

# Re-Approaching Social Inequality in Colombia

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**Abstract:** Research on inequality in Colombia is primarily approached from an economic point of view with quantitative methodologies. Heterodox and alternative approaches on inequality are almost absent from academic literature in that country. However, there is plenty of literature that presents theoretical and methodological alternatives on how to research inequality, especially in countries in the Global South. This paper takes a qualitative historical approach to inequality to make an argument for class replication following the works of Vester et al (2001), Rehbein et al. (2015) and Rehbein, Jodhka, and Souza (2018). It argues that the early colonial period is determinant in the formation of modern inequality in Colombia.

## Introduction

Known for excelling in other infamous indicators, Colombia stands out in an unequal region as one of the most unequal countries in the world. While inequality and a class system are common traits of Latin American countries, the Colombian case is remarkable not only for its extremely high inequality, ranked anywhere from the 5<sup>th</sup> (CIA World Factbook, n.d.) to 15<sup>th</sup> (World Bank, n.d.) most unequal country in the world, but for the relative stability of the structures that help perpetuate this condition.

The rigid social structure of Colombia is not remarkably different to the norm of the continent. It originates from the administrative system devised by the Spanish to create a control structure and a hierarchy for the different individuals of their colonies (Bushnell 1994, 30). This system was implemented uniformly throughout all of the Spanish colonies and the discontent with it was one of the many motors that fueled the independentist movements of the XVIII Century.

Although Colombia was an active player during the independence campaigns, and also had native precursors to the independence movement, like the *Rebelión de los comuneros*<sup>2</sup> in 1781, the reformist spirit was never integral to the Colombian institutions (Bushnell 1994, 52). In contrast, efforts for reform continued and came to fruition in many neighboring countries, while events like the Mexican revolution or the land reform in Peru are absent from Colombia's history. Also missing are the uncountable attempts and successful coup d'états that are typical to the region. Despite suppressing the calls for reform, the Colombian establishment did not get overthrown over this matter.

On this issue, Colombian historians often emphasize the atypical stability that Colombian institutions have enjoyed when compared with its neighbors. In comparison to other Latin American countries, Colombia has had a stable democracy and institutions, which have only been interrupted during a short period during the 1950's (Bushnell 1994, 292). Even then, the military took over the government in what has been called "*an opinión coup d'état*" (Corredor 1998) given

the ample support it secured from all the political parties and its non-violent nature (Caballero 2018, 351).

It is almost needless to say that the political stability of the country was not reflected in many other fields, as it has been on the top of the most violent countries in the world for decades and was until quite recently an example of a failed state (Gehring and Koch n.d.). Historians often go as far as to mention that the country has never really been at peace (Borja 2015, 173-88), as there has always been some kind of internal conflict going on since its independence. Colombia then presents a paradoxical scenario: a country with a very stable government and institutions that has failed to control years of violence, sometimes even encouraging it, but that has never fallen victim to it.

The Colombian case begs for a new understanding of the reproduction of inequality and the structures that make it unique in comparison with their neighbors. For this purpose, I will distance myself from traditional economic measures to explain inequality in Colombia and argue that conventional quantitative measurements of inequality ignore the structures that shape inequality in Colombia today. In the case of Colombia, I will focus on the consequences of its racial and social composition created by the Spanish colonial system, the unremarkable performance of the economy, the state and the elites. I will also argue that a more comprehensive study of Colombia's social structure and the reproduction of inequality in the country can be conducted by implementing a qualitative based approach.

I will begin this paper by explaining the alternative qualitative approaches to inequality and my motivation for approaching inequality in Colombia with this framework. Secondly, I will provide a historical recount of Colombia's formation, highlighting the elements that contributed to the construction of the current social stratification. Throughout this section, I will show the peculiarities that make the current socio-economic structure in Colombia so resilient to change and I will also denote the few periods or instances that allowed for social restructuring in Colombia. Finally, I will argue for the need to move towards a holistic approach for describing the socio-economic composition of the Colombian society.

## Abandoning the Mainstream Understanding of Inequality

To make an argument for the reproduction of inequality out of the construction of Colombia as a nation, one has to depart from the mainstream accepted academic tradition on inequality that is principally based on the capability-effort approach and on income inequality. These approaches are in line with the ideas of liberal thinkers like Locke (1967) and neo classical economist like Friedman (1962) and are based on the axiom that societies are a playing field where the goal is for the individuals to explore their full potential.

Pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999), the capability-effort approach understands outcomes in life as the interaction of two kinds of factors: the conditions an individual has to take for granted in his life and how much effort he puts into achieving the goals he has set for himself. The guiding principle in this approach is that individuals are optimizing actors who always choose what is better for them. In this system, the most relevant condition one has to take for granted is the socio-economic status of one's own family. The quality of the public goods a country offers plays a significant role, as they are understood to be an equalizing force that compensate the deficiencies that could be inherited from the household. In this regard the PISA tests (OECD n.d.) con-

stantly evaluate the differences between the educational achievements of students in developed countries, concluding that the countries with better education systems quite often tend to also perform better on inequality measurements. Other factors like racial or gender (Blau and Blau 1982) discrimination also play a role, as these are barriers a person cannot negotiate and unfairly limit their potential.

This methodology to measure and address inequality comes in line with traditional liberal agendas that propose that free individuals that operate like maximizing machines and exercise free choice would lead to a fair society (Quint et al. 2018). In this hypothetical society, the different outcomes in life of two people with the same socio-economic characteristics can only be explained by the effort they put into their goals and personal interests. As a society removes more forms of inequality and discrimination, the system becomes fairer, as would the position each person ends up in life. This system justifies persons on a privileged level in society as well as those who are worse off. Although many limitations are still present in all societies, arguments based on this thesis condemning those who are worse can be seen in capitalist societies. Those who are poor are often portrayed as lazy and worthy of their condition and those who are best off are deemed to deserve it.

Income inequality complements this approach by introducing a market negotiated layer to inequality. Even in a perfect society, from the capability-effort approach viewpoint a significant share of inequality could still be dictated by the productive system (Friedman 1962). It has been observed that numerous known market failures can lead to a suboptimal personal income (Matallana 2013). That is, when a worker does not get the fair share that his work is worth. A case example is lacking information during a wage negotiation. By not having information about the average wage for a certain position, someone may close a contract to a price lower than the market. Another example are sectors with only a few employers who collude and pay their employees a low salary to save money and eliminate the incentive of the employees to switch firms.

In aggregated economic terms, there are also issues with inequality. Income inequality is measured on a national basis and is often used as a proxy variable to build different socio-economic classes out of the different tiered income groups. Categories like the famous 1% or the richest 10%, in both cases referring to the wealthiest part of society, are derived out of these kinds of measurements. The gold standard when it comes to income distribution is arguably the GINI coefficient (Spicker, Alvarez and Gordon 2009). This indicator summarizes in a single number how unbalanced the income distribution in a country is. The two theoretical extremes of this measure are zero and one hundred, with zero corresponding to a country where everyone gets the same and one hundred to a country where only one individual gets all the income. In practice, a country with a smaller number has a more equal distribution of income than one with its value close to hundred. Studies that use this measurement as their proxy for inequality have argued that more unequal societies are more violent, less efficient, less innovative and more prone to fail (Quint et al. 2018). This is undesirable due to the negative effects on growth and lower economic performance associated with higher inequality.

There is ample debate around both of these approaches, and it is worth mentioning that neither of them is considered an unquestionable method or measure. However, as the purpose of this paper is not to enter into the criticism of them, it suffices to say that both are well established as the mainstream measurements for researching inequality and that despite the many criticism they have received, they still remain very popular. Unfortunately, there is agreement neither on an alternative methodology for doing research on inequality, nor upon why it is a relevant problem.

A holistic approach to inequality that sees individuals as more as unconnected points in a leveled field is also not prevalent.

For the case of Colombia, and arguably in many other countries in the Global South, these measurements provide little insight into the stable high levels of inequality and the myriad of social issues derived from socio-economic inequality. These measures only reflect on the quantitative and monetary values of inequality and ignore the complicated construction of the social fabric of countries in the Global South that underwent different processes to those in the Global North.

I will argue that the understanding of inequality in a country like Colombia can benefit from a sociological approach and that a good argument can be made from the theoretical and empirical work on class reproduction of Vester et al (2001), Rehbein et al. (2015) and Rehbein, Jodhka, and Souza (2018). These works acknowledge the reasoning behind the leveled field market mandated understanding of societies and acknowledge up to a point its role in the reproduction of inequality, but argue that symbolic inequality is the guiding principle behind the segregation of society and ultimately the articulating force behind inequality. Under this framework, societies and individuals are not playing on a level field but on the contrary, they live inside societies that actively reproduce the current social stratification.

A good way of illustrating the core differences between the mainstream quantitative approach and the sociological one is to compare the different role of education in each. The previously described mainstream quantitative understanding of inequality sees education as the primordial tool for addressing inequality. Under this framework, more and better education allows individuals to improve their socio-economic position by means of higher wages or by granting access to positions of high social regard. Thereby, universal access to education is the best tool to fight inequality. A society with open, good quality education leads to a potentially more equal society.

In contrast, the work on social reproduction of the sociological understands education as one of the main tools in replicating and legitimating inequality (Kerckhoff 1995). Instead of helping people in low social conditions to achieve a higher socio-economic status, education mainly helps to legitimate the social position of those belonging to a privileged group. The key difference with the mainstream approach is that individuals are not isolated units, but the continuation of familiar and social lines that get assimilated into one's preferences and choices. Even in a big social state with unrestricted access to education, the academic performance, preferences on study, work habits, use of free time, and companions are defined from home and the social environment.

It is important to note that this understanding does not conflict with the observed higher productivity and higher wages that have been empirically measured in association with an increase in education. An individual that has experienced a substantial increase in income can remain an outcast. It is very possible for someone with a poor background to get enough education to get a high paying job, but even then, this individual would still be missing the other elements that give him full recognition in a higher echelon of society and is therefore not fully recognized by this group. Although his income could come close to those in the higher up group, he lacks the cultural and social goods that would grant him access to a social group he aspired to be a part of.

An example of this in the Latin American realm are the NiNis (Jimenez 2018), a term coined out of the Spanish expression: “ni estudia, ni trabaja” (he/she neither studies nor works). This expression is used to refer to the increasing number of young people, usually with some academic

degree, who do not work or study and decide to live longer with their parents until they can find a job or an alternative that is up to their expectations. Research has shown different explanations for this phenomenon and the unfulfilled expectations of their professions usually plays a significant role in them (Jimenez 2018, 8).

Either not finding a well-paying job or choosing not to work in bad working conditions are often reasons given by the people who become a NiNi. Here one could also argue for the role of social reproduction in the very unequal societies as those of Latin America. Good and desirable jobs exist in Latin America, but they are usually reserved for the already established individuals and having the academic requirements is not enough to get them. Terms for those who belong to the social group that gets this kind of job exist throughout the continent.

A concept used by Rehbein (Surinder, Rehbein and Souza 2018) that helps to further understand the division of society is that of the dividing lines in society. These lines help to partition tradition lines, between which social mobility is almost impossible. As the social composition of each tradition line is reproduced from generation to generation, chances for social mobility are only seen during periods that change the socio-economic order such as social revolutions, regime changes, the introduction of new technologies, wars or natural disasters. Even then, the chances of social mobility are small and nowhere near to what economic mobility would suggest. The role of history and the prevalent social structures acquire then a crucial role in explaining the social composition in a country and the inequalities of it.

In the following section I will argue that the social reproduction approach is well suited for understanding inequality in Colombia. I will begin by recounting the historical process that constructed the social classes in Colombia today and the elements that helped build the structures of class reproduction. Secondly, I will show that the social structure that formed during the colony closely resembles the one today and the few changes correspond to transformations over which the ruling elite had little control, or which it had to reluctantly accept after the viability of the country was at risk.

## Racial Mixture Without a Predominant Group

Race played an important role during the creation of the Colombian state and it continues to do so today. The current racial composition of Colombia is defined almost exclusively by the initial colonization period. In comparison to the territories of the two most important colonies of Spain in the New World, the territories that would eventually become the Viceroyalties of New Spain (México) and Perú, the territory that would later become Colombia lacked a single dominant indigenous group. The territory was instead occupied by several different indigenous groups that lacked a common culture and spoke in languages that were mutually unintelligible (Caballero 2018, 52). This made a colonization campaign with a clear winner and loser like the ones of Mexico and Peru impossible, as there was no single dominant group to conquer that would grant instant superiority to the others (Bushnell 1994, 21).

Due to the lack of an indigenous centralized power, the colonization process in the northern territories of South America during the first half of the XVI Century followed a case by case approach in a process that involved wars, truces and agreements with the different indigenous groups, each one with their own ways of approaching the Spanish (Bushnell 1994, 27). Handling each tribe individually meant that some groups made peace with the Spanish with almost no

confrontation and suffering small losses, while others whose approach was to fight to death to defend their territory were completely exterminated by the Spanish (Caballero 2018, 28).

The relative isolation of some groups due to the remote areas they inhabited meant that they were completely overlooked by the Spanish; some of them remain uncontacted even up to this day (Butler 2020). As was the case in other colonies, the diseases brought by the Spanish and the destruction of the productive structures of the indigenous were the main culprits of the decimation of the indigenous population (Bushnell 1994, 33). The destruction of the native population was extreme in some areas, as was the case of the Caribbean coast which saw 95% of the indigenous population disappear in the first century of the colony (Ocampo 1987, 20). As a result, the indigenous groups that survived the arrival of the Spanish were heavily reduced in number and had to coexist with a significant number of Spanish migrants, and later on, also with African slaves (Caballero 2018, 28).

The second major population change in Colombia after the arrival of the Spanish was the introduction of slavery. Slaves were brought to compensate for the rapidly declining indigenous population (Restrepo 1827) and they became the main labor force following the introduction of the *Leyes Nuevas* (new laws). These laws deemed Native Americans to bear souls and thereby banned their use as slaves (National Geographic 2012). Although these laws initially wanted to humanize the horror of the Colony described by chroniclers like Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (1992), there is an open debate on whether their introduction actually benefited the natives or not. Some historians have argued that these laws made the indigenous less valuable than slaves, as they had no exchange value and their work was considered more inefficient than that of the slaves (Caballero 2018, 88).

In practice the *Leyes Nuevas* did not end the exploitation of the indigenous as ways around them were quickly devised. In the north of South America, the preferred mechanism to allow the exploitation of the surviving indigenous communities was called *Encomienda*, a system that was based upon old feudal agreements. In this system, a group of indigenous was given to a landowner or *Encomendero*, whose official role was to civilize the indigenous in exchange for a payment. Despite being forbidden by the new laws, this practice continued in many places where indigenous were forced to work the land of the *Encomenderos* and give a big share of their produce to him. Although the indigenous could not be traded under the provisions of the new laws, the land where they were forced to live could change owner freely (Bushnell 1994, 32).

At the early point of the colony there is then a clean break with the pre-colonial time, and this constitutes the foundation of the main structures of the social stratification in current Colombia. Indigenous groups were decimated, a big number of Spaniards arrived and started founding settlements, African slaves were brought to work the fields. The dominance of the Spanish was established during this early period of the colony. The agreements of co-existence between the Spanish and some indigenous groups plus the legal protections introduced by the *Leyes Nuevas* gave the indigenous a better place in society than slaves, who were at the bottom of society.

This stratification got more complicated due to the non-segregated nature of the Spanish colonization process. Living in proximity and in an integrated, although highly stratified, society gave way for inter-racial relationships and new individuals of mixed race in a process that is known as *mestizaje* (Bushnell 1994, 33). Despite being ubiquitous in all former Spanish colonies in the Americas, the Colombian *mestizaje* is made up of only three groups. Thanks to the detailed archives from the times of the Spanish colony, *Archivo General de Indias*, it has been proved that

the individuals that inhabited the territory of future Colombia only had one of three possible origins: Spanish from Castile, Native Americans and mixed Africans from Sub-Saharan Africa (Caballero 2018, 28).

Mestizaje between these groups compelled the Spanish to introduce a caste system in order to differentiate the roles and privileges of each population group in relation to the state (Caballero 2018, 101). This further helped to delineate a structure of dominance inside the country and it is still pretty much visible today. While in other parts of the world the caste system had to do with religion, ethnicity and dominance, in the Americas the main criteria were racial characteristics. The European phenotype was the baseline while darker skins and indigenous or African features were progressively ranked below. Although initially simple, this system quickly outgrew its capacities and became impractical due to the different possible combinations between the three basic racial groups and their mixed offspring. In the end, the many categories and groups of the original system were reduced to the five following broad groups:

Whites	People born in Colombia from European parents
Criollos	People born in Colombia from European parents
Mestizos	People of a mixed origin with one European parent
Indigenous	People with darker skins and dominant Indigenous features
Blacks	People with darker skins and dominant African features

It is worth noting that the concept of race for the majority of individuals was reliant almost exclusively on phenotype while genealogy only played a significant role for the two dominant groups in order to certify their European ancestry. Due to the favorable bias towards the European phenotype, Mestizos with more European features enjoyed better opportunities than those with more Indigenous or African ones. This classification remains in the collective idea of the country up to this day and plays a role in social organization. Phenotypically white individuals continue to be perceived as high class while those with prevalent Indigenous or African features continue to be victims of xenophobia.

Although many of the former colonies had pretty much the same system, they experienced significant changes after independence. Either through agricultural revolutions like those of Mexico or Peru, or increased migration as in the cases of the countries on the southern cone, the social structures inherited from the Spanish suffered substantial changes. Colombia in contrast never experienced a significant revolution and immigration has been negligible for the longest part of its history.

During the colony, migration was governed by the strict rules of the crown and the centralized nature of its colonial organization. Migration was reserved for Catholics from Castile, excluding converted Muslims, Jews (Caballero 2018, 32) and the people from other Spanish dominions in Europe. Prominent individuals were also forbidden from going to the new world; the author of *el Quijote*, Miguel de Cervantes, unsuccessfully tried to migrate to the new world on several occasions. The ban on commerce with countries outside the Spanish Kingdom and between the *Audiencias* further restricted the movement of people and mestizaje between the people from different colonies (Bushnell 1994, 50).

These restrictions ended for the *Audiencias* after the new independent republics were created in the XIX century. Being released from the institutions of the Spanish crown meant that the incipient nations could start trading with others and that they finally had control over their own

population and migration. The most significant change occurred during the second half of the XIX Century. At this time many countries from the Global South had embraced the ideas of modernism and decided that encouraging European migration was a more effective way of speeding up this process, instead of modernizing their own people. The civilized European migrants were supposed to replace the native population of the country that was perceived as Barbaric and uncivilized. Many influential politicians of the time adhered to this idea, such as President Sarmiento of Argentina (Sarmiento 2009). This meant that countries like Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay actively encouraged migration from Europe to become modern nations. Regardless of the success, or failure, of these policies in promoting the so-called modernization process, it is undeniable that they shaped the societies in many of the newly formed republics by disrupting the racial structure and establishing the precursors to the worker class.

The Colombian case presents the opposite picture by having completely refrained from this process. Despite a short-lived liberal period that tried to implement reforms aimed at diminishing the power of the Church and creating a more liberal, open and modern country, Colombian politics of the XIX Century followed a mostly conservative path. The Colombian elites were very cautious when considering any sort of reform (Gomez 2020). On top of their religious and conservative positions regarding modernization, they also distrusted the idea of encouraging immigration from Europe as they feared this could corrupt the moral basis of the country and would open the way for social and anarchic movements. The reformative nature of modernism was not seen positively by the elite groups.

These positions did not change much in the XX Century, as immigration remained negligible. Apart from some 180.000 Syrian, Armenian, Palestinian and Lebanese that arrived after the fall of the Ottoman empire (admitted on the basis that they were being prosecuted for being Catholics), and a similar number of Europeans fleeing the Spanish civil war and the second world war, no other major immigration to Colombia occurred during the XX Century (Caballero 2018, 30). The biggest break from this trend came during the second decade of the XXI century with the influx of Venezuelan migrants which are calculated to be up to two million (Migración Colombia 2020).

It is worth mentioning that the lack of substantial immigration was not entirely dependent on the restrictions, but also related to the lack of substantial economic promise. This was the main motor that compelled Europeans to move to other American countries like the United States, Argentina or Venezuela. In contrast, most of the immigration to Colombia was due to humanitarian needs.

This shows that the biggest social shock in the history of Colombia happened during the early time of the colony and that this period was responsible for setting the stage for the current social structure. In comparison, the following centuries experienced little change and the social hierarchies, initially based on racial grounds, were replicated to the point that they can still be observed today. The independence from Spain did not bring substantial change as it did in other former colonies. The case of immigration in Colombia is a good example of the replication of social structure through time, as it reflects not only on the lack of change in its social structures but also on two other important factors in the replication of social inequality in Colombia: its economic performance, or lack thereof, and the power of the elites.



## The Unfulfilled Economic Promise of Colombia

In comparison to its neighbors in the Caribbean, Colombia was fairly uninteresting in agricultural terms (Bushnell 1994, 34). Although the country had enough arable land to sustain a significantly big population, the most fertile lands were located on the high plains hundreds of kilometers away from the coast and at around 3000 meters of elevation (Bushnell 1994, 32). Even then, the complicated topography that had led to the indigenous groups being so diverse and unconnected also made supply chains inside the country very inefficient and allowed for only a limited amount of internal trade and limited the accumulation of wealth (Bushnell 1994, 114). The terrain also made commercial enterprises for export, other than mining, impractical (Bushnell 1994, 34), to the point that while the ban on trade with other countries was a big source of unhappiness in most of the *Audiencias*, this was irrelevant in *Santa Fe* (Bushnell 1994, 50).

The extreme difficulties that the terrain presented to any economic enterprise can be best summarized by *The Darien Scheme*. With this project Scotland (still an independent country at that time) aimed to have a colony of its own in the Americas (Ibeji 2011). Unfortunately, the harsh environment quickly decimated the first group of colonizers even before the Spanish became aware of the invasion. This quickly diluted the hope of any success until the entire scheme had to be aborted at great economic loss shortly after the arrival of the Spanish. The Bankruptcy of Scotland due to the failure of this scheme is often seen as one of the main reasons that led them to join the United Kingdom in 1707.

The country's topography played a major role in structuring the economic production in regions rather than in a centralized way, as was the norm throughout the Spanish colonies (Bushnell 1994, 30). The difficulties to go between towns gave way for a constellation of commerce and productive centers throughout the country that started to share the power with the centralist government and eventually became the de facto regional power (Bushnell 1994, 63). These towns conveyed the productive structures of the region in self-sufficient units with some limited form of trade with the other territories and the countries. For this reason, the population and economic activities of Colombia today are not centered entirely around the capital of the former seat of the *Audiencia Bogotá (Santa Fe)*, but are distributed across many smaller cities. In comparison to Argentina or Chile, where almost half of the population lives in or around the capital, only 16% (Dane n.d.) of Colombians live in Bogotá's metropolitan area and the next four bigger cities have the same population as the capital.

Mining was above and beyond the most feasible enterprise in the country aimed at export (Bushnell 1994, 37). However, this presented no competition to the mines found in Peru and Mexico. The country's mines not only paled in size compared to the deposits of other colonies, but the most available precious metal was not silver but gold, a second-class metal at that time. Latin American historians remark that the minerals extracted from Colombia, mostly gold, did not have the same importance during the colony as our point of view may suggest.

At that time gold was a valuable precious metal but not nearly as valuable as silver. In fact, the ratio between the two only reversed after the exploitation of American silver mines increased the supply of silver worldwide so much that its value dropped in comparison to the now scarcer gold (Tovar 2013). Furthermore, the majority of the gold that the Spanish acquired from Colombia during the Colony was not mined but robbed from the indigenous, who had accumulated it out of centuries of trade with other groups (Bushnell 1994, 24). This implies that the amount of gold mined out of Colombia during the colonial times, while important for the Spanish Crown,

paled in comparison with the importance of the silver mined in the other colonies.

The well renowned historian David Bushnell describes the economic performance of Colombia during the colony as unimpressive (1994, 44). Although there was enough to prevent famines and to pursue some economic ventures, it paled in comparison to that of Perú or the Antilles. As a consequence, the living standards were lower than in many other Spanish colonies. This made the colony unattractive for Spanish settlers, who even when holding the most privileged position in the Colony could barely enjoy the living standards of a middle-class person in Europe.

Bushnell suggests that the relative unattractiveness of the country was not entirely negative for its inhabitants. Although the population was relatively poorer than the inhabitants of other colonies, the lack of very profitable activities in the times of mercantilism limited the degree of exploitation that the majority of the inhabitants were subject to. Regarding slaves, he states: “a slave would do much worse in a plantation in the Caribbean or in a mine in Potosí. The death toll of the demanding jobs there was so high that they were in a constant need for new slaves. In comparison, a slave in Colombia would work in less risky places like plantations and without much pressure given the lower local demand for goods and the difficulties to trade inside the country or exporting. Even in mining the working conditions were better as slaves did not work underground as in Peru but instead in much safer slow rivers. The Crown’s demand for gold was also nowhere near its demand for silver, so the demand for results was not as high”.

After independence, the economy continued to underperform many other former colonies with an economic development that can be described as average, a trend that continues until today. During the first years of the independence the economic system hardly differed from that of other colonies and extractive industries continued to dominate exports. Industrialization finally arrived during the second half of the XIX Century, but it took until the beginnings of the XX Century for a significant share of the economy to become industrialized. Even then, extractive and agricultural exports continued to dominate the country’s economy and they were only overtaken by the financial sector in the late XX Century. Even to this day the extractive industries continue to play a very important role in the economy and in state finances.

The economy played a significant role in the replication of society as the slow development did not open many opportunities for social change. For comparison, in other countries the quick structural changes opened the opportunities for social mobility with new families rising to economic and social power. Meanwhile the lack of change in Colombia meant that the social classes became more isolated from one another. For this reason, the majority of the regional and national elites today can be tracked to the times of the colony.

One period that brought up opportunities for substantial change occurred during the XX Century as a result of industrialization, a process that took place in the regional centers and created a new group of individuals above peasants and below the aristocracy: the worker class. This mobilized class in the Marxian sense (Portes 2010) was motivated by concurrent revolutions in other nations and pushed for reforms, however it was met with escalating repression from the establishment. The confrontations between them and the state eventually escalated into a full-scale civil war headed by the command of both parties that climaxed with the murder of the liberal *Jorge Eliecer Gaitán*, an event that further sank the country into violence.

Despite there being many of the elements necessary for a revolution, the ruling elites managed to remain in power by agreeing to share the power with the liberals, whose guidance rested on

members of the traditional elite. This agreement further diminished the chances of real reform or revolution. Perhaps the biggest and only challenge to the hegemony of the ruling class came with the war on drugs that started in the 70's and reached its peak during the early 90's.

The economic means of drug lords was such that it rivaled the means of the state and their extremely violent and terrorist approach made the elites feel their livelihoods threatened for the first time since independence. Their weakened position and the economic disruption that the money from the drugs produced relaxed the stiff social stratification of the country.

While in the past, heritage had been the main factor behind social status, money and economic power started playing a more significant role after the 80's. The political interest of many of the new powerful individuals, both drug lords and the new rich individuals who had made their money out of drug money, also opened the field for reform. It is no coincidence that during this time a new liberal secular constitution based on the concept of the social state was written to replace the previous conservative constitution of the XIX Century.

In summary, the economy of Colombia was shaped around its colonial institutions and they continue to influence it today. The Colombian economy has been always characterized by its average performance and by its lack of dynamism. Changes and reform were also not dramatic or fast enough to help reshape the social structure of the country as they did in other places. Only the war on drugs brought some changes to the country's social structure by contesting the role of the elites, however they were not major.

The elites and the undisputed rule they have on a national and regional level, is the third element in the replication of social structures in the country. The administrative structure established during colonial rule plays a significant role in the reproduction of inequality in Colombia today.

## The Colonial & Modern Elites

The complications brought up by topography, the complex colonization process, racial mixing and the unpromising economic outlook delayed the establishment of governing structures in the north of South America (Bushnell 1994, 26). Despite being one of the first parts of continental America to be reached by the Spanish, the colonization process lasted well into the second half of the XVI Century (Bushnell 1994, 25). The territory that would become Colombia started the colonial rule as the *Audiencia de Santa Fé* (today Bogotá), one of the Audiencias inside the Viceroyalty of Peru which was founded in Lima in 1542. The territory remained in this condition until the year 1717 when the *Audiencia* of Santa Fé was elevated to the rank Viceroyalty of the New Granada or *Virreinato de la Nueva Granada* (Bushnell 1994, 30).

The *Audiencias* were the main administrative body in the Indies during the Colony. These courts represented the Spanish Crown in all its executive, legislative and judicial faculties and were in charge of the daily business in the territories they controlled (Bushnell 1994, 30). The collection of aristocrats, professionals, military and artisans necessary for a court to work created influential cities that quickly developed a local ruling elite (Bushnell 1994, 35). These elites proved to be very reluctant to give away their power and areas of influence and started to increasingly relinquish the influence of the crown as they grew in size and wealth. It is no coincidence that despite the continuous interference of the crown to prevent the Colonies from acting indepen-

dently, all the former seats of an *audiencia*, with the exception of Cuzco, became the capital city of independent countries and that the territories of the independent republics in most cases match the borders of the territories of the former *Audiencias* (Bushnell 1994, 31).

Of all the territories inside the viceroyalty of Peru, the *Audiencia de Santa Fe* was the most remote one (Bushnell 1994, 38), as anyone going from Lima to Santa Fe needed to sail to Panamá, cross the isthmus, sail again to Cartagena, go upstream on the *Magdalena* river and climb up the mountains. This, paired with its relatively modest economic potential, made the *Audiencia de Santa Fe* very uninteresting (Bushnell 1994, 45).

The relative independence that this meant for *Santa Fe* made its population lose interest in the rest of the world and, up to certain degree, in some of its territories. While other *Audiencias* often debated with the crown regarding liberties, trade and a more open contact with the world, the debates in the *Audiencia de Santa Fe* dealt mostly with the distribution of land among the elites and the concession of positions inside the *Audiencia* (Bushnell 1994, 50). Furthermore, the *Audiencia de Santa Fe* was elevated to Viceroyalty of the New Granada not out of its own right but rather out of the necessity of having a governing body located closer to the Caribbean, as British and pirate action had become an issue of great concern for the Spanish crown (Bushnell 1994, 30).

The de facto economic and political independence of the regions inside the *Viceroyalty of New Granada* established a semi federal system that gave way to the creation of the States of Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela and continues to shape modern Colombia and its regions (Bushnell 1994, 63).

The idea behind the *Viceroyalty* and *Audiencia* system was to favor a centralist organization as the seats of the *Audiencias* conveyed all the economic and political power, enough elements to quickly overcome other towns in size and power. However, despite being the capital of the Viceroyalty, *Santa Fe* was at best self-sufficient and often described as a parasite city (Bushnell 1994, 35). By the late XVIII century other cities under its jurisdiction like Popayan or Cartagena were wealthier and had in practice more politic and economic power than *Santa Fe* (Bushnell 1994, 62).

Accordingly, the interest in separating from Spain varied depending on the region. While in *Santa Fe* the main distress with the Crown revolved around the privileges the few Spanish had in comparison to the majority of white *Criollos* and the distribution of political power (Bushnell 1994, 50), the Popayanian Elite, with many more aristocrats than in *Santa Fe*, was fairly happy with their position in the Kingdom (Bushnell 1994, 35) and Cartagena relinquished both and wanted to be independent from Spain as well as from *Santa Fe* (Bushnell 1994, 65).

The independence of the New Granada started the Gran Colombia Project. Its subsequent failure was a consequence of the disagreement over how to share power and the impossibility of any single government taking over the others (Bushnell 1994, 70). Despite efforts to build a federal state, the *Audiencias* were not comfortable with sharing power with the others, and neither were they capable of taking over the others; they subsequently dropped out of the union. Panamá remained part of Colombia for an additional Century until American support, in exchange for securing their interests in the canal zone, guaranteed their independence.

Although the separation from Spain in 1819 represented a major break with the past, with hindsight it is possible to see that the changes were limited when it comes to the social organization of the country. Although contested during the beginning of the republican time, when a

federalist approach was tried, the political and executive centralism that had characterized the colony continued to be the norm and still is today. The de facto regional power also remains untouched, leading to a relation of mutual respect between the central and local governments.

Not only did the structures remain significantly unchanged, but so too did their composition. Despite being active participants of the independence movement, national and regional elites were not severely affected during independence. Although there were some casualties during the short-lived reconquest of the country, several family lines from the times of the colony remain in the elites today.

Although there have been some newcomers in the economic elites, political power remains associated with some families. A great example of this was seen with the wedding of Santiago Pastrana and Sabina Nicholls in 2013. Both come from families with a long political tradition; Santiago's father and grandfather were both presidents while Sabina can also count a fair number of presidents on her lineage, going back to the very first Colombian President elected by popular vote, Mariano Ospina.

There is good reason to argue that elites and the social structures have survived since the time of the colony. In the following section I will argue that the survival of this structure, paired with the social stratification system based on race and the lackluster economic performance, lead to the very unequal Colombia of today.

## An argument for class reproduction in Colombia

One of the points of departure in Rehbein's work (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza 2018) is the role of structures from the pre-capitalist societies in countries in the Global South in shaping the structures that define the current social composition. I will argue that in Colombia the colony presents a breaking point for its social stratification. New structures appeared out of the destruction of the indigenous cultures, while hybridization incorporated the remnants of these cultures into a new unit. This structure has reproduced itself until today and is one of the main forces behind the violence in the country.

The absence of a major dominant indigenous culture in the territories and the complex nature of the conquest allowed for the survival of the indigenous groups that agreed to co-exist with the Spanish, who in many regions also outnumbered them. The multiplicity of languages that were unintelligible among themselves made the Spanish language the de facto Lingua Franca between the surviving indigenous groups, an element that further diluted the native cultures (Bushnell 1994, 34). This does not mean that the indigenous cultures were completely erased or conquered. Many indigenous elements were incorporated and remain in the Colombian culture today. These elements mixed with elements of Spanish and diverse African cultures in a hybridizing process. It is clear that this process played a big role in the creation of the current Colombian culture (Bushnell 1994, 33).

However, hybridization and its local form in the Americas, *Mestizaje*, has been criticized as a tool aimed at erasing the identity of minority groups and oppressing them (Moraña 1994). Here it is worth noting that many diverse processes can be understood under *mestizaje*, with two classic counter examples being the *mestizaje* processes in México and Perú.

In México around 7% of the population is considered indigenous, as the big majority of the population that has indigenous heritage renounced life in the indigenous communities and for this they are regarded as *mestizo*. It has been claimed that the aim with this was to destroy the culture of the dominant indigenous group and at the same time antagonize the indigenous groups in the periphery who had rejected this process.

Peru presents a very different experience. There, the official share of the population classified as indigenous goes up to 47% and the mestizo and indigenous divide is based on the urban-rural divide and not necessarily on race. It is used as a way of differentiating between the people from the high plains and those from the cities on the coast (Moraña 1994).

I will argue that it is undeniable that *Mestizaje* at least to some degree did happen in Colombia. A good example can be seen in the languages that rely exclusively on oral tradition and how the myths and tales of the indigenous live up to this date as the altered and incorporated versions the Spanish made out of them (Schwaller 2018).

The racial division of the country also evolved from the caste system introduced by the Spanish. From the many groups that existed at the beginning of the colony, four remained after the independence of the country and although they continue to structure the life in the country today, the social hierarchy is not so strongly defined by them. Although people of African origin are more often subjects of discrimination, people with mixed roots are nowadays present in pretty much all echelons of society.

The absence of significant migration also prevented the creation of the European vs Natives divide that was present in the other audiencias (Bushnell 1994, 34). The number of foreigners in the *Audiencia de Santa Fe* was so low that even during the time of the Colony, the local elite was the dominant force in its administration (Bushnell 1994, 77). The absence of massive immigration also gave a different ratio to the antagonism between civilized and barbaric that prevailed in countries like Argentina. The governments of countries that encouraged European immigration heavily antagonized their indigenous populations and engaged violently with them during the XIX Century (Park and Richards 2007). The decimation of the African population in Argentina is a tale of the extreme reach of these policies (INADI n.d.).

The economic system was shaped during the colonial process and the consequences of this can still be seen today. The persistence and high importance of agriculture and extractive industries today proves the perpetuation of the colonial structures. Although the capacity of the Colombian economy was enough to prevent famines like those in Europe or Asia (Caballero 2018, 28), wealth accumulation was a privilege for only a handful of individuals. The regional and decentralized structure of the Colombian economy also dates back to the colonial time and continues to be relevant today.

In other former colonies, the post-independence reforms of the economic system and their development played a role in re-shaping the social structures and allowing for some flexibilization of the stiff social structure. However, this cannot be observed in the case of Colombia due to the slow pace of economic development and the lateness of its reforms. The economic system in Colombia has therefore reinforced the social stratification across time and it is one of the foundational stones of the rigid social structure.

The final traceable element that evidences the replication of social structures across time in

Colombia is the perpetuation of the elites in power. The persistence of the structure created to control the colony until today proves that the changes to the governing structures were mostly in form and lacked content. That presidential lines are so well-connected through time is an extreme example of how closed this group is.

## Conclusions

The persistence of a race-based system, the shape of the current economic system and the survival of the colonial elites help to prove that the current social structures in Colombia can be traced back to the first years of the Colony. This also suggests that one of the most important challenges in overcoming the extreme inequality in Colombia is the stiffness of the traditional structures and the reluctance to change them. The absence of pre-colonial structures also shows the magnitude of the destruction that the colonization process implied. Evidence of *Mestizaje* can also be made for the Colombian case because a clear separation between the original individuals, Spanish, Indigenous and African, is not possible. The current Colombia originated in its own process that included elements of all these groups.

This paper also shows the value of doing non-quantitative research. Quantitative measurements routinely measure inequality at face value and dominate the study of this subject. However, they fall short at uncovering external factors behind the replication of inequality that other techniques like the one used in this paper can uncover.

Finally, despite only showing a summarized version of the development of the current social structures in Colombia, I argue that there is a good argument to adhere to this thesis. This also leaves open the doors for a more in-depth study on this subject. The shared story with other Latin American countries could allow for a comparative study on the structures that shape inequality in the region.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Early uprising on the mainly against the taxation from the Spanish Crown. One could see it as the Colombian version of the Boston Tea Party.

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