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# Coerced or Voluntary? The *Repartimiento* and Market Participation of Peasants in Late Colonial Oaxaca\*

JEREMY BASKES

*Abstract.* This article challenges the traditional depiction of the late colonial *repartimiento de comercio* as a system of forced production and consumption. Employing a micro-economic analysis of the *repartimiento*'s operation in Oaxaca, it argues that peasant participation in the *alcaldes mayores*' *repartimientos* was voluntary, not coerced, and that the *repartimiento* should be understood instead as a system of consumer and producer credit designed to operate under colonial conditions of high risk. *Repartimiento* credit was expensive, but it permitted peasants to participate more extensively in markets as consumers and producers. 'Indians are capable of requesting the cargo of a flotilla, and [so] it is a vulgarity and a misunderstanding of the repartimiento to say that they are forced.'<sup>1</sup>

Images of force and subordination dominate the historiography of Spanish–American economic relations during the colonial era. Indigenous communities are depicted as virtually autonomous entities reluctantly drawn into markets through coercive political devices created and applied by the Spanish Crown and its agents in America. While this picture is undoubtedly accurate to a degree, it assumes that the Crown possessed an ability to penetrate indigenous society far beyond its limited capacities. The Bourbon state in the late eighteenth century has been shown to be weak in comparison to other states of the era except in its ability to extract wealth from key sectors of the colonial economy.<sup>2</sup> The notion that the

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<sup>1</sup> Don Manuel Josef López, *alcalde mayor* of Teotitlán del Camino, in response to the accusation that he forced an Indian to accept a *repartimiento*. *Natural de Teotitlán del Camino contra su alcalde mayor sobre cuentas del repartimiento*, Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca (AGEO), Real Intendencia de Oaxaca (R.I.), II, Leg. 1, exp. 7, 1788.

<sup>2</sup> That the Bourbon state was weak is most clearly and directly shown by John H. Coatsworth, 'The Limits of Colonial Absolutism: The State in Eighteenth-Century Mexico', in Karen Spalding (ed.), *Essays in the Political, Economic and Social History of Colonial Latin America* (Delaware, 1982), pp. 25–51, but this notion is implicit in the

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state relied on force to draw indigenous populations into participating in market-oriented behaviour is painfully incongruous with the known capacities of the Spanish colonial state and its agents. This contradiction emerges most sharply in the conventional portrayal of the colonial *repartimiento de mercancías*<sup>3</sup> as a system in which regional officials used force and intimidation to compel reluctant indigenous villagers to purchase goods and to produce marketable commodities. Without the backing of a state apparatus powerful enough to penetrate society at all levels, local officials would not have commanded the means necessary to enforce such transactions. Studies of colonial Spanish–American economic relations thus need to concentrate less on the weak political arm of the Crown and more on the strong ‘invisible hand’ of the market.

During the past two decades, the *repartimiento* has gained significant attention in the historiography of colonial Spanish America. In general, studies have approached the topic from two very different perspectives. Scholars interested in the Bourbon Reforms have examined the *repartimiento* because it was selected as a main target of reform.<sup>4</sup> These

work of many colonial scholars. William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979) shows how the Crown of limited strength responded to rebellion through a policy of appeasement, rather than direct confrontation, giving in to peasant demands in most cases. Susan Deans-Smith, *Bureaucrats, Planters, and Workers: The Making of the Tobacco Monopoly in Bourbon Mexico* (Austin, 1992), shows that even in sectors where the state did concentrate its economic and political resources, Bourbon rule was marked by negotiation not absolutism. Brian R. Hamnett, *Politics and Trade in Southern Mexico: 1750–1821* (Cambridge, 1971) demonstrates how the Crown even proved largely unable to force its own functionaries to abide by Article 12 of the Ordinance of Intendancies, the key piece of legislation which sought to outlaw *repartimientos*.

A weak Crown was not new in the eighteenth century. Weakness was institutionalised in the reign of the Hapsburgs who sold or farmed out most Crown responsibilities, creating what many scholars have termed Spain’s ‘indirect rule’ over its colonies. The Bourbon Reforms were the Crown’s attempts to address its weak, ‘indirect rule’ and ‘reconquer’ the colonies. But, as Colin MacLachlan put it, ‘... the reformers failed to achieve a perceptual revision of the colonial reality’. Colin M. MacLachlan, *Spain’s Empire in the New World: The Role of Ideas in Institutional Change and Social Change* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 128; see chs. 5–7 in general. Many historians now agree that the Bourbon Reforms did not markedly strengthen the Crown. On the origins of Spain’s ‘indirect rule’, see Woodrow Borah (ed.), *El gobierno provincial en la Nueva España 1570–1787* (Mexico, 1985), pp. 18–27 especially.

<sup>3</sup> This system is also known as *repartimiento de bienes*, *repartimiento de comercio*, *repartimiento* or *reparto*.

<sup>4</sup> The classic work on the *repartimiento* is Hamnett, *Politics and Trade*; on the Bourbon Reforms and the *repartimiento*, also see, Stanley J. Stein, ‘Bureaucracy and Business in the Spanish Empire, 1759–1804: Failure of a Bourbon Reform in Mexico and Peru’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 61, no. 1 (1981), pp. 2–28; John Fisher,

important studies have been predominantly institutional and political histories, focusing closely on the late eighteenth-century debates over the *repartimiento*, the difficulty of prohibiting it, and the general attempts to introduce the Intendancy system into Spain's colonies. The standard remains Hamnett's critical study of the political, fiscal and economic links between wealthy colonial merchants and the Oaxacan *alcaldes mayores*, links which the Bourbon Reforms sought to sever.<sup>5</sup> Other studies have viewed the *repartimiento* at the regional and local levels in an effort to understand better a variety of issues such as indigenous rebellion and the structures of Indian communities.<sup>6</sup> With little exception these works have depicted

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*Government and Society in Colonial Peru. The Intendant System, 1784–1814* (London, 1970); Alfredo Moreno Cebrián, *El corregidor de indios y la economía peruana del siglo XVIII (Los repartos forzosos de mercancías)* (Madrid, 1977); MacLachlan, *Spain's Empire in the New World*.

On the Bourbon Reforms in general and the Plan of Intendencies for Spanish America, see John Lynch, *Spanish Colonial Administration, 1782–1810: The Intendant System of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata* (London, 1958); Lillian Estelle Fisher, *The Intendant System in Spanish America* (New York, 1929); David Brading, 'Bourbon Spain and its American Empire', in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Cambridge History of Latin America*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 389–439.

<sup>5</sup> Limited space precludes doing justice to Hamnett's important and well-known work. Hamnett showed how the *alcaldes mayores* needed funds to purchase their posts and needed to provide the Crown with *fiadores*, individuals who guaranteed their solvency in the event they failed to collect the Indian tribute owed to the Crown. This forced the officials to secure wealthy merchant backers who served as *fiadores* but, in turn, demanded that the *alcaldes* promote their mercantile interests in the Indian districts in which they were assigned. These merchants provided many of the goods and much of the investment capital that the Spanish officials used in the operation of the *repartimiento*. This led the Oaxacan officials to become more closely allied with merchants than with the Crown, an arrangement accepted by the Crown until the 1786 Ordinance establishing the Intendancy system, aimed at reducing such corruption. In effect, the power of the *alcalde mayor* became the private tool of mercantile interests. See Hamnett, *Politics and Trade*.

<sup>6</sup> On Mexico see Rodolfo Pastor, 'El repartimiento de mercancías y los alcaldes mayores novohispanos: Un sistema de explotación, de sus orígenes a la crisis de 1810', in Borah (eds.), *El gobierno provincial*, pp. 201–49. Rodolfo Pastor, *Campeños y reformas: La Mixteca, 1700–1856* (Mexico, 1987); Horst Pietschmann, 'Agricultura e industria rural indígena en el México de la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII', in Arij Ouweneel and Cristina Torales Pacheco (eds.), *Empresarios, indios y estado: Perfil de la economía Mexicana (siglo XVIII)* (Amsterdam, 1988); Daniel Dehouve, 'El pueblo de indios y el mercado: Tlapa en el siglo XVIII', in Ouweneel and Torales Pacheco (eds.), *Empresarios*; Marcello Carmagnani, *El Regreso de los dioses: El proceso de reconstitución de la identidad étnica en Oaxaca. Siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico, 1988), pp. 163–74; María de los Angeles Romero Frizzi, 'El poder de los mercaderes. La Mixteca alta: del siglo XVI a los primeros años del XVIII', in *Familia y Poder en Nueva España*, Memoria del Tercer Simposio de Historia de las Mentalidades (Mexico, 1991), pp. 49–61; Robert W. Patch, *Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1648–1812* (Stanford, 1993); María de los Angeles Romero Frizzi, *Economía y vida de los españoles en la Mixteca Alta: 1519–1720* (Mexico, 1990); John

the *repartimiento* as a system of forced production and consumption in which the *alcalde mayor* used physical coercion and intimidation to draw peasants into the market.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these studies, historians' understanding of the *repartimiento* remains limited. As Lockhart and Schwartz note, 'the topic has generated an entrenched mythology, but what is known about the actual operation of *repartos* is actually very little'.<sup>8</sup> This article, a departure from the conventional view of the *repartimiento*, focuses closely on the micro-level operation of the system in Oaxaca, Mexico, using *repartimiento* production of red cochineal dye as a primary example. It argues that peasants accepted *repartimientos* voluntarily because they provided them with valued goods and inputs and sorely needed income, not readily available on credit or in advance from other sources. The *repartimiento* was not the only type of rural trade, but it was different because it involved the provision of credit to indigenous Oaxacans. While at times the *repartimiento* yielded for peasant recipients undesired hardships, including the unleashing of the *alcalde mayor*'s often violent debt collectors, more often indigenous peasants benefited, if modestly, from their market participation.

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K. Chance, *Conquest of the Sierra: Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Oaxaca* (Oklahoma, 1989); John K. Chance, 'Social Stratification and the Civil Cargo System Among the Rincón Zapotecs of Oaxaca: The Late Colonial Period', in Richard L. Garner and William B. Taylor (eds.), *Iberian Colonies, New World Societies: Essays in Memory of Charles Gibson* (Private Printing, 1986). John K. Chance, 'Capitalismo y desigualdad entre los Zapotecos de Oaxaca: una comparación entre el valle y los pueblos del rincón', in María de los Angeles Romero Frizzi, compiler, *Lecturas históricas del estado de Oaxaca*, Vol. 1 (Mexico, 1990), pp. 193–204; for a comparison between Mexico and the Andes, see Brooke Larson and Robert Wasserstrom, 'Consumo forzoso en Cochabamba y Chiapa durante la época colonial', *Historia Mexicana*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1982), pp. 361–408; for the Andes, see Jürgen Golte, *Repartos y rebeliones: Túpac Amaru y las contradicciones de la economía colonial* (Lima, 1980); Karen Spalding, *Huarochirí: An Andean Society Under Inca and Spanish Rule* (Stanford, 1984); Karen Spalding, 'Tratos mercantiles del corregidor de Indios y la formación de la hacienda serrana en el Perú', *América Indígena*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (July 1970), pp. 595–608; Javier Tord Nicolini, 'El corregidor de indios del Péru: comercio y tributos', *Historia y Cultura*, vol. 8 (Lima, 1974), pp. 173–214; Javier Tord Nicolini, 'Los repartos legalizados', *Proceso*, No. 4 (Huancayo, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> The exceptions are Pietschmann, 'Agricultura e industria' and Romero Frizzi, 'El poder de los mercaderes'. Pietschmann has long challenged the traditional view of the *repartimiento*, suggesting that the role of coercion has been overstated. Romero Frizzi's brief article also questions the conventional historiography on the *repartimiento*, suggesting that means other than force were probably more important in drawing Indians into the market. Neither Pietschmann's nor Romero Frizzi's articles, however, were based on extensive research designed to address this issue specifically. As a result, they are more speculative than conclusive.

<sup>8</sup> James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, *Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 356.

*How the Oaxacan repartimiento operated: a micro-economic view*

In Oaxaca the *repartimiento* generally worked in one of two ways. Most often, the *repartimiento* involved a cash disbursement made by the *alcalde mayor* to an Indian recipient who, in turn, was obliged to repay the official at a later date in some specified product. Throughout Oaxaca, the production of Mexico's second most important colonial export product, cochineal dye, or *grana* as it was commonly called, was produced with *repartimiento* financing. In the *alcaldía mayor* of Villa Alta, the cash *repartimientos* also financed large volumes of *mantas*, cotton mantles. Many other items were obtained on a smaller scale by the *alcaldes mayores* through *repartimiento* cash advances. *Huipiles* were produced for the *alcaldes mayores* of both Teposcolula and Teotitlán del Camino Real, and the officials of Villa Alta financed the production of raw cotton. In a number of districts, even corn and wheat were acquired through *repartimiento* advances to producers. In this first type of *repartimiento*, then, the *alcalde mayor* loaned money to peasant producers who repaid the *alcalde mayor* with whatever good was stipulated. The term of the loan, the length of time between the cash advance and the date payment in kind was due, differed from item to item. For *grana* cochineal debts, payment in cochineal was typically owed in 6–8 months. Cash advances in expectation of the future delivery of goods was not unique to Oaxaca. Farriss found that the *repartimiento* system in Yucatán usually operated in this 'reverse' fashion.<sup>9</sup> Pietschmann notes that in Puebla the *alcaldes mayores* obtained corn, wheat, chilies, nuts, cotton, cochineal and other goods through *repartimientos* in coin.<sup>10</sup> This same system also operated in Guerrero, according to Guardino.<sup>11</sup>

The second type of *repartimiento* which operated in Oaxaca is the one most widely examined for other areas of Spanish America, the *repartimiento* of goods. In this practice the *alcalde mayor* supplied items to the Indians of his district who were obliged to pay for them in the future. In Oaxaca, repayment was almost invariably made in cash, not kind. The most widely distributed items were *ganado mayor*, especially oxen, bulls and mules. In Oaxaca, it was very unusual for any other item to be sold by the *alcalde mayor* through the *repartimiento*. Livestock was always advanced on the same terms: half payment was expected in 6 months and the remainder was due at the year's end.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, 1984), p. 43. <sup>10</sup> Pietschmann, 'Agricultura e industria', p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800–57* (Stanford, forthcoming). For the *repartimiento* in colonial Guerrero, see ch. 1.

<sup>12</sup> A third type of *repartimiento* common in other regions of Spanish America was the advance of goods repayable in indigenous output. This type of *repartimiento*, however,

The day-to-day operation of the *repartimiento* was performed by the *alcalde mayor* and his three or four *tenientes* (assistants). This entailed travelling to the many Indian villages of the district and making *repartimiento* loans, providing either money or animals. *Repartimientos* in money were usually made at the beginning of a production cycle – September or October for cochineal. The *alcalde mayor* of Miahuatlán reported in 1752 that he always distributed pesos to the Indians of his district in September and October, contracting for them to pay him back at harvest time at the rate of one pound of *grana* cochineal for each twelve reales (1.5 pesos) that he advanced to them.<sup>13</sup> Other items might follow different schedules, especially if they were not tied to production cycles. The *alcalde mayor* of Nexapa, for example, informed the Viceroy in 1752 that he and former *alcaldes mayores* of his district typically purchased mules for the *repartimiento* in the September fair in Puebla. These beasts were then transported to Nexapa where they were sold on credit to the Indians of the region.<sup>14</sup>

The next step in the transaction involved the collection of the debts. In the case of cochineal, the *alcalde mayor* or his *teniente recaudador*, his debt collector, returned to the towns in which debtors lived in the late spring to collect the recently harvested cochineal. Debt collection, however, was difficult because debtors frequently proved unable or unwilling to repay their *repartimientos* promptly.<sup>15</sup> Often debtors were unable to meet their debt obligations, owing, for example, to the loss of the harvest. This was particularly common for *grana* cochineal, which was unusually vulnerable

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was not common in Oaxaca where goods provided on credit were normally paid for in cash.

<sup>13</sup> *Informe de curas y alcaldes mayores sobre el repartimiento: Miahuatlán*, *Archivo General de la Nación* (AGN), *Subdelegados*, Tomo 34, p. 141, 1752. For the same *repartimiento* schedule see also the *informes* of other *alcaldes mayores* in the same volume: Nexapa, p. 119; Chichicapa y Zimatlán, p. 135; Teotitlán del Camino Real, p. 154; Tlacolula, p. 313.

These *informes*, used extensively in this article, were produced by priests and *alcaldes mayores* from districts throughout Mexico in 1752 at the request of the Viceroy, the first Count Revillagigedo, who was considering the legalisation of the *repartimiento*. The *alcaldes mayores* clearly had reason to fabricate their reports, yet one is struck by the similarity of issues addressed by all who responded, officials and clergy alike. While it is important to read such reports critically, one would need to accept a broader conspiracy, for which there is no evidence, to discount them entirely.

<sup>14</sup> *Informes de curas y alcaldes mayores sobre el repartimiento: Nexapa*, AGN, *Subdelegados*, 34, p. 119, 1752; Pietschmann, 'Agricultura e industria', p. 77 and Dehouve, 'El pueblo de los indios', p. 87 found that the officials of Puebla and Tlapa, Guerrero respectively also purchased their mules for the *repartimiento* at the annual fairs in Puebla.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of *repartimiento* default, see Jeremy Baskes, 'Indians, Merchants and Markets: Trade and *Repartimiento* Production of Cochineal Dye in Colonial Oaxaca: 1750–1821', PhD Diss., University of Chicago, 1993, ch. 5.

to inclement weather. When the item advanced by the *alcalde mayor* was a mule or an ox, repayment was often delayed because debtors simply had not been able to save enough money. Farm animals were high-priced items<sup>16</sup> for the average indigenous household and making such large payments promptly was clearly difficult. Inability to pay was probably the most common reason for delay or default, but other peasants simply evaded their debts or resisted repayment, dragging their feet as long as possible. Peasants who evaded contracted *repartimiento* debts reduced the economic pressures upon themselves, even if only temporarily, without increasing their debt burden because interest charges on *repartimiento* loans did not accrue, but were fixed amounts independent of the length of time debts remained outstanding.

*Alcaldes mayores* unable to collect their *repartimiento* debts had several options available to them. First, they could simply permit the indebted peasant additional time to pay. In 1752 a number of provincial priests and *alcaldes mayores* suggested that this was often necessary. The *alcalde mayor* of Nexapa, for example, noted that few Indians paid for their mules entirely in one year as stipulated, but that most needed two to three years, sometimes five. The official from Chichicapa-Zimatlán wrote that while total payment was due in one year, 'one gives thanks to God when the money is collected in two years'. Regarding the cochineal *repartimiento*, the *alcaldes mayores* and priests consulted generally agreed that when a debtor proved unable to repay, the *alcalde mayor* had to refinance the individual hoping that the entire debt would be repaid in the following harvest.<sup>17</sup> The second option available to the *alcalde mayor* was to apply pressure to the debtor and his family, or to imprison him. In fact, the *alcaldes mayores* often did resort to violent means to collect debts owed to them, especially when the Spanish official believed that the debtor was resisting repayment of a debt that he could in fact meet, or when the official feared that the debtor might attempt to flee the village without paying. Even if the debt still proved uncollectable, punishment of a recalcitrant debtor undoubtedly sent a powerful message to others to pay up promptly. Incarcerating an indigenous official was effective if the community as a whole owed the *alcalde mayor* funds, because the Indian authority served as a hostage to force the community to produce the

<sup>16</sup> The *repartimiento* price of mules is illustrative. Numerous archival references to the *repartimiento* sale of mules suggest mules typically sold from 28 to 50 pesos apiece, depending on quality. Even at 28 pesos this represented 112 workdays at the typical colonial wage of 2 reales per day. Mules could be obtained less expensively by paying with cash. The *repartimiento*, however, provided mules on credit. For more on *repartimiento* prices, see below.

<sup>17</sup> *Informes de curas y alcaldes mayores sobre el repartimiento*, AGN, *Subdelegados*, Tomo 34. For Nexapa see p. 119 and for Chichicapa-Zimatlán see p. 135.



outstanding debt. The final alternative open to the Spanish official was to embargo the personal belongings of the debtor and attempt to recover the value of the initial *repartimiento* with goods of equal worth. Needless to say, the average indigenous family in rural Oaxaca did not own many items valued by the *alcalde mayor*. When the debt originated from a *repartimiento* of a mule or oxen, the *alcalde mayor* could attempt to recover the animal. By then, however, the beast was older by a year or more and was, consequently, of lower worth.

Whether the *alcalde mayor* waited patiently, arrested and imprisoned the debtor or confiscated his belongings, he incurred administrative costs which reduced the real value of the return he hoped to earn on his *repartimiento* loan. Not infrequently, all of the above tactics failed. In such instances, the *alcalde mayor* had no choice but simply to write off the debts, entering ‘*incobrable*’, uncollectable, in his *repartimiento* ledger. The officials from Oaxacan districts all recognised that some level of total default was inevitable, and that *repartimiento* loans, while providing potential for very high profitability, also placed principal at very substantial risk of loss.<sup>18</sup> That default was common is unquestionable: most of the archival materials dealing with the *repartimiento* involve cases in which the *alcalde mayor* responded, often violently, to indebted peasants who failed to meet their obligations promptly.

The *repartimiento* operated essentially as follows: the *alcalde mayor* supplied goods on credit to Indian consumers and made cash advances against the future output of indigenous producers. The recipient of a *repartimiento* was obliged to repay the debt within a pre-arranged time period. The *repartimiento* was thus a system of credit linking Indian production and consumption with the larger Spanish economy.

#### *Rationale for the repartimiento*

The sections above describe how the *repartimiento* operated, but leave unexplained a critical question: why did the *repartimiento* exist? The overwhelming consensus in the historiography is that the *repartimiento* was a coercive system in which the *alcalde mayor* served as a violent intermediary who, abusing the power of his position, threatened the Indians of his district with imprisonment, beatings and sanctions if they refused to buy his stock of items or to produce for him output marketable in the Spanish economy. Prices were determined arbitrarily by the official and were so unfavourable to the Indians that one historian has claimed it ‘more nearly resembled robbery than commerce’.<sup>19</sup> The official, then, would simply present himself in an indigenous village and order the population to trade

<sup>18</sup> *Informes de curas y alcaldes mayores sobre el repartimiento*, AGN, *Subdelegados*, Tomo 34.

<sup>19</sup> Chance, *Conquest*, p. 97.

with him at whatever terms he stipulated. Thus, the *repartimiento* is conventionally seen as the motor force driving Native Americans to participate in markets, a system created in response to a perceived unwillingness of Indians to produce and consume.

This traditional depiction is overly simplistic. It suggests that Indians were reluctant to participate in the market, that they lived in closed, isolated and self-sufficient communities, and that only the coercion of the *alcalde mayor* could induce them to trade. This picture contrasts sharply with the known trading activities of indigenous Mexicans, including preconquest civilisations. Long before the Spaniards arrived in America, central Mexican peasants marketed output and elites consumed imported luxury goods. While the arrival of the Spanish may have partly changed the 'basket of goods', there exists little doubt that Indians eagerly consumed the newly introduced items.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, such depictions fail to illustrate convincingly how the *alcalde mayor* was able to force Indians to trade. Most scholars argue that the *alcaldes mayores* used their judicial authority 'to coerce the Indians to trade in commodities they might otherwise not be inclined to trade in bulk'.<sup>21</sup> Such an argument, however, attributes to the state a level of coercive power in excess of its real capacity. The Crown concentrated its resources in those colonial areas capable of producing the greatest Royal revenues. In remote rural areas, including most of Oaxaca, the state's authority was negligible and was only capable of exerting the Crown's will in extraordinary cases – to send in the Royal troops to contain rebellions, for example. In the day-to-day governing of indigenous society, the state's influence was limited.<sup>22</sup> The *alcalde mayor* was essentially the state's sole representative. Apart from him, the state had no presence in the indigenous districts of Oaxaca. Thus, it is inconceivable that the Spanish colonial state forced Mexico's indigenous population to participate in the market.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the mercantile activities of the *alcalde mayor*, his

<sup>20</sup> On preconquest Mexican trade, see Ross Hassig, *Trade, Tribute, and Transportation: The Sixteenth-Century Political Economy of the Valley of Mexico* (Norman, 1985); Frances F. Berdan, 'Markets in the Economy of Aztec Mexico', in Stuart Plattner (ed.), *Markets and Marketing*, SEA, Vol. 4 (Maryland, 1985); Frances F. Berdan, 'Trade and Markets in Precapitalist States', in Stuart Plattner (ed.), *Economic Anthropology* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 78–107. The immediate post-conquest economy is well documented. For the economy in general, see Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (Stanford, 1964); for close analysis of how Indians reacted to the goods brought by Spanish conquerors to the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca, see Romero Frizzi, *Economía y vida*.

<sup>21</sup> Hamnett, *Politics*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> On the weakness of the Bourbon state, see n. 2 above.

<sup>23</sup> A number of leading Latin American scholars have recently employed Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to help advance our understanding of state power. While little agreement to date exists even on the term's definition, hegemonists generally argue that the dominant class used its monopolisation of the ideological tools

*repartimientos*, were his and his merchant allies' private dealings, at times even prohibited by the Crown, as was the case both before 1754 and after 1786. Hence, the *alcalde mayor* was on his own – he could not even count on the support of a weak and ineffective state. In short, though the historiography suggests the *alcalde mayor* and three *tenientes* alone were capable of subjugating whole communities and forcing them to trade unwillingly, in fact the *alcalde mayor* did not have the power to coerce Indians to trade.

Third, traditional portrayals of the *repartimiento* are illogical and incomplete – they leave too many questions unanswered. If the *repartimiento* were truly nothing more than 'robbery' in which the *alcalde mayor* simply forced Indians to do as he chose, then it is doubtful that he would have delivered to the Indians expensive and valued items such as livestock or money, and always on credit. A cash advance, from the perspective of the recipient, had the advantage of being easily convertible into other goods. While some portion of the loan was necessarily used to finance production, the remainder was easily fungible, employed in the purchase of other necessities or perhaps used for the payment of Crown tribute. The very fungibility of money was both a nuisance and a danger to the *alcalde mayor*. That the funds issued in the *repartimiento* could be used for other purposes meant that the *alcalde* and his *tenientes* had to guard against the total misuse of the funds. If the loan were not employed at least in part

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of the society to construct an ideology which reinforces its class domination. The subordinate class ultimately accepts (or is blinded by) the hegemonic ideology and sees the economic and political system as legitimate. They accept their positions in society, and rule is henceforth through consensus. Coercion and force are employed only in extraordinary cases when the system threatens to break down. Hegemonists might argue that the Crown did not need to employ coercion in the operation of the *repartimiento* because it exercised a degree of hegemony instead which served to coopt peasant resistance.

While fundamentally sound, hegemony lacks measurability; theorists are unable to establish the degree of hegemony exercised by the state and certainly not all states are equally hegemonic. The late colonial state did enjoy legitimacy even among the indigenous populations of Mexico, but it was a legitimacy predicated on the Crown's inability to step beyond certain boundaries, what scholars have called 'the unwritten constitution', or 'the colonial compact'. The Crown exercised hegemony, but it was a weak hegemony, one which was characterised by a limited capacity in rural, indigenous regions. The Bourbon reforms, an attempt to address this very weakness, failed to increase significantly the state's hegemony.

On the application of hegemony to Latin America see Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, 1994); Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, 1995). For a critique of hegemony not dissimilar to the one provided above, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985), ch. 8.

to finance production, then the debtor was almost certain to default. While certainly infrequent, the *alcalde mayor* also risked losing the entire loan if the debtor fled with the money. Thus, the *repartimiento* for the production of certain goods, cochineal included, was made in the form which most benefited the recipient and left the *alcalde mayor* most vulnerable to the loss of his principal, a highly implausible arrangement if the *alcalde mayor* truly exerted absolute control over the indigenous population as is generally assumed in conventional depictions. Instead, this suggests a less lopsided balance of power, one in which the *alcalde mayor* had to remain sensitive to the demands of the Indian consumers and producers of his district.

Similarly, goods distributed in the *repartimiento* were those valuable and useful to the peasant economy. Mules, bulls and oxen performed useful functions in the daily tasks of rural life, increasing productivity and facilitating the delivery of surplus production to regional markets. These animals, furnished by the *repartimiento* of the *alcalde mayor*, were those needed and demanded. They were not the worthless items that some historians claim were sold through the *repartimiento*, goods such as silk stockings, fur hats, or playing cards.<sup>24</sup> They were desirable yet expensive items which without the extension of credit were beyond the means of most rural Oaxacans. Work animals helped pay for themselves by increasing productivity, and so receiving them in advance with no required down payment facilitated saving the money to repay the *alcalde mayor*. Productivity increases resulting from the introduction of a farm animal probably compensated the peasant for the cost of the animal in the first year or two.

Furthermore, many of the goods that the Spanish officials provided were a nuisance for them to obtain. Beasts of burden were often brought from distant regions which entailed a substantial outlay for transport and fodder. In addition, such animals were highly vulnerable to death, illness or loss. That such troublesome goods were selected by the *alcalde mayor* for distribution, however, is not surprising; they served the needs of the peasantry and were, thus, in demand.

Historiographical portrayals of the *repartimiento* are simplistic. If the

<sup>24</sup> Gibson, *Aztecs*, p. 94 claims the *alcaldes mayores* 'disposed of' silk stockings and other luxury goods in the *repartimiento*. Stein, 'Bureaucracy and Business', p. 6, found that the Peruvian *corregidores* forced Indians to buy 'velvets ... linens, baizes of Castile, fine beaver hats, mirrors, playing cards, [and] gilded paper'. These 'worthless items' and others allegedly were forced upon Andeans according to Juan and Ulloa, two eighteenth-century Spanish travellers to Peru. See John J. TePaske (ed.), *Discourse and Political Reflections on the Kingdoms of Peru* (Norman, 1978), translation of Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, *Noticias secretas de América* (1749). Patch, *Maya and Spaniard*, pp. 82, 91 and 158, claims that religious indulgences were regularly sold in the *repartimiento* in Yucatán. Lockhart and Schwartz, *Early Latin America*, p. 356, express doubt that such worthless items really were sold in the *repartimiento*.

*alcalde mayor* could truly compel an Indian to purchase a sickly mule, then why did he not simply extort the money directly, giving him nothing in exchange? Why did the *alcalde mayor* not simply confiscate indigenous output or oblige Indians to produce cochineal, paying them nothing at all? Why did he provide valuable, yet troublesome, livestock rather than force worthless articles upon the Indians? The answers to such questions are obvious. The *alcalde mayor* could not merely steal from the Indians because he lacked the power to do so. Instead, he needed to provide them with goods and services not readily available. He did this by selling to them on credit goods that were useful and desired. He also became the banker to the Indians, lending them money.

Although the *alcalde mayor* lacked the power to force Indians against their wills into the market as producers and consumers, I believe that the *repartimiento* did emerge in response to a limited participation in markets on the part of Indians, and that the *repartimiento* was a motor force contributing to the greater integration of peasants into colonial markets. In order for the indigenous population to participate more extensively in the market, the extension of credit was essential. As most merchants and many colonial administrators realised, few Indians commanded sufficient economic resources to permit them to purchase that which they needed or desired. Similarly, most Indians lacked the finances to permit them to produce in bulk certain cash crops, cochineal for one. The *repartimiento* expanded and deepened markets not because the *alcalde mayor* used force and coercion, but because the *repartimiento* provided the credit and financing without which many transactions would have been impossible.<sup>25</sup>

Cash *repartimientos* not only provided financing for production of cash crops like cochineal but could also be partly used to meet other expenses such as tribute or religious fees. Peasants could also turn to the *repartimiento* for a loan when bad weather threatened their subsistence. The *repartimiento* system of credit, then, came to be an important outside source of funds for Oaxacan peasants to complement the traditional rural economy.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Romero Frizzi, 'El poder de los mercaderes', also suggests that *repartimiento* credit was a crucial incentive for market participation by colonial peasants.

<sup>26</sup> Carmagnani, *El Regreso de los dioses*, p. 173, notes the importance of the *repartimiento* in peasants' economic strategies as a source of income and goods, yet he stops short of arguing that peasants voluntarily sought *repartimientos*. Peasants rarely revealed how they invested cash obtained in the *repartimiento*, although clearly much went as intended towards financing the production needed to repay the loan. Occasionally, however, documents revealed additional peasant strategies. One woman, Bernarda González, requested a *repartimiento* to tide her over when her harvest failed and she and her children faced starvation. See AGEO, R.I, II, Leg. 14, exp. 5, 1811. In other cases, peasants without funds when tribute was due borrowed from the *alcalde mayor*. Since the official collected tribute, there was probably no actual exchange of money in such

The *repartimientos* of the *alcaldes mayores* were not the only source of credit, but were indisputably the most significant. Internal communal sources of credit existed, such as indigenous *cofradías* or *cajas de comunidad*, but about these we know very little and the paucity of references to them, relative to the *repartimiento*, suggests that they were of only secondary importance.<sup>27</sup> Private merchants and local hacendados represented another source and did sometimes loan funds or sell goods on credit (i.e. provide *repartimientos*) to Indians, especially those they knew personally. This was risky business, however, since it entailed the provision of credit to nearly propertyless peasants, neither able nor required to provide collateral security or a loan guarantor. For most merchants hoping to expand their business dealings into the indigenous districts of Mexico, this posed an obstacle, one which they dared not recklessly ignore.<sup>28</sup> The 1754 legalisation of the *repartimiento* was justified on these grounds. As the Viceroy, the first Count Revillagigedo, noted in 1752: 'no merchant, nor any other person, can expose [funds], nor wait terms so delayed and [face] so difficult and costly a collection' as can the *alcalde mayor*.<sup>29</sup> Most often, the value of a *repartimiento* was only several pesos, and even when farm animals were supplied on credit, the total transactions rarely exceeded 50 pesos. Given the low value of most credit transactions with Indians, trying to collect unpaid debts through legal means was too costly. Furthermore, legal procedures lasted months, sometimes years, and the outcome was far from certain.

This difficulty was the very consequence of the deficient Crown penetration of indigenous society. The *república de indios* retained its own political, social and economic institutions over which the Crown had

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cases. See several entries in the ledger of the *alcalde mayor* of Teposcolula, *Libro en que consta las dependencias líquidas*, AGN, *Real Hacienda, Administración General de Alcabalas*, Caja 43 (XI).

<sup>27</sup> Carmagnani, *El Regreso de los dioses*, p. 157 refers to the practice of Indians borrowing from the *cofradía* at an interest rate of 20–25 per cent. I uncovered a case in which peasants, unable to pay their *repartimiento* debts, succeeded in repaying the *alcalde mayor* by borrowing the funds from their parish *cofradía*. See AGEO, R.I. II, *Tomo 6, exp. 17, Proceso que se sigue a Nicolás Larumbe subdelegado de Nexapa por fraude en repartimiento*, ff. 105.

<sup>28</sup> Hacendados extended credit to workers on their haciendas yet proved unable to force them to repay their debts fully before they departed, nor did hacendados normally try. Instead credit was an incentive to attract workers in the first place and peasants sought to maximise their indebtedness. The more privileged rural workers were the most indebted. For a review of this literature see Arnold J. Bauer, 'Rural Workers in Spanish America: Problems of Peonage and Oppression', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 59, no. 1 (1979), 34–63.

<sup>29</sup> See the viceroy's questionnaire accompanying the *Informes de curas y alcaldes mayores*, AGN, *Subdelegados*, Tomo 34, 1752.

limited control. Spanish institutions, in this case legal tribunals, were insufficiently effective at the village level to enforce regularly and inexpensively debts owed by rural Oaxacans. The only representative of the Crown's authority at the local level was the *alcalde mayor*, and he was occupied with the operation of his own business dealings.

The economies of modern Western societies operate with highly developed institutions that are designed to reduce the uncertainties of trade and to ensure that contracts are easily enforceable at a reasonable cost. Contracts specifically dictate the responsibilities of all parties. When one party fails to abide by the stipulated terms of a contract, the other has recourse to institutions that either force the first to comply, penalise him, or, at the very least, ostracise him. In rural colonial Spanish America, these institutions were virtually non-existent. The lack of developed institutions meant that the leverage available to most Spaniards to ensure repayment of debts and compliance with contracts was limited, at least at a reasonably low cost.<sup>30</sup> The *repartimiento* served as a substitute for the lack of more formal Spanish penetration because it was operated by the *alcalde mayor*, the one Spaniard possessing sufficient leverage personally to enforce contracts with the general population.<sup>31</sup> The *repartimiento*, then, served as a substitute for a more formal Spanish institutional presence.

Theoretically, the *alcalde mayor* could have employed the power of his office to collect the debts owed to private merchants as well, but this would have worked against his own best interests since business that the *alcalde mayor* facilitated for a competing merchant represented profits lost to him. At times the Crown ordered the *alcalde mayor* to help collect the debts of private merchants, but this only occurred in extreme cases. In general, the *alcalde mayor* was free from state supervision and could use his judicial authority however he chose. He was, consequently, reluctant to help his competition. Without greater security for their capital, merchants

<sup>30</sup> According to Douglass North, the degree of institutional organisation 'determine[s] transaction and transformation costs and hence the profitability and feasibility of engaging in economic activity'. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 118.

Hegemony theories suggest that institutions reflect and disseminate the values, laws, and customs which reinforce the rule of the dominant class and bring about subaltern compliance. Scott points out, however, that the underdevelopment of the elites' (the colonials') institutions in most peasant societies reduces the plausibility that they truly exercise hegemony. 'Living outside the cities where agencies of hegemony are quartered...and having its own shadow institutions...the peasantry is simply less accessible to hegemonic practice'. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p. 321. Rural colonial Oaxaca would be a classic case where the weakness of dominant class institutions would greatly reduce the hegemonic power.

<sup>31</sup> That the *alcalde mayor* was alone in his ability to loan funds to Indians safely is recognised by several other scholars. See, for example, Pietschmann, 'Agricultura e industria', pp. 77-9; Spalding, 'Tratos mercantiles', p. 598.

were unwilling to lend money to Indians they did not know personally to be trustworthy and solvent. This excluded most Indians.

Most studies have argued that the *cacique* and other *principales* stood at the pinnacle of the *repartimiento*, serving as the quasi-ally and debt collector of the *alcalde mayor*, sometimes even sharing in the profits.<sup>32</sup> Chance even speculates that native elites of the Rincón, a region in Villa Alta, to a large extent owed their positions to the *alcaldes mayores* who only supported the elections of Indians who aided them in the operation of their *repartimientos*.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Romero Frizzi suggests that the role of the indigenous authorities in the operation of *repartimientos* has been exaggerated. Observing *repartimientos* in the Mixteca Alta until about 1725, she notes that villagers rarely accused their *principales* of cooperating with the *alcaldes mayores*. Instead, she found that Indian nobles were often the recipients of individual *repartimientos*, not the issuers.<sup>34</sup>

That Indian *alcaldes*, *gobernadores* and other *principales* commonly received goods or money through the *repartimiento* for their personal use is indisputable. Surviving ledgers showing the *repartimientos* of money for the production of cochineal reveal that indigenous authorities received *repartimientos* to produce cochineal regularly and in quantities comparable to other villagers.<sup>35</sup> The Indian nobility also sometimes turned to the *alcalde mayor* for *repartimiento* loans.

If indigenous leaders used the authority of their positions to reinforce the *repartimientos* of the Oaxacan Spanish *alcaldes mayores*, there survives little evidence. While Romero Frizzi only found a few cases in which the indigenous leaders helped their *alcaldes mayores* operate the *repartimiento*, I did not find any even after the 1786 *Ordenanza de Intendentes* which specified that the *gobernadores* should help in the collection of debts, receiving a one per cent commission as compensation.<sup>36</sup> When an indigenous official became involved in litigation over the *repartimiento*, it was usually because he found himself incarcerated for non-payment of a debt, sometimes his

<sup>32</sup> Pastor, 'El repartimiento', p. 204; Dehouve, 'El pueblo de indios', pp. 87, 92-3; Pietschmann, 'Agricultura e industria', p. 77; Carmagnani, *El Regreso*, p. 172; Chance, 'Capitalismo y desigualdad'; Larson and Wasserstrom, 'Consumo forzoso', p. 365; Golte, *Repartos y Rebeliones*, p. 115; Spalding, 'Tratos mercantiles', p. 605.

<sup>33</sup> Chance, 'Capitalismo y desigualdad'. Spalding suggests that Andean *caciques* who did not ally themselves with their *alcaldes mayores* risked losing their posts. Spalding, 'Tratos mercantiles', p. 605.

<sup>34</sup> Romero Frizzi, 'El poder de los mercaderes', pp. 56-7.

<sup>35</sup> Detailed ledgers survive in AGN, *Civil*, Tomo 302, *Primera parte, cuaderno de la cuentas*, 21-46; AGN, *Civil* 284, exp. 6, 19v-24. AGN, *Tierras*, Tomo, 1038, exp. 1, pp. 212-13; AGN, *Real Hacienda*, *Administración general de alcabalas*, Caja 43, 1-37; and AGEO, *Real Intendencia de Oaxaca II*, Leg. 40, exp. 24.

<sup>36</sup> On the new role of *gobernadores*, see L. E. Fisher, *The Intendant System in Spanish America* and *Que se observa en Villa Alta la prohibición de repartimientos*, AGN, *General de Parte*, Tomo 78, pp. 14-20.



own and sometimes one that he had contracted for the community as a whole. Far from the allies of the *alcalde mayor*, then, the indigenous authorities were the frequent targets of the sometimes harsh methods used in the collection of debts.

The provision of credit was necessary to permit the expansion of markets. While few merchants would willingly risk their funds lending them to the general indigenous population, the *repartimiento* was operated by the *alcalde mayor*, the one Spaniard personally possessing the Crown's authority to collect debts. The *repartimiento*, then, was a quasi-institution designed to operate in a colonial environment where an efficiently functioning market was absent. It reduced transaction and enforcement costs to a level where provision of credit became feasible and profitable.

#### *Rebellions and complaints against the repartimiento*

Two types of evidence have generally been presented by historians to argue that the *repartimiento* was a coercive system of forced production and consumption. First, scholars have attempted to identify the *repartimiento* as the catalyst for indigenous peasant rebellions. Second, the numerous complaints against the *repartimiento* have been offered as proof that the *repartimiento* was coercive and involuntary.

Historians have identified the *repartimiento* as the cause of two widespread regional rebellions. Most studies of the 1660 Rebellion of Tehuantepec attribute it to the *repartimientos* of the *alcalde mayor* of Tehuantepec who was murdered at the start of the upheaval. As Carmagnani argues, however, this movement was caused at least as much by a fierce political struggle within the Indian elite as between the elite and the *alcalde mayor*.<sup>37</sup> Much more fully documented is the 1780s Andean movement of Túpac Amaru which Golte has argued was primarily a rebellion against *repartimientos*. He found that the provinces most inclined to rebel were those in which the burden of *repartimiento* debt weighed most heavily.<sup>38</sup> Golte's thesis has subsequently been attacked by several

<sup>37</sup> Marcello Carmagnani, 'Un movimiento político indio: "La rebelión" de Tehuantepec, 1660-1661', in Héctor Díaz-Polanco (ed.), *El fuego de la inobediencia* (Mexico, CIESAS, 1993), pp. 81-101; also see Basilio Rojas, *La rebelión de Tehuantepec* (Mexico, 1964); Héctor Díaz-Polanco and Carlos Manzo, *Documentos sobre las rebeliones de Tehuantepec y Nexapa (1660-1661)* (Mexico, 1992); a published 1622 version of the happenings is contained in Cristóbal Manso de Contreras, *La rebelión de Tehuantepec*, Víctor de la Cruz (ed.) (Mexico, 1987). An authoritative history of the 1660 movement remains to be written.

<sup>38</sup> Golte, *Repartos y Rebeliones*, pp. 176-83 subtracted the sum of *per capita repartimiento* debts and annual tribute burdens from his estimates of *per capita* income per province. He then argued that the provinces whose net incomes (income after payment of *repartimiento* debts and tribute) were 20 pesos or lower were those with the greatest participation in the rebellion. This proved, he claimed, *repartimientos* were the primary cause of the rebellion's outbreak.

historians. O'Phelan rejected Golte's theory, arguing instead that eighteenth-century Andean rebellions were caused by the mounting 'competition between *hacendados*, *obrajes*, *corregidores* and priests for control over the local communities and their economic resources'. According to O'Phelan, the *repartimiento* never provoked large-scale rebellions, but merely local revolts.<sup>39</sup> Stern also rejected Golte's 'ingenious but flawed' study, arguing that the cause of the Túpac Amaru rebellion was more systemic, the result of a century-long depression of the colonial economy which contributed to the growing exploitation of Andean communities and, consequently, to a deterioration of the Crown's perceived legitimacy.<sup>40</sup> Stavig, too, attributed the rebellion to a breakdown of the legitimacy of Spanish rule in the eyes of indigenous communities.<sup>41</sup>

Certainly it is beyond the scope of this article to address the causes of Túpac Amaru – let alone the broader issue of peasant rebellions. It is instructive to note, however, that Oaxaca experienced little unrest during the colonial period despite the fact that the *repartimiento* was probably more important to the economy of Oaxaca than to any other province in Mexico.<sup>42</sup> Far from rebellious, Oaxaca seemed prone not to rebel, as evidenced by the cool reception received by the insurgent priest José Morelos in 1812, despite his rebel army's call for the final termination of *repartimientos*. Morelos's army marched through the Mixteca en route to the occupation of the central Oaxacan valley, and in neither of these areas did villagers provide much support.<sup>43</sup>

When rebellions in colonial Spanish America did erupt, the earliest victims were often the local *alcaldes mayores*. This is hardly surprising. The *alcalde mayor* stood at the crossroads between Indian and Spanish societies – an economic and, in part, cultural broker between the two worlds. He represented Spanish rule and the exploitation inherent in the colonial relationship between conqueror and conquered. As the main economic link with external markets, the Spanish *alcalde mayor* wielded considerable control over the Indian society and economy. The *alcalde mayor* determined

<sup>39</sup> Scarlett O'Phelan Godoy, *Rebellions and Revolts in Eighteenth-Century Peru and Upper Peru* (Cologne, 1985), pp. 118–26.

<sup>40</sup> Steve J. Stern, *Resistance, Rebellion and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World: 18th to 20th Centuries* (Madison, 1987), pp. 39–42.

<sup>41</sup> Ward Stavig, 'Ethnic Conflict, Moral Economy, and Population on the Eve of the Thupa Amaro II Rebellion', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (1988), pp. 737–70.

<sup>42</sup> While rebellions were rare in southern Mexico, protests or riots were common. Several involved conflicts over the *repartimiento*, especially the way in which debts were collected. See William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979), pp. 120, 134.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Pastor, *Campesinos y reformas*, pp. 417–18.

when credit was extended and who received it, and when local economic crises occurred, the *alcalde mayor* still demanded debt repayment. For all these reasons, the *alcalde mayor* was an obvious target for indigenous aggression. Furthermore, the *repartimiento* itself was a conspicuous target, for it was most Indians' primary connection with the Spanish economy. When crops failed for lack of rain, the *alcalde mayor* unsympathetically demanded that debts be paid anyway. Who else, then, would the peasants blame for their predicament but the *alcalde mayor* and his system of credit?

While rebellions are certainly the most striking evidence of peasant discontent, in the colonial period Indians far more commonly issued complaints through legal channels to gain redress for their grievances. Indians, however, were not the only ones inclined to complain about the *repartimientos* of the *alcalde mayor*. Non-Indians, most of whom were Spaniards and viewed the Spanish officials as their economic or political rivals, also issued protests. No matter who initiated the complaint, its receipt usually sparked a Crown investigation.

Thirty-four distinct cases dating from the period 1750–1821 were examined in the various archives of Oaxaca and Mexico City in which either an Indian or a Spaniard issued a complaint about the *repartimientos* of an Oaxacan *alcalde mayor*.<sup>44</sup> In 26 of the cases, the person issuing the complaint was an Indian. Ten others<sup>45</sup> were presented by Spaniards, eight of whom were merchants, one a priest and one an *ex-teniente* of an *alcalde mayor*. All of the 26 Indian petitioners found themselves in debt from *repartimientos* that their *alcaldes mayores* were attempting to collect. In each case, the pressures placed upon them to repay their debts became unbearable, leading them to seek relief. Most of the grievances introduced by Spaniards accused the Spanish officials of monopolising trade and excluding competitors.

Grievances expressed against the *repartimiento* fall into four general categories, each of which is treated below. First, petitioners noted the disparity between market and *repartimiento* prices. Second, the *alcaldes mayores* were often accused of being monopolists, preventing mercantile competition in their districts. Third, the officials were denounced for the frequently violent manner in which they attempted to collect debts. Last, plaintiffs occasionally charged that *repartimientos* were forced upon recipients.

<sup>44</sup> Only 'first-hand' accounts were included, the testimonies of recipients, local merchants, or other individuals who were directly involved in the contested *repartimientos*.

<sup>45</sup> The sum of the complaints by Indians and Spaniards exceeds by two the number of cases used because two cases had multiple parts actually enclosed in distinct expedientes and are counted twice, once as a complaint by an Indian and a second time as a complaint by a Spaniard.

In several cases, complaints were made about the prices charged by the *alcalde mayor* for the merchandise he bought or sold through his *repartimientos*. Interestingly, the people most often issuing such complaints were not the recipients themselves but rival merchants or Crown administrators bent on prohibiting *repartimientos*. These arguments have been used by modern scholars in support of their assertions that the *repartimiento* was coerced. Prices, according to this argument, were unfavourable to Indians because they were dictated by the Spanish official who forced them upon indigenous producers and consumers.<sup>46</sup>

It is true that Indians paid more for goods obtained through the *repartimiento* than they would have had they purchased identical items in the marketplace. It is also clear that the *alcalde mayor* purchased output from Indian producers at below market prices. A mule, for example, might be supplied to an Indian in the *repartimiento* for 25 pesos, when a similar mule might be bought at the marketplace for only 15 pesos. Why, scholars have asked, would an Indian pay 25 pesos for a mule worth only 15? The usual answer is coercion. As Nancy Farriss expressed it, 'the great discrepancy in prices, always in the Spaniard's favor, was of course one reason that the latter had to rely on force... in the first place'.<sup>47</sup>

While it is perhaps true that an Indian could buy a mule in the market for only 15 pesos, the mule provided by the Spanish official in the *repartimiento* was supplied on credit, and so it naturally had to be priced higher, because an interest charge was built into the final price. The purchaser was not required to make any down payment, received immediate use of the animal, and did not have to pay anything for 6 months, at which time only half was due, and even this partial payment was often delayed. Interest charges were included in the *repartimiento* price for simplicity and to reduce transaction costs. The *alcalde mayor* issued hundreds of loans, the vast majority of which were only worth a few pesos. Calculating interest owed on so many small transactions would have been difficult and would have entailed substantial administrative costs. Consequently the interest was simply incorporated into a *repartimiento* price which guaranteed a return to the *alcalde mayor* under most conditions.

Thus, to compare the market and *repartimiento* prices is misleading – the two transactions were distinct. When an Indian needed a mule and had at his disposal 15 pesos, he could purchase the animal outright. As was frequently the case, however, the Indian was forced to turn to the Spanish official to purchase the mule, paying for it in instalments. He received the

<sup>46</sup> For this perspective see Larson and Wasserstrom, 'Consumo forzoso', p. 365; Pastor, *El repartimiento*, pp. 201 and 206; Golte, *Repartos y Rebeliones*, p. 114; Farriss, *Maya Society*, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Farriss, *Maya Society*, p. 44.

animal on credit, and so he naturally paid a higher price for it, a price which included an implicit interest charge.<sup>48</sup>

*Repartimiento* prices and market prices were different because the *repartimiento* was a fundamentally different type of transaction. In fact, the prices offered by private merchants were not better than those paid by the *alcalde mayor* when the latter dealt ‘*al contado*’, in cash. The *alcalde mayor* not only acquired indigenous output by advancing funds through the *repartimiento*, but also bought large amounts outright, paying in cash and at market prices, the same prices paid by other merchants, powerful or weak.<sup>49</sup>

The second type of complaint levelled against the *repartimiento* charged the Spanish officials with preventing merchants from trading with the Indians. In 1774, for example, an itinerant merchant named Juan Fernando Herrera issued to the Viceroy a blanket complaint against the *alcaldes mayores* of the entire province of Oaxaca who, he claimed, had harmed his business of buying and selling cochineal by regularly interfering with his dealings with the Indians.<sup>50</sup>

Critics of the *repartimiento* usually claimed that the *alcalde mayor* excluded potential competition in order to enlarge his profits by forcing indigenous producers and consumers to deal with him alone. It was necessary for the *alcalde mayor* to exclude competitors, they argued, because competition would provide Indians with more favourable terms. This argument was central to the 1786 abolition of the *repartimiento*, as proponents of free trade argued that commercial monopolies reduced the volume of trade and that the abolition of *repartimientos* would open and expand commerce, benefiting smaller merchants and peddlers.<sup>51</sup>

While this explanation for the *repartimiento* is logical, it was probably not the entire story. By attempting to exclude competitors, the Spanish official sometimes did prevent peasants from selling their production to

<sup>48</sup> That interest rates charged to recipients of *repartimiento* loans were so high was a reflection of the high levels of risk to which the *alcaldes mayores* exposed their funds. Debtor default and delay were extremely common. High rates of interest charged on individual *repartimiento* transactions merely produced normal rates of return on the overall funds loaned. For a more detailed examination of returns on *repartimiento* loans, see Baskes, ‘Indians, Merchants, and Markets’, ch. 5.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, *Inventario y precios de bienes del difunto Capitán Manuel María de Ortega, subdelegado que fue de Miahuatlán*, AGEO, R.I. II, Leg. 40, exp. 24, 1811. Ortega, the Spanish official of Miahuatlán, purchased cochineal both through the *repartimiento* at 12 reales per pound and directly in cash at the considerably higher market price.

<sup>50</sup> AGEO, *Alcaldia Mayores*, Leg. 34, exp. 14, 1774.

<sup>51</sup> The best sources on the debate over the *repartimiento* in Mexico are Hamnett, *Politics and Trade*, and MacLachlan, *Spain's Empire in the New World*, ch. 6. The 1786 abolition of the *repartimiento* did not stimulate a trade boom as its authors predicted. Instead, in the 1780s the cochineal industry declined by 50 per cent as the *alcaldes mayores*' financiers withdrew their investment funds from rural Oaxaca.

outsiders, and this practice probably did move prices slightly in the *alcalde*'s favour. I believe, however, that the *alcalde mayor*'s primary objective in limiting competition was for reasons other than hoping to benefit from monopoly or monopsony prices. In *repartimiento* transactions he did not need to exclude competition because he already possessed a virtual monopoly since only he could and did extend credit widely to the peasantry. The *alcalde mayor* did not need to prohibit others from providing credit – few merchants would consider it for they lacked the means to collect debts easily and cheaply.

Instead, the exclusionary practices of the Spanish officials were a rational defensive strategy designed to reduce the riskiness of *repartimiento* loans. When a propertyless, insolvent individual defaulted on a loan, the judicial authority of the Spanish official was largely worthless. It was impossible to collect a debt from a person with no assets. Consequently, the *alcalde mayor* had to reduce to the best of his ability the propensity of default. When an itinerant merchant entered a cochineal-producing village at harvest time, he offered to purchase the dyestuff from producers at market prices. Most of the producers, however, had already contracted to sell their cochineal to the *alcalde mayor* and had received advanced payments through the *repartimiento*. If producers reneged on their contracts and sold their dyestuff to the travelling merchants, the *alcalde mayor* remained uncompensated for his loans and risked losing his funds entirely. Excluding other merchants from trading in his district, then, helped the *alcalde mayor* to reduce the danger of default.

This point was well illustrated by the *alcalde mayor* of Nexapa who in 1752 observed that when market prices dropped, he had no difficulty in collecting the cochineal owed to him, but that when prices were high debtors sold their dyestuff to travelling merchants or in Antequera and claimed they had lost their harvests. The same was claimed by the *alcalde mayor* of Villa Alta who in 1770 was unable to collect his cochineal debts from the Indians of his district because, as he testified to the Viceroy, the prevailing high prices had led debtors to renege on their contracted obligations and sell their output elsewhere.<sup>52</sup>

In short, it is problematic to explain the exclusionary practices of the Spanish officials as an attempt to inflate the prices of goods sold to Indians and deflate the purchase prices of indigenous output. *Alcaldes mayores* already enjoyed a near monopoly on credit transactions because they monopolised the judicial resources needed to enforce payment of debts. Instead, the *alcalde mayor* sought to limit the circulation of other merchants

<sup>52</sup> *Informes de curas y alcaldes mayores sobre el repartimiento, Nexapa*, AGN, *Subdelegados*, Tomo 34, p. 119, 1752; *Superior Despacho para que los vecinos de Villa Alta paguen a Don José Molina lo que le adeudan de la grana*, AJVA, Civil no. 328, 1770.

in an effort to lower his risk and reduce the potential for peasants to violate their contracts with him. Any monopoly benefit accruing to the *alcalde mayor* in the way of better prices for transactions outside of the *repartimiento* would have amounted to an added bonus, but in practice seldom materialised.

Finally, it is doubtful if the *alcalde mayor* really succeeded in excluding itinerant merchants or even that he tried to do so in most years. The districts in which the *alcaldes mayores* served were geographically large, making virtually impossible the task of excluding competing merchants. Peddlers could have easily entered remote villages and traded with the inhabitants undetected by the *alcalde mayor* and his *tenientes*. The cost of limiting the circulation of such merchants would have been enormous and the effort probably futile given the inadequate manpower. Furthermore, in most years the need to reduce competition to avoid default was minimal. Only in years when cochineal prices rose to high levels did the *alcalde mayor* need fear that peasants would evade repayment. In most years the price differential was not large enough for peasants to risk unleashing the *alcalde mayor's* wrath.

The overwhelming majority of peasant complaints concerned the manner in which the *alcalde mayor* attempted to collect outstanding debts. When an *alcalde mayor* faced difficulties collecting his debts, there were several means at his disposal to aid him, several of which might lead a peasant to complain. First, he could imprison debtors in the hope that he could force them or their families to repay. Alternatively, the *alcalde mayor* could seize a debtor's belongings. Most, however, possessed few goods valued by the Spanish official.<sup>53</sup> The families of debtors who were imprisoned or whose possessions were seized occasionally lodged complaints with authorities in Oaxaca or Mexico City. Generally, peasants begged for release from prison and return of their belongings, promising to repay their *repartimiento* debts at the next harvest or when their economic conditions improved. Such requests were usually granted, and the *alcalde mayor* was ordered to free the prisoner, refrain from harassing him, and wait patiently for the debtor to repay.

In five cases, accusations were made that the *alcalde mayor* had forced peasants to accept unwanted *repartimientos*. In one of the five, both indigenous recipients of the 'forced' *repartimiento* and a local Spanish merchant accused the *alcalde mayor*. In three other cases the claims were levied by indebted Indians alone while in the last case a Spanish

<sup>53</sup> O'Phelan has argued that in the Andes the *repartimiento* operated primarily as a 'system of indebtedness' to supply labour to other colonial enterprises, especially haciendas and *obrajes* (rural sweat shops). O'Phelan Godoy, *Rebellions and Revolts*, pp. 99–102. In Oaxaca evidence for this practice is scant.

functionary charged with investigating a peasant complaint denounced the *alcalde mayor*. Significantly, only four of the 26 complaints issued by peasants charged the *alcalde mayor* with having forced them to accept *repartimientos*. While compelling evidence of coercion, a case can be made that such accusations were merely attempts by desperate peasants to resist repayment by denying the legitimacy of their debts. In each of the four cases, debtors responded to their imprisonment by claiming that they should not be held accountable for their debts because the *alcalde mayor* had forced them to take *repartimiento* loans they had not wanted. Charges of forced distribution always occurred many months and usually years after the loan was first extended. A typical claim might follow this pattern: 'Five years ago the *alcalde mayor* forced me to accept a *repartimiento* to produce cochineal, and now he's placed me in prison because I can't repay him'. No documented protests were found that stated 'the *alcalde mayor* is trying to force me (or has just forced me) to accept funds to produce cochineal, but I don't want them'. That is, accusations of force emerged only after the debtor was squeezed for repayment and claimed insolvency. In addition, close scrutiny of the cases casts doubt on their authenticity.

Close examination of one such case is revealing. In 1788, Bernardo Antonio, an Indian cochineal producer from Santa María Teopoxco in the district of Teotitlán del Camino, issued a complaint to the *Intendente Corregidor* against his *alcalde mayor*, Don Manuel Josef López. According to Antonio, he fled his village to seek help in Oaxaca when he learned that the *alcalde mayor* had ordered his arrest for debts he owed from the *repartimiento*. Antonio testified that five years earlier, upon his election to the post of village governor, *alcalde mayor* López had forced him to accept money to distribute to other community members to produce cochineal and *huipiles*. Consequently, he came to owe *alcalde mayor* López eight arrobas (200 pounds) of cochineal and an unspecified number of *huipiles*.

Antonio's complaint sparked an investigation by Antonio de Mora y Peysal, the *Intendente Corregidor*, who ordered the *alcalde mayor* of Teotitlán del Camino to respond promptly to Antonio's charges. In his response, dated 23 May 1788, López admitted supplying Antonio with funds to produce not 200 but 155 pounds of cochineal and 546 *huipiles*. A ledger submitted by López revealed that Antonio had repaid all but 12 pounds, 12 ounces of cochineal and 14 *huipiles*. Repeated requests that the balance be paid had failed, leading López to order his *teniente* to arrest Antonio.

Facing imprisonment and loss of his few personal belongings, Bernardo Antonio eluded the *teniente* and escaped to Oaxaca to seek help. Antonio's main grievance, however, was apparently not the manner in which he had been allegedly forced to receive the money in the first place. The complaint occurred only after 5 years and most of the debt had been



repaid. Had this *repartimiento* been truly so onerous and unwanted, Antonio would have surely sought the aid of Oaxacan authorities much sooner. What had changed since the loan was initially made was the ability of Antonio to repay his debt. It was only the order for his arrest which prompted him to deny the legitimacy of the debt.

This case, however, is extraordinary, because López was able to produce five letters, written to him in 1784 and 1785 by Antonio (or a scribe) and signed by Antonio himself, which both requested the *repartimiento* loans and acknowledged their receipt. López submitted these letters to disprove the claims against him. Antonio had requested the loans, not been forced to take them.<sup>54</sup> In this example, then, we see both an accusation of force and relatively conclusive proof that the allegation was untrue. Antonio was threatened with imprisonment and responded rationally by denying the legitimacy of his debts. Antonio undoubtedly hoped this approach would win him relief from his debt obligations – not unreasonable given the Crown’s antagonism towards the *repartimiento* at that time, only 2 years after its official 1786 prohibition.<sup>55</sup>

Only five accusations of forced *repartimientos* in Oaxaca were found for the period 1750–1821, and there is sound reason to doubt the veracity of several. Even if one were to accept accusations such as Bernardo Antonio’s as true, the case in favour of the *repartimiento* being primarily a coercive system would be weak. The *repartimiento* was the major means through which Indians produced for and consumed goods originating in the non-Indian market. If the *repartimiento* were truly as coercive as many have argued, the incidence of complaints would surely have been much higher, despite the significant obstacles to lodging complaints. Indians in Spanish America showed a remarkable penchant for utilising the Spanish court systems. That so few archival examples were found indicates that forced *repartimientos*, if they existed at all, must have been exceptional. Indians did issue complaints against the *repartimiento* but the issues they raised most often involved matters other than forced distribution.

In contrast to the several accusations of force, numerous cases were found in which the recipient of a *repartimiento* freely admitted that he or she had willingly accepted or requested a *repartimiento*. For instance, a

<sup>54</sup> A number of readers have suggested the possibility these notes were forged by the *alcalde mayor*. Proving their authenticity is obviously impossible, but they appear authentic, and there is no evidence that they were forged. While the letters unambiguously request that the *alcalde mayor* advance *repartimiento* money to Antonio, the amounts requested are different from those the *alcalde mayor* actually loaned. In addition, the total sum requested in all the letters combined is less than that which the *alcalde* ultimately advanced. One would imagine that had the official forged the notes, he would have sought a more perfect match between the letters and the real situation.

<sup>55</sup> *Natural de Teotitlán del Camino contra su alcalde mayor sobre cuentas del repartimiento*, AGEO, R.I., II, Leg. 1, exp. 7, 1788.

widow from the district of Huizo, Bernarda González, solicited a *repartimiento* advance of money against her harvest of corn because, as she testified in 1811, 'I was motivated by need... to support myself and my children [and so] I asked [the *alcalde mayor*] for six fanegas worth which he gladly gave me... giving me nine reales per fanega... He didn't want to give me more but finding myself with no alternative, I had to take them.'<sup>56</sup> González states unambiguously that she sought a *repartimiento* owing to economic forces, not political ones.

Juan José Benites, a native of San Mateo Sindihui in the jurisdiction of Teozacoalco, Nochixtlán, testified that in 1806 'seeing that my *alcalde mayor* was making *repartimientos* for cochineal as always has been the custom at the rate of twelve *reales*... I went to him to ask for twenty pounds worth'. Benites added that he later requested two additional cochineal *repartimientos*.<sup>57</sup>

Mateo Méndez of Santiago Matalán, in the district of Teotitlán del Valle, noted that in 1792 he requested a *repartimiento* loan to produce 12 pounds of cochineal and to buy a team of oxen, but the *alcalde mayor* refused to make the loan until Méndez first paid debts from a past *repartimiento*. Other peasants from Teotitlán del Valle testified in 1789 that the *alcalde mayor* advanced money to cochineal producers who were 'good payers'.<sup>58</sup> As well as his knowledge of consumers permitted him, the *alcalde mayor* withheld *repartimiento* credit from peasants believed to be greater risks. Far from being forced, some peasants were denied *repartimientos*.

The community of Santo Tomás Mazaltepec, located in the Marquesado del Valle, also sought oxen through the *repartimiento*. When in 1792 they went to the town of Cuilapa to obtain *repartimiento* oxen, they refused them owing to their 'fatal' condition. Only after the price was lowered and they were granted a longer than normal time to repay did they accept the animals. Not only did they freely accept them, but they bargained for a better price.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, in 1770 the *principales* of the town of Santiago Xilotepec in the jurisdiction of Nexapa submitted an urgent request to the *alcalde mayor* of Nexapa requesting a *repartimiento* of money to be repaid in cochineal, because, they claimed, they needed to pay their 'offering, tribute and other

<sup>56</sup> *Los naturales de Huitzgo contra el subdelegado por repartimientos ilegales*, AGEO, R.I., II, Leg. 14, Exp. 5, 1811.

<sup>57</sup> *Contra el alcalde mayor de Teozacoalco por un natural de su jurisdicción*, AGEO, R.I., II, Leg. 13, exp. 2, 1810.

<sup>58</sup> *Un natural de Tlacolula contra el alcalde mayor de Teotitlán del Valle*, AGEO, R.I., II, Leg. 2, exp. 20, 1789.

<sup>59</sup> *Naturales contra el alcalde mayor del Marquesado porqué cobra con violencia*, AGEO, R.I., II, Leg. 4, exp. 13, 1795.

things'. Strapped for cash, the village elites turned to their *alcalde mayor* and his system of *repartimiento*, and they requested a loan. Economic need drove the Indians into the credit market. In this particular case, the *alcalde mayor* was unwilling to loan the funds because his term in office was soon to expire and, he insisted, this would make collection of the debt too difficult. Notifying his authorities, the *alcalde mayor* warned that economic conditions were so dire that not even the Indians' subsistence was guaranteed. If no additional *repartimiento* were made soon, he warned, the Indians might even rebel.<sup>60</sup>

The court cases cited in this article, of course, were unusual. These had been *repartimientos* that had required the involvement of parties normally extraneous to the procedure. During the period 1750–1821, hundreds of thousands of *repartimientos* were made by the *alcaldes mayores* of Oaxaca which were received and repaid without any dispute or resistance. It was the latter, the undocumented *repartimientos*, which were typical.

### *Conclusions*

An *alcalde mayor* sought his political post for one reason – he hoped to grow rich from the operation of his *repartimientos* and depart from his district a wealthy man. Undoubtedly many succeeded. Remunerative economic activities, however, are not evidence of coercion. Historians have traditionally portrayed the *repartimiento* as a forced system of production and consumption because they have failed to scrutinise its operation closely. In fact, the *repartimiento* was merely a system of credit designed to operate in a risky, institutionally underdeveloped, colonial environment. The *repartimiento* reduced transaction costs, the cost of debt collection, to a level which made profitable the provision of credit. Spanish officials usually enjoyed high returns, but also risked the total loss of their principal. Given the riskiness, it is no surprise that the most successful *alcaldes mayores* employed ruthless debt collectors.

The vast majority of Indians in colonial Mexico were poor, in part because of the socio-economic and legal limitations placed on them by the colonial state. This poverty made necessary the acquisition of credit to enable them to participate more widely in the marketplace, both as producers and consumers. Eighteenth-century Oaxacan peasants desired credit just as poor people do in all societies,<sup>61</sup> and they encountered

<sup>60</sup> AGN, *Alcaldes Mayores*, Tomo 1, no. 42, 62–7, 1770.

<sup>61</sup> This was the point made by Bauer, 'Rural workers in Spanish America', and other historians who revised our understanding of debt patronage two decades ago. Institutions like the *repartimiento* have been developed in other societies to meet the credit needs of peasants. See, for example, Scott's description of the Malaysian credit system of *padi kunka* in Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p. 15. Bradford Barham and Oliver Coomes, 'Wild Rubber: Industrial Organization and the Microeconomies of Extraction

*alcaldes mayores* eager to profit during their 5-year posts and willing to finance their production and consumption. *Repartimiento* credit, however, was not cheap. Reflecting the riskiness of such loans, the Spanish officials charged high rates of interest (built into the *repartimiento* price) in an effort to offset the high level of debtor default.<sup>62</sup> Only the *alcaldes mayores* extended such loans, because only they possessed the judicial authority needed to help ensure that debtors fulfilled their obligations. True, peasants paid higher prices for goods and sold their output at below market price. This, however, was the cost of receiving credit. In exchange for the immediate use of money or goods, borrowers naturally paid a premium.

Credit has its opposite side: debt. Often peasants experienced difficulties in extricating themselves from the burden of their debt. It was not in the interest of an *alcalde mayor* to permit (let alone force) a peasant to take more credit than he or she could easily repay, for this increased the propensity of default and exposed the lender to the loss of his principal. Nonetheless, *alcaldes mayores* frequently did have difficulty collecting their *repartimiento* debts, and, unsympathetic to the plights of debtors, resorted to violent means to collect their debts. In addition to imprisoning debtors or confiscating their belongings, occasional rumours suggested that an *alcalde mayor* beat up or even whipped a debtor. While despicable, such offences were exceptional, not the rule. In the overwhelming majority of *repartimientos*, loans or goods were received and debts were repaid without violence.

Historians have misinterpreted such debt collection techniques, among other factors, as evidence that the *alcaldes mayores* forced *repartimiento* loans upon Indians, concluding that market-oriented behaviour on the part of indigenous Mexicans was coerced. Such a conclusion ignores the fact that Mexicans were not loath to trade, having participated in markets long before the arrival of Spaniards. Moreover, these depictions fail to demonstrate from where the *alcalde mayor* obtained such force. The Spanish officials operated their *repartimientos* with the help of two or three

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During the Amazon Rubber Boom (1860–1920)', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 26 (1994), pp. 37–72 show that the ostensibly coercive debt-merchandise contract of the Amazon instead developed as the best solution to the high-risk environment in which it operated.

<sup>62</sup> Rates of return on *repartimiento* loans were good, but not extraordinary. While individual transactions often yielded simple returns of 50–100 per cent, the overall return on the *alcalde mayor*'s entire principal, the funds invested into his business dealings, was much lower, the result of the high level of delayed debt collection and debtor default. For a detailed discussion of debtor default including estimates of returns on investments, see Baskes, 'Indians, Merchants, and Markets', ch. 5.

assistants who lacked the power to force Indians to produce and consume. Nor could the *alcalde mayor* depend on the backing of an authoritarian state. The colonial state was weak and could not regularly impose its will in indigenous areas of Mexico. Furthermore, the Crown's position towards the *repartimiento* was ambivalent and at times antagonistic, which meant that the *alcalde mayor* could not always even rely on the aid of an ineffectual state but had to operate clandestinely. In short, *alcaldes mayores* did not have, nor did they need, sufficient power to coerce Indians to participate in the market. Indians accepted *repartimientos* voluntarily.