

The politics of print: the historiography of the book in early Spanish America.

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## **The Politics of Print: The Historiography of the Book in Early Spanish America**

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The Politics of Print

The Historiography of the Book in Early Spanish America

# Hortensia Calvo

The history of book studies for early Spanish America (1492-1820s) has followed a different path from that of northern Europe and the English-speaking world. Rather than stemming from the methods and concerns of the *Annales* school of social history in the 1950s and 1960s, modern approaches to the book in Spanish America can be traced to the 1930s, or perhaps earlier, when research into the institutional context of the transatlantic book trade altered prevailing conceptions of cultural life in the Spanish colonies. Since that time, most scholarship on the printed word for this period in the region has largely expanded on the findings of the modern founders of the discipline. With some notable exceptions, research into the social impact of printing or evolving trends in print culture has not been a major focus. Instead, the literature centers primarily on documenting the exportation of books from Spain to the New World and assessing the role of printed works in the dissemination of European ideas. In the past decade, new theoretical perspectives in the field of early Spanish American studies have generated a healthy critique of the cultural authority of the Western book in the New World. Alternate avenues of inquiry seek to capture more fully the range of printed and nonprinted forms of communication in colonial Spanish America, including those of native origin. **[End Page 277]** The purpose of this essay is to survey recent scholarship on the book for early Spanish America while sketching out some historical contours for understanding the present state of the discipline.

## I. Historical Contours and Foundations

When considering book studies for the region as a whole, some preliminary observations on the establishment of printing and the nature of print culture during the Spanish American colonial period are in order. Printing was established in different parts of the region over the course of four centuries. The printing press was brought first to Mexico City (1539) and then to Lima (1581), which remained the only two printing centers in the Spanish territories of the New World until one hundred years later, when the first presses were brought to Puebla (1640) and Guatemala (1660).<sup>1</sup> The rest of the region did not have printing presses until the eighteenth century: in the remote Jesuit missions of Paraguay, printing began in 1700, when a press was constructed with local materials by native Guaraní laborers who had converted to Christianity. The first Havana imprint is from 1707, and in Santafé de Bogotá printing did not begin until 1736, exactly two hundred years after the city was founded. Most Spanish colonial cities, such as Quito (1759) and Buenos Aires (1780), did not have presses until the latter half of the eighteenth century. Printing began in Caracas (1808) in the early nineteenth century; a press functioned briefly in 1776 in Santiago de Chile but, like San José and most Central American cities, printing was not established permanently until after independence from Spain. Thus the bulk of research on colonial books concerns sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico City and Lima, the two cities with the longest typographical traditions.<sup>2</sup> As the cultural and political epicenters of the Spanish empire in the Americas until the mid-eighteenth century, Mexico and Lima were also the major distribution points for imported European books.<sup>3</sup> Very few studies have focused on the social history of print in the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century on the eve of independence, as we shall see below.

In the colonies, the printing press served the ideological, political, and administrative purposes of Spain. The first presses were brought to Mexico City and Lima for the explicit purpose of aiding missionaries in the Christianization of native populations. Thus multilingual catechisms, instructional religious tracts, grammars, and vocabularies of Amerindian languages were the main products of early colonial presses. As the sixteenth century wore on, the Crown's initial preoccupation with the moral and spiritual welfare of..

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### THE POLITICS OF PRINT



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in Early Spanish America

*Hortensia Calvo*

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