Juárez and Madero. Somewhat as in the old *images d'Epinal* of the heroes of French history, the great Mexican figures appear with strikingly accentuated features, in the sense of a particular vision of national history. This vision of them is disseminated and popularized in primary school texts. In large part, though not wholly, this conception of history developed by the people, or rather *for* the people, comes from above—essentially from those in power, who in Mexico, since 1855, have been the liberals and others whose origins are in liberalism. These holders of power have drawn their inspiration from historians of similar ideological tendencies to their own; and they express the dominant view of history in their country. For, with the exception of a few, though very interesting, dissidents, the only thing that their adversaries had to offer was a defensive position, which held no really original ideas.

Although in a country like France the theoretical positions were more numerous and more diversified, nonetheless the prevailing trend was, and is, comparable. There is nothing surprising in that, since, in broad terms, France was the source of such ideology in Mexico and elsewhere. The keystone was the perception of a leading role of the French Revolution in destroying obscurantism. On many points, these positions, which were initially clearcut and rigid in their official versions, have taken on nuances, at least in their details, through free discussion among historians of varying inclinations. This has happened above all, of course, at the level of higher education; and from there changes spread eventually to secondary and primary school texts. In Mexico, as happened a little earlier in France, what was simplified has become rather more flexible; and I am struck by the more open views that have appeared in Mexican school texts—works produced by able historians. We historians of Latin America who are not Latin Americans should, however, be particularly understanding, open-minded, and prudent when we discuss topics that lie so close to the national consciousness of the peoples in question.

On the whole, therefore, the officious and official view of national history has acquired nuances and flexibility. But something else has been happening in the last few years. In the Western countries, or at least those that I know, the younger generation has challenged all positions and values, old and new, moral and ideological, recognized or held implicitly by their elders. There are no more untouchable themes or taboo topics. This dissenting attitude has its repercussions on history, for young people

debate the too commonly accepted truths, although in Latin America, at least, the “protest” aspect of Marxism continues for the moment to work in that ideology’s favor. That situation augurs changes in the future, perhaps in the near future, and it offers immediate encouragement, I believe, for a still greater opening-up than we have seen of the historical and social sciences.

*How can we in the United States go about improving our relationship with historians of Latin America itself, and in Europe? Do you see a need for such improvement?*⁹

Let us first take a general point of view, one that is purely academic, though perhaps too theoretical. I have always thought that we could achieve amazing results in history if we could form teams of North Americans and Latins of high academic and intellectual ability. The North Americans would contribute their pioneering and innovative character, less constrained than elsewhere by impediments and routines, and also their spirit of cooperation in research. They work with much seriousness and method. The Latins could offer their experience of living in societies that are still replete with tradition, an often acute comprehension of the historical problems in question, and a disposition that is particularly suitable for conceptualizing those problems.

Ideally, I imagine a harmonious collaboration and a better balance than hitherto between empirical and conceptualized approaches, with the realism of the northerners better controlling the southerners’ tendency to systematize—but with that realism broadened by the southerners’ attitudes, to include new horizons.

In practice, departments specializing in the social sciences exist in the United States that welcome and incorporate large numbers of researchers of Hispanic or Latin American origin—and sometimes people from France and elsewhere. Some remarkable work, produced no doubt by team efforts, has already appeared as a result. But the reverse practice occurs to a lesser extent, and very little in Europe. We are very short of resources for such purposes in our schools, and especially in our universities. Nevertheless, the possibility of doing something along these lines surely exists, in some carefully chosen academic group, and in collaboration with some intellectual leader or scholar who is able to devote the necessary time to the researchers and to the delicate task of coordinating their work.

Besides the material difficulties, I recognize the multiple problems that would arise in such enterprises: for example, the question of the language to be used (if possible, that of the country being studied). If the

researchers were young, they would be faced with the standard necessity of obtaining an academic qualification in their own country. All participants would suffer delay in their normal university activities, and perhaps would not be able to leave their countries for sufficient time. Since this sort of project concerns a narrow elite, and obvious results are not forthcoming in the short term, political support would probably be difficult to find. It would at any event be useful, at least on a more modest scale, but still in the same general framework, to ask any high-level partners in such enterprises to take advantage of their participation to establish further contacts, to take part in group meetings, and even to develop round tables where wide exchanges of views would occur. Both individuals and international comprehension would inevitably gain through such activities.

Bibliography
(in chronological order)

Books

- Editor and annotator, *Descripción de la Nueva Galicia (1621)*, by Domingo Lázaro de Arregui. Seville, 1946.
- Prolog and notes to *Instrucciones a los hermanos Jesuitas administradores de haciendas (Manuscrito mexicano del siglo xviii)*. Mexico City, 1950.
- La formation des grands domaines au Mexique. Terre et société aux XVI^e–XVII^e siècles*. Paris, 1952. Spanish ed., Mexico City, 1956; English ed., with foreword by Lesley Byrd Simpson, Berkeley, 1963.
- L'Amérique Latine de l'Indépendance à nos jours*. Paris, 1977.

Articles

- “Les cargaisons des flottes de Nouvelle-Espagne vers 1600.” *Revista de Indias*, 1943.
- “Les municipalités indiennes en Nouvelle-Espagne, 1520–1620.” *Anuario de Historia del Derecho Español*, 1944.
- “En lisant les ‘novelas’: La vie à Séville au siècle d’or.” *Annales. E.S.C.*, 1947.
- “Signification sociale de la fondation de Puebla de Los Angeles.” *Revista de Historia de América*, 1947.
- With Louis Hugué. “Peuplement et mise en valeur du tropique mexicain.” *Miscelánea Paul Rivet (Mexico City)*, 1953.
- “Survivances seigneuriales et présages de la réforme agraire dans le nord du Mexique (xviii^e et xix^e siècles).” *Revue Historique*, 1959.
- “Un facteur décisif de la révolution agraire au Mexique: Le soulèvement de Zapata (1911–1919).” *Annales. E.S.C.*, 1961.

- “‘Caudillos’ et ‘caciques’ en Amérique. Contribution à l’étude des liens personnels.” *Mélanges offerts à Marcel Bataillon* (Bordeaux), 1963.
- “Ejido et stabilité au Mexique.” *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 1966.
- “L’expansion de la grande propriété dans le haut Pérou au xx^e siècle.” *Annales. E.S.C.*, 1966.
- “Décolonisation et réforme agraire en Amérique Latine.” *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 1969.
- “Official indigenismo in Peru in 1920.” In Magnus Mörner, ed., *Race and Class in Latin America* (New York, 1970).
- “Prolongements en Nouvelle-Espagne du latifundisme bético-romain?” *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* (Paris), 1972.
- “Vingt-cinq ans de nouvelles recherches sur les grands domaines au Mexique: Un bref bilan.” *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* (Paris), 1975.
- “La ‘plaza mayor’ en Amérique espagnole. Forum et plaza mayor dans le monde hispanique” (Paris), 1978.
- “Dictature et légitimité en Amérique Latine, particulièrement au xix^e siècle.” In Maurice Duverger, ed., *Dictature et légitimité* (Paris, 1982).
- “Caracteres originales de las haciendas venezolanas de la costa central (período hispánico).” *Memoria del Cuarto Congreso Venezolano de Historia . . . de 1980* (Caracas), 1983.
- “Un positivisme spécifique comme modèle d’intégration culturelle en Amérique Latine. XIX^e–XX^e siècles.” In *Unité et diversité de l’Amérique Latine* (Bordeaux), 1983.
- “Le Mexique occidental, raccourci d’histoire agraire. La fondation de bourgs libres dan les grands domaines.” *Congreso de Historia Rural: Siglos xv al xix* (Madrid) 1984.