

A300, Spring 2008, Writing Assignment #1, Sample Paper #1

“Few Anglos would consider either one [Spanish Inquisition and Spanish nation] to have been part of the modern experience. In our eyes Spain and particularly the Inquisition would represent just the opposite: examples of the horrors, of the barbaric irrationalities, of the cruelty and ruthlessness people were forced to endure before our way of life claimed victory over the planet” (Modern Inquisitions, 222). Yet in Irene Silverblatt’s book *Modern Inquisition*, she argues that the Spanish Inquisition proves to be a modern institution and furthermore that it is the basis for modern “Western” barbarism found in the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries. The Inquisition made it easier for modern and civilized cultures to embrace barbarism by introducing dominance of a master race who used bureaucratic rule and rationality to justify and organize their actions, so as to appear more civilized. To understand her thesis better, exploring key terms she uses throughout her writings is helpful.

Superiority- “The way we express cultural differences or ‘otherness,’ Coronil argued, must be understood historically; that is, in relation to the political and economic disparities kindled by Western dominance. The ‘hierarchization of cultural difference’- the fantasy making the West both superior to and isolated from the rest- is embedded in global geopolitics” (MI, 16).

Inquisitors were given the task of defining and certifying Spanish “purity of blood” (lack of Jewish or Moorish ancestry) and were therefore able to form, through this race thinking, this superior social caste, which declared the Spaniards as a superior nation.

Violence- “violence is as much a part of our Western legacy as the most uplifting of civilization’s values [...] violence and civilization: they are inseparable” (MI, 14). Furthermore, Silverblatt states that violence and reason are coupled as well, explaining that nations go through great lengths to hide and deny this relationship, but “all those ‘legal niceties’ that are part of the

‘necessary attempts to rationalize violence.’” prove the interwoven dependency violence and reason have on each other. Inquisitors did not use a claim of a divine right to excuse their horrific behavior (as many traditional, pre-modern societies would have), they instead appealed to reason, public good, and national security to justify their actions, much like a modern state.

Social Categorization- People were given broad racial classifications to distinguish and label them by the Peruvian government; Native Americans and their descendants were called Indians, Iberians and their descendents were Spanish, and once the Indian population began to decrease heavily, a third category of Negros came about from the formation of slavery. “as authorities were soon to realize, colonial realities could not be contained within colonial categories, and “hybrid” racial classes (like mestizo, mulato, and sambo) entered the Spanish political ken” (MI, 5). A Spanish legal theorist categorized the classes in a simple caste system of espanol, indio, and negro, with mixtures of the three considered as well.

Race- “Spain divided conquered peoples into corporate groups- Spanish, Indian, black- each with associated rights, privileges, and obligations. [...] caste is understood to be a legal or social construct at heart” (MI, 17). They understood race to be a biological question, based on ancestry, which supposedly made it unlike a caste system and separated it from social and political constructions, yet Silverblatt describes the relation between race and caste as “interpenetrating” ideals. She explains that these two constructions of divisions among people worked together to create a social hierarchy based on lineage and descent. In Spain, the word ‘Spaniard’ “defined a unifying experience for all colonizers, gave that experience substance as an ‘unmixed race,’ and portrayed the kingdom and people as God’s chosen over all others” (MI, 20). As is apparent, the Spaniards were the pure and desired race.

Bureaucracy- A distinction is made between traditional and modern bureaucracies, with traditional ones being “mired in patronage and chosen without regard to merit, were corrupted, biased, partisan” while modern ones were, “professional, rationally organized, impartial, and impersonal” (MI, 8-9). For many scholars, they place the birth of modern bureaucracies in either the nineteenth or seventeenth century, but do not consider the sixteenth century Spanish Inquisition. Silverblatt does, however, which can be seen when she explains it as, “Not only absorbed by rules and regulations, not only structured by offices in a clear hierarchy of command, the Inquisition’s mandate extended to all members of society, regardless of social standing, wealth or power [...] In this sense, the Inquisition was the empire’s fairest court” (MI, 6).

National security- The Spanish Inquisition was formed for the purpose of protecting its nation from “the undermining of the Spanish state; first by Judaizers, and then by all manner of heretics” (MI,6) The state used this threat to national security to justify holding inquisitions to determine “who, among the colony’s non-Indiana populace, held beliefs or engaged in life practices that were considered threats to the colony’s moral and civic well-being” (MI, 7). This shows that the Spaniards felt their nation was in danger if anyone of non-Spanish heritage tried to poison their country with other cultures.