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How might present-day inequalities be linked to colonialism? Discuss with reference to a specific example.

This essay recognises 'present-day inequality' as the unequal distribution and access to economic resources, political power, and legal protection across social groups. Lorenzo Veracini defines colonialism as the establishment and maintenance of an unequal relationship between a colonial metropole and a colonized territory through violence. Following this definition, this essay will argue that Spanish colonial rule in Mexico entrenched racialised hierarchies through its production of legal, political, and economic institutions structured to disadvantage Indigenous people. Whilst the Spanish empire had formally ended in the nineteenth century, the institutional hierarchies which colonial rule had imposed persisted post-independence, shaping patterns of land ownership, political exclusion, and uneven legal protection. Therefore, this essay will demonstrate how present-day inequality in Mexico cannot be understood without exploring its roots in Spanish colonial past by examining how colonial law alongside political and economic structures have perpetuated Mexican racial inequality.

Spanish colonialism in Mexico constructed a legal order which formally recognised Indigenous humanity, whilst simultaneously integrating the racial hierarchy within the structure of governance. The New Laws of the 1542, influenced by the advocacy of Bartolomé de las Casas, were promulgated under Charles V to protect the Indigenous people by eliminating the worst abuses of the *encomienda* system. This included measures such as forbidding the enslavement of Indigenous people and reducing the power of *encomiendas*, which were a system rewarding conquistadors with forced Indigenous labour. As Lewis Hanke argues, Las Casas was central to Spain's thinking, as he framed Indigenous peoples as rational and capable of Christian conversion and

political community. However, Anthony Pagden alleges that Las Casas won the philosophical argument but lost the deeper institutional battle of transforming the underlying institutions of colonial rule. As Molly Borowitz acknowledged, the measures taken within the New Laws of 1542 were not unprecedented and the Crown had included many of them in their previous decrees. In fact, the formal nature of the New Laws allowed Charles V to preserve his right of exclusive domain over his American territories by trading papal privilege for a smoother path towards popular governance. Consequently, a legal culture whereby Indigenous communities possessed formal protections but lacked institutional support was fostered. In addition to these reforms, colonial authorities categorised individuals using the Casta system, according to ancestry, which caused a disproportionate depreciation in the quality of life of Indigenous people. In 2022, 65.2% of Indigenous Mexicans lived in poverty, compared with the much lower 33.1% of non-Indigenous Mexicans. These disparities reflect the long-term institutional marginalisation of Indigenous communities, which are rooted in colonial hierarchies which restricted their access to land and political authority. Moreover, the colonial casta system which underpinned most of the Spanish Empire's rule legally categorised individuals by ancestry, determining that Indigenous people deserved one of the lowest statuses in society. This normalisation of a racial hierarchy has arguably contributed to social stratification even post-independence; Indigenous communities currently experience persistent disadvantages in education, health, and access to public services. Notably, the Human Development Index of Indigenous people is declining at a rapid rate, whilst the proportion of Indigenous people who are below the food poverty line is exponentially increasing. This emphasises how the impact of the subordination of the Indigenous people under the Casta system has manifested itself into current Mexican society, reinforcing patterns of marginalisation emphasised by colonial racial hierarchies. This is exacerbated by the enduring social stigma which Spanish colonialism has left behind as the negative perceptions of Indigenous pueblos as poor, low-status neighbourhoods have resulted in a cycle of continuous underinvestment and unequal provision of public goods. During the 19th and 20th centuries, infrastructure and public services were concentrated in wealthier parts of the city, which left the pueblos and other peripheral areas devoid of support and aid to increase the Indigenous standard of living. This exclusion reflects earlier colonial

patterns in which Indigenous communities were segregated and excluded from centres of political and economic power, therefore consolidating the pueblos' status as low-value and undeserving neighbourhoods, rife with prominent levels of poverty and marginalisation faced by the Indigenous people.

Beyond legal hierarchy, Spanish colonial rule created a hierarchical political system in which authority went from the Crown through peninsular officials, systematically excluding Indigenous people from having the ability to make substantial change within their homeland. The independence of Mexico in 1821 did not dismantle this structure and instead criollo elites inherited and adapted the frameworks established during colonial rule, entrenching patterns of exclusion that continuously shape present-day inequality in Mexico. One key feature of Spanish colonial political institutions was an extractivist logic based on mining and silver transfers for the benefit of the colonial metropolis, which had always been the reasoning behind Spanish governance. The imposition of the Viceroyalty of New Spain allowed for the authority of the Spanish Crown to be territorially enforced, meaning that the elite now had control over the Indigenous lands which enabled them to further marginalise them within their own territory. The Viceroyalty of New Spain formalised this structure by subordinating Indigenous communities and recentralising control to ensure that political authority remained with the non-Indigenous elite. Ultimately, governance was undemocratic and not participatory by the Indigenous people, therefore reducing their political power and voice in society. Another key feature of Spanish colonial political institutions was racialised political exclusion. The social stratification which the *casta* system introduced meant that high offices were primarily reserved for *peninsulares* (Spanish-born) and indigenous communities were subordinate to them in terms of political power and weren't integrated into imperial decision-making. For instance, the *limpieza de sangre* (*blood purity*) laws required individuals to prove descent from 'Old Christians' to differentiate them from *conversos*. Eventually, they merged with the emergence of the *casta* system and the racial hierarchy, subsequently introducing a pigmentocracy to marginalise the Indigenous people and serving as a singular component of hierarchical classification. As a result, political power became racially

stratified and Indigenous people having disproportionately low levels of influence in politics even within their own Mexican homeland. This racial stratification of power limited the scope of postcolonial reform and has maintained its significance in Mexican politics even post-independence; approximately 19.4% of Mexico's population is composed of Indigenous people, yet they are underrepresented in political leadership. Oaxaca is the only state out of 31 which constitutionally recognises the political autonomy of Indigenous communities using the *usos y costumbres* system. This highlights how the subordination and undermining of Indigenous authority at the hands of racial power stratification placed structural constraints on Indigenous power within their own homeland but also emphasises the post-independence endurance of community autonomy. Moreover, *Transparency International* rank Mexico as the 27th most corrupt country in the world. This suggests that the way colonial governance structured institutions around elite dominance and centralised authority means that present-day Mexican public trust in institutions is low due to the persistent institutional inequality and representation of Indigenous people in the political sphere. Thus, present-day inequality in Mexico can be understood by the institutional marginalisation of Indigenous people in Mexico with regards to political positions of power.

In addition, Spanish colonial rule distorted Mexican economics by focusing primarily on extraction as opposed to development, which changed land ownership, labour systems and regional developments in a way that enabled inequality to be engrained in the Mexican economy. The economy of New Spain revolved around silver production, particularly in regions such as Zacatecas and Guanajuato, where there were extensive silver deposits. This led to a mining boom which continued for centuries, and the wealth generated from the Mexican mines became foundational to the local economy and the broader Spanish empire; Mexico was now integrated into mainland Spain's imperial trade network. However, labour systems such as the *encomienda*, and later the *repartimiento* enabled colonial elites to assign Indigenous people to *encomenderos* for tribute and force them into coerced labour, which emphasised how New Spain's economy was based on the forced labour of the Indigenous and pioneered a framework of racial hierarchy in the economic sphere. The *encomienda* facilitated the

consolidation of economic power in the hands of the Spanish settlers, particularly through granting the conquistadors authority over Indigenous populations to extract tribute and labour. Moreover, the hacienda system subordinated Indigenous communities economically through debt peonage, whereby labourers were kept in a state of perpetual debt to the landowner despite theoretically being free. Rather than encouraging domestic development, colonial economic institutions emphasised mineral extraction and elite agricultural production for external markets. Consequently, wealth was accumulated primarily by the upper echelons of Mexican society, whilst Indigenous people were structurally confined to low wages or tremendous amounts of debt to landowners. This structural disadvantage did not reach its end after Mexican independence; Liberal reforms in the 19th century, such as the Ley Lerdo, which dismantled the economic power of corporate entities by forcing them to sell properties not directly used for their operations. This accelerated Indigenous dispossession through the introduction of marketisation, therefore leading Indigenous people deprived of land and status as a result of economic restructuring. In addition, the ejido system was introduced following the Mexican Revolution, which represented the government's attempt to fight the historical accumulation of land in the hands of the few by granting land to groups of farmers for agricultural use rather than private property. Despite over half of Mexico being held under ejido or community land tenure, this system did not fully eliminate structural inequality as patterns of regional social inequality are still rife in present-day Mexico. Southern states with high indigenous populations, notably Oaxaca, consistently document some of the highest poverty rates in Mexico. This reflects how current regional disparities are rooted in colonial economic organisation which were designed around extraction and the concentration of land ownership amongst the elite, which disproportionately impact Indigenous communities. While present-day inequalities cannot be attributed solely to colonial structures, the extractivist logic which underpinned colonial Spanish rule established an institutional framework of unequal wealth and infrastructure distribution.

In summary, whilst Mexican present-day inequality cannot be intrinsically linked to Spanish colonial rule, the establishment of institutional control and frameworks profoundly altered political, legal, and economic development, which

disproportionately impacted the human rights of Indigenous Mexicans. Therefore, legal hierarchy, political institutions and economic structures all worked in tandem to craft the enduring structural effects of exclusionary institutions that have shaped the conditions under which present-day Mexican had developed post-independence.