

Revista humanidades

Enero-Junio, 2015 • Volumen 5, Número 1 • ISSN 2215-3934 • pp. 1-23

From Columbus to globalism: The construction of western hegemony

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15517/h.v5i1.19387 Recibido: 23-Abril-2014 / Aceptado: 20-Junio-2014

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El proceso de Globalización que vivimos hoy en día nos ha puesto frente a la necesidad de estudiar la historia en términos de procesos globales -vale decir, aquellos que se verifican en el nivel de lo global-, no solamente como una descripción de acontecimientos, sino desde un enfoque científico y analítico. Este proceso -hasta ahora único en la historia humana- ha estado caracterizado por una integración de mercados internacionales, un desarrollo sin precedentes de la tecnología particularmente de la informática-, una geopolítica gobernada por la interacción de bloques económicos, y por la emergencia de una cultura global. No encontramos hasta 1492 la existencia de un mercado mundial que verdaderamente integre a todos los continentes del planeta por primera vez en la historia bajo un estilo de civilización llamado la modernidad. Este nuevo estilo de civilización estará caracterizado por un modelo racional de pensamiento y una forma racionalizada de dirigir la economía y la política, que luego sería conocido como el Estado Moderno, quién generará una reorganización de la estructura de los intercambios globales a favor de Europa como centro rector del mundo. La modernidad se convierte en el máximo modelo de evolución, desarrollo y progreso mundial que se impone todas las otras culturas del planeta.

Resumen

Palabras clave: Globalización, hegemonía occidental, Historia, tecnología.

Abstract

The process of Globalization we live today has put us in front of the necessity of studying History in terms of global processes -namely those that verify themselves in the world level-, not only as a description of events, but from an analytical and scientific approach. This process -so far unique in human history- has been characterized by an integration of international markets, an unprecedented development of technology -particularly the computer science-, a geopoliticsgoverned by the interaction of economic blocks, and the emergence of a global culture. We do not find the existence until 1492, the real unification of the world in terms of markets, because this is the first attempt of constructing a hegemonic global form of civilization that has been called the "Modernity." This new style of civilization will be characterized by a rational model of thought and a rationalized form of managing economy and politics, the latter known as the Modern State, who will reorganice of global exchange structures in favour of Europe occurs, as the ruling center of the world, and stays in position to impose its Modernity to the other cultures of the planet. Modernity becomes the foremost model of evolution, development and global progress which impose to the other cultures of the planet.

Keywords: Globalization, western hegemony, History, technology. Contemporary human societies have been experiencing, from the end of the 20th century on, a unique process in History. Many aspects of human life, ranging form development models to world visions and ways of thinking, considered valid up until recent times, have been put into question.

In this context, an important issue that is being intensely discussed in academic and political forums worldwide is the Globalization process. It is turned visible on a daily basis by the dominant discourse of governments and mass media. But, first and foremost, it is a fact that affects lives of people intensely and, sometimes, even devastatingly, all over the world.

The process of Globalization, as we know it today, started during the 1980's as a result of the economic crisis suffered by the industrialized world powers. This process possesses many aspects. First of all, and this is probably its most visible and primary feature, Globalization is characterized by an integration of international markets, but has also implied an unprecedented development of technology –particularly the computer science-, a geopolitics governed by the interaction of economic blocks, and the emergence of a global culture.

All this has put us in front of the necessity of studying History in terms of global processes -namely those that verify themselves in the world level-, and not only in particular regions or countries.

Of course this study has to be assumed not only as a description of events, but from an analytical and scientific approach –which implies the use of a solid theoretical frame-, that aims to find a global explanation of social processes. Concepts such as geopolitics of empires, cultural hybridization, rise and fall of civilizations, systems of beliefs and so on, would acquire a thoroughly different dimension if faced within such a perspective. Inevitably, a so conceived World History can only be understood as a process of contact between civilizations.

Introduction

In consequence, this article aims to show the advantages of conceiving World History as a History of social processes that happen in the world level, in long term spans of time and in terms of relationships and interactions. Its particular field of study will be human civilizations as a concept, but the explanation will be made through the exposition of some particular examples that show how to analyze global processes. Concretely, the main goal will be to apply this to the specific case of Spanish America at the Age of the Discoverers and to propose some hypothesis to interpret World History from this particular case.

As we suggested some lines above, World History has been defined as the History of social processes that occur in the world level. Meanwhile, Global History is typified as the History of worldwide processes that happen during the specific nowadays Globalization process1. This implies a difference of concept, and demands us to establish a distinction between what happens before and after the actual process.

The Globalization process of nowadays has been defined as a new development model, characterized by the rule of transnational economy, based on financial capital, and driven by computer science. This kind of economy, supported by technology has made some scholars to speak about a process of "world trade in real time²." Moreover, this development model has been promoted by powerful elites and *think tanks* on the world level, and is closely associated to a particular economic paradigm that has been called "neoliberalism." All of this is profoundly and significantly different from any other similar processes of economic and cultural interdependence in human history.

However, taking this statements as a starting point, it seems logical that, in order to have a process like this, there has to be previous conditions. For instance, to have a globalized world market there has to be a world market first. The same can be said about culture, and so on. When does this kind of processes start?

Many processes of cultural and economic exchange and interdependence have taken place during human history. These processes determine the emergence of world-systems, as have been proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, or world economies as have been analysed by Fernand Braudel, and they exist nearly since the very origins of civilization. Consequently, these dynamics cannot be understood but as processes of contact and interaction between civilizations.

One can mention, as examples of this, the contacts between the Roman Empire and the China of the Han dynasty through the Silk Route. This is also the case of ancient Egypt, where there are very early proofs of the existence of commercial relations with distant peoples such as Palestine and Mesopotamia, a fact that has been documented as far back as in the pre-dynastic period (c3250 BC)³. Trade between ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro has been documented as well, dating back at least to 2500 years BC. Ancient empires also built world economies and geopolitical relations by interacting with each other, such was the case of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and the Hittites by 1200 BC. Meanwhile others were world economies in themselves like the Persians, Greeks and Romans.

In fact, the conflictive relationships that existed between the civilizations of the past, along with the contacts and interdependences they held in the economic and cultural fields, led the ancients to think of creating a unified world empire, able to put an end to the conflicts. This tried to be done through attempts like the *Pax Romana* or the creation of a universal empire held together by Hellenistic culture, as it was conceived by Alexander the Great.

Also, empires in the Middle Ages such as the expansion of the mongols under Genghis Khan, Bizantium or the Arabic Umayyad Caliphate, acted as world systems since they put in relation many distinct and distant regions. The same can be said of the pilgrim routes or the extended caravan networks travelling all the

way form places like Cordoba, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Damascus, Bagdad, Calcuta, Samarcand, Chang'an and Tombuctu, during the medieval times.

These contacts, as we say, were not merely economic, but also cultural and knowledge-related. To exemplify this, it suffices to think, for instance, about the idea that has proposed by archaeologists that hieroglyphic writing in ancient Egypt started as an influence of Mesopotamian cuneiform writing⁴. This implies that since the earliest times in human history, peoples and ideas have travelled from one civilization to another. This transit has been led mainly through commercial networks that are responsible of carrying not only material goods, but also symbols, practices and knowledge. Multiple, examples of intercultural exchanges held by the ancient societies that add further evidence of the extension of interconnections between civilizations since the earliest periods of History can be mentioned. For instance, we can think of the Mesopotamian symbols, present in Egyptian early art such as the case or the hero clothed on a semitic robe strangling two lions on the Gebel-El-Arak knife (dating from c3300 to 3200 BC), or the two long necked cats with their necks interwoven present on the Narmer palette (dating from about the 31st century BC)⁵.

We may also talk about Greek cities being built in the Near East and Egypt during the Hellenistic period, and syncretic Greco-Egyptian gods -such as Serapis or Isis- being adored in the Roman Empire. In fact, the expansion of Greek culture over Asia after the fall of the Persian Empire, produced such a surrealist process as the arrival of Greek art influence in India and the central Asian region of Gandhara. This influence gave place to the birth of an artistic school of Buddhist art intermingled with Greek influence, called the Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara. In fact, the Buddhas of Bamiyan, blown up by the afghan Taliban in 2001, were a creation of this school of art.

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Thus, one can observe that these processes of economic exchanges and cultural hybridization undoubtedly exist in human societies since the most ancient times.

Even in the Americas, dynamics of interconnection of civilizations can be found, for instance, in the circuits of commerce established between northern and southern cultures. It has been documented by the archaeology that an extensive trade system, put to work through the navigation of rafts, covered long distance trips from South to North America in the pre-Hispanic times. Scholars have pointed out that Peruvian Chimú culture practiced an extended maritime trade through the use of coastal rafts, that reached out far away territories such as Panama, Costa Rica and even Mexico. The trips of Chimú merchants to Mexico are reputed to have introduced metallurgy to the Mesoamerican cultures⁶. Coastal rafts were also used on the Caribbean coast, probably by indigenous cultures other than Chimú. Even Christopher Columbus documented in his travel diaries to have run into a raft like this when he travelled the Central American Caribbean coast during his fourth trip to the Americas⁷.

Also, archaeologists have documented the existence of broad exchange networks in the region now called the Lower Central America, between indigenous chiefdoms that used to trade highly appreciated ceremonial goods such as stone, jade and gold objects⁸. Also, Mayan and Mexican merchants used to travel down south in order to obtain commercial and ceremonial goods such as quetzal feathers, gold, jade and others, attaining far away regions in the south of Central America9. In the 16th century, at their arrival to what we now call Costa Rica, for instance, the Spaniards document that a community of Mexican merchants called the "sicuas" (which means foreigners in the native language) by the local people, existed in the southern part of the future country, and were there to trade goods with the inhabitants of the region. That is why the Spanish conquistadors called the region the "valley of El Duy" or "the valley of the Mexicans."

However, none of these processes covered the entire world or had the entire planet as its field of action. Social processes verified in the level of the whole world and thus, the rise of a true World History does not happen until the moment in which humanity lives in a really unified world, where all civilizations and cultures have a real possibility of interact with each other, creating worldwide extended trade and cultural networks. This moment is the discovery of the Americas.

After 1492, new processes risen in the world level allow us to think for the first time in a truly planetary scale. The Americas are for the first time, connected to Eurasia and Africa (Oceania will add up later) creating a single world system of exchange. This is an element that neither the Romans, the Greeks, the Mongols or the American indigenous civilizations had at their time.

New processes happen ever since the Age of the Discoverers that will significantly transform the dynamics in which human societies were used to function until then. With a unified planet functioning as a whole, everything changed thoroughly and forever in a process that had never happened before, and definitely will not happen again. Before 1492, there were virtually two worlds within the same planet. From this moment on, we literally have two planets that unite in a single world. This represents the rise of the first historical processes happening in a real world level.

As we have exposed, many world-system type of processes have happened in the past, but this is the first time mankind had one system like this really covering the whole extension of the Earth and, therefore creating a real world market, as well as a unification process of the planet in many aspects. Thus, since a precondition to nowadays Globalization is the existence of a world market, one can say that the discovery and conquest of the Americas represents the earliest antecedent of the processes that are happening today, since this is the time when the first world market deserving to be named as such appears¹⁰.

Ever since that time, everything on planet Earth will start to relate to European expansion.

As a matter of fact, this first unification of the world was caused by the trips of discovery launched by the Europeans during the Modern Era. Therefore, it was made following European interests, and implied the colonization of other regions of the world by the colonial European powers. A reorganization of the global structures of exchange to the profit of Europe then occurs and this continent will dominate extended portions of the planet. This will make it stand in position to impose its culture to other civilizations. From this moment on, the West stands up as the ruling center of the world.

In fact, as a result of this, the image of a Eurocentric world, unified in European terms emerged, carrying with it the idea of a European world power. Dutch cartographer Gerardus Mercator offered us, through his map of 1569, the image of a complete world with Europe on the top right side and utterly oversized. This happened like that since Mercator's projection of the sphere on a flat surface tends to expand the extremes, making look bigger what is located near the poles. So, as the top and right side of objects were considered by Christian western culture as associated to good, heaven and light, Europe appeared in Mercator's map as the continent naturally called to rule over the others, because of the superiority of its culture. This was used to justify Europe's recently acquired world hegemony. The map is the companion to the empire, it has been said. Mercatorian projection is still being reproduced today¹¹.

Actually, many authors point out that this rise of European power to the foremost position in the world can be understood as a transit to a whole new way of living in civilization, that operated in Europe at this time, which is known as "Modernity." This new form of civilization was related to a new pattern of thinking that has

to do with the rationalization of all spheres of human life. With the fall of feudal regime during the 14th and 15th centuries, a new way of thinking based primarily on reason took form, leading society, on one hand, to the centralization of state and, on the other to the adoption of a rationalized economy with technology applied to production¹². The rationalized system that emerged from there reached its peak with the 19th and 20th century industrial society. However, its most important feature, namely the rational thought, started taking form several centuries before. So, it becomes visible that the components of this new pattern of life did not evolve all together, but in different rhythms.

Octavio Ianni, Brazilian sociologist, has proposed that ever since western civilization took a predominant role in the world -something that happens during the Age of the Discoverers-, Modernity becomes the symbol of development, evolution and progress. Thus, all other civilizations have been influenced, submitted or challenged by this vision¹³.

As a result of the evolution or European society and of its expansion as a colonialist power, European modern thought will spread all over the world, carried out by European colonialism of the Modern era. A world market will then appear, always under western European rule, and organized in western European terms. With it, the first world history will emerge as well. American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein proposes that the world system that appears after the discovery of America was structured through the interaction of three major regions: a colonial periphery characterized by forced labor and extractive economy, an intermediate region of colonial European powers that capture the benefits of colonial trade circuits, and a higher level –located in northern Europe- that received the financial benefits of colonial trade. On his side, Italian historian Ruggiero Romano has shown that there were rather multiple centers and peripheries in this context, that tended to experience global processes in a discontinuous way¹⁴. So, we should rather talk about a multi-centered economy at this time.

For centuries, this world-system lied largely on the Spanish fleet system. With trade routes being travelled by galleons transporting wealth extracted form the American colonial territories to the European metropolis, Spain became the spine of a new unification of the world in western terms¹⁵. The Spanish galleons travelled constantly from both sides of the Atlantic, bringing merchandises, people and ideas from Europe to the Americas, exchanging American silver and crops for European manufactured goods. This created a whole Spanish Atlantic System¹⁶. However, maritime commerce did not connect only Europe with America, it also put in contact America with Asia. Great amounts of Chinese silk and porcelain started filling the market of elite sumptuary goods in both Europe and Hispanic America, in exchange of silver from the mines of Potosí (in nowadays Bolivia), and New Spain (nowadays Mexico), actually ended up in China.

Soon other European powers appeared as well in the American scenery, and established themselves in significant portions of the continent. They also contributed to the birth of a world economy. The Portuguese rooted soon in what we now call Brazil. The British, French and Dutch invaded the Caribbean and North America, reaching up from the tropic to the cold lands of Canada. These rising world powers reacted against the Spanish rule of the seas granted by the popes. A massive springing out of piracy during the 17th and 18th centuries was the result of this rejection, and contributed to the rise of an economically unified world as well¹⁷.

The diaspora of European merchants all around the world and the thirst for labor force of the newly created extractive economy of the American colonial territories gave birth also to a new kind of diaspora, intended to fulfill the needs of plantation and mining production: the slave trade. It opened the way for the emergence of the so called "triangular trade", a circuit of commerce that aimed to bring slaves

form Africa to the Americas, in order to make them work and produce. The wealth so created would be sent later on to Europe, to finance the capture of more slaves, and thus reproduce the cycle. This dynamics established a triangle departing from Africa, all the way to America and then to Europe, only to get back to Africa and continue over again, producing a continuous feedback.

All these factors determined the emergence not only of a world market, but also of a geopolitics of empires. For instance, the Bourbon Reforms of 18th century Spain have been explained as the result of the struggle of Spain to rationalize the exploitation of its empire, in order to resist the attacks of other European powers and keep on being a first rate imperial country in the 18th century¹⁸. Even the Hispanic American independences have been explained as a result of processes operated in this geopolitics of empires as a part of a macro-cycle of Atlantic Revolutions¹⁹.

But the creation of a world market and of a world-level geopolitics carried out processes that go far beyond the merely economical structures. Spanish historian José Manuel Santos has proposed that this process of unification of global exchange structures after the 15th century covered many other areas²⁰.

An intense technological exchange, for instance, was held between the newly connected regions of the world. At first, this exchange came basically from east to west, bringing Chinese innovations such as paper and gunpowder to Europe. But soon this technological change took a west-east direction when navigation techniques, newly developed by European sailors, brought them to the Americas. Thus, technology made possible the conquest and colonization of America, where firearms, horses, iron weapons and European war tactics were used to submit the indigenous civilizations that totally ignored them. Moreover, an intense exchange of biological species takes place, bringing plants and animals of America all the way to Europe. One only has to think about the effect plants like tomato –of Mesoamerican origins- had on Italian food or how Andean potatoes served to lessen the effects of famines in Ireland or Eastern Europe during the modern times.

Maybe the most conspicuous effect of this exchange was the spread in the New World of European diseases that were harmless for the invaders but utterly lethal for the conquered, whose immunological system was not prepared at all to fight them. These diseases, such as small pox or pneumonia, killed up to 80 to 90% of the population in some regions²¹. This is the "microbial unification of the world" that French historian Emmanuel LeRoy-Ladurie talks about²². The microbes, along with the weapons and war tactics brought in by the Spaniards, combined to create a destructive force that led to the fall of the high civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes, in a process that American researcher Jared Diamond has synthesized in the title of his celebrated book Guns, Germs and Steel.

Finally, processes of global expansion had also cultural implications with the spread of ideas and art styles that had religion as its backdrop. Since the Middle Ages, Islam had an explosive spread all over Asia and so did Buddhism. Christianity expanded also powerfully form Europe to the Middle East with the crusades. However, during the Age of the Discoverers, emerged a new space of catholicity, oriented to the expansion and defense of Christian Catholic faith, and led mainly by the Roman Holy See and Spanish monarchy. This power network will promote the diffusion of Christianity to all corners of the world, taking America as its most outstanding laboratory of evangelization.

As a result, the European world powers traced the lines of a project of cultural integration of the world, under the rules of Christianity. This was proposed to be

done through the preaching of faith, but also through the diffusion of artistic styles destined to convey the messages of belief. First, Renaissance art was brought by the Europeans to all their colonies. Later, with the ascent of Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholic authorities felt the need to create an artistic style so great and so powerful that it showed all the greatness of their faith and the absolute of its truth would seem undisputable²³. This style was the Baroque, a style that retreived the features of classic art, but overcharging it with a great deal of ornaments, in order to express the human passions, exaltated to mysticism.

Baroque art was so exported to all corners of the Spanish empire in America, aiming to convince the new Native American and African believers of the power and greatness of Christian faith. The Portuguese also brought it to India, in their colonies of Goa. Baroque style became thus the first Atlantic culture. So, to the first economic, technological and biological unification of planet Earth added up also the first attempt of creating a hegemonic global culture in human History. One can only think of the magnificence or the side chapel of Mexico City cathedral, the emotive power of the Guatemalan imagery, or the expressivity of paintings of the Andean art workshops. The image of Italian Jesuit Mateo Ricci, showing a baroque harpsichord to Ming emperor Wanli in China in the year 1601, in order to convince him of the superiority of European music and then lead him to convert to Christianity, also comes to mind²⁴.

However, despite the fact that this new global culture pretended to be uniquely structured from the cultural stand point of the European masters, soon it started to exhibit the imprints of a multicultural dialogue. With indigenous, European and African elements mixing up in the New World and extended exchange networks spreading all over the Earth, cultures of the whole planet interacted and fertilized each other giving way to a process of cultural hybridization. Soon the Hispanic Baroque in America started to be filled with elements transposed

from the indigenous and African cultures, although indeed very limitedly and most times even surreptitiously. The images of chilli and corn cops sculpted by the native Mexicans in the Santa María de Tonanzintla chapel at Cholula, Mexico, the "guineas" and "negrillo" songs of Peruvian African slaves ²⁵, and the bas-reliefs representing chirimoyas –a kind of Andean fruits- in the colonial churches and noble houses of La Paz, Bolivia, speak to all us about this situations. Many have spoke about a "mestizo (half-blood) baroque" or an "Indian Baroque" in the Americas.

Thus, during the Age of the Discoverers a whole World system emerges, as it had never been known in history before. This process has even been cited as the broad scenery in which Hispanic-American Independences took place, as it has been analyzed by American historian John Tutino. This author has proposed that the system that emerged after the discovery of America was essentially a multicentered commercial capitalism in which coexisted many poles of development that set the rules of an interdependent global system²⁶. The most important poles of development of this extended world system were basically Europe and China, whose economies were largely dynamized by -and depending upon- silver imports. This made them become the biggest silver consumers in the world during the modern times. For the three centuries that lasted the Spanish colonization in the New World, this system was powered basically by the wealth provided by the silver mining production of Spain's two great viceroyalties: New Spain (now Mexico), and Peru. So, the interdependent world multi-centered commercial capitalism of the epoch lied largely on the pivot provided by Spanish America. From 1550 to 1640, this pivot was mainly situated in the viceroyalty of Peru. After 1700 and up until 1810, the Andean region was displaced as a main nucleus of silver production by the New Spain (now Mexico), as the southern viceroyalty endured a process of impoverishment. This made Mexico become the richest one of the Spanish colonies in the New World.

Sugar and slave trade were also pivots of European commerce at the time. This was valid especially for other European powers such as France, whose economy depended extensively (even up to 50%) upon this wealth source. England, on its side, leaned also very powerfully on slave and sugar trade of the Caribbean, a circuit that was managed from Britain's thirteen colonies in North America (later the United States). This circuit of wealth circulation was, in fact, financing the beginning of the industrial era in the Great Britain.

By 1750, as Chinese silver demand diminished, the European world powers increased their demand of the metal in order to obtain more silver to trade it for Chinese goods. This carried on a period of great economic growth to the powerful Spanish viceroyalty of Mexico. This stimulated global trade, but also created a strong rivalry among European powers, that competed to have access to Mexican silver. These rivalries would lead to the first Independence process in the Americas: the Independence of the United States. Due to the constant confrontation between Spain, England and France, the rebellious movements in the British thirteen colonies were seen as an opportunity to strike England by the other two European powers. So, Spain and France financed and sent soldiers to fight on the side of American rebels.

This drove the French monarchy to bankruptcy, a situation that caused the French Revolution of 1789, and lately the Independence of Haiti by 1804. Desperate for finding resources to sustain his regime after the loss of the wealthiest colony of his country, French leader Napoleon resolved to invade Spain in 1808. This fact launched the conditions for the Hispanic American Creole movements, rebellious against Spain, to take over and beat the Spanish power in the New World. So, weakened up by the devastating consequences the French Revolution had on its economy and the French invasion had on its politics, Spain just could not resist anymore and lost the empire it held for three centuries and that for those three centuries was the pivot of the world economy.



After 1810, Mexican silver production collapsed, the insurgents of the viceroyalty won, and thus the biggest money producing economy in the world sunk in the most absolute way. As a result, Spain lost everything that had made it rich and powerful, and Mexico was faced to the need of creating a whole new economy. One of the biggest recessions in the world takes place after 1812. Ever after in the 19th century the British Industrial Revolution will take over as the ruling axis of the world economy.

In the span of these few pages we have travelled along centuries of history in all continents of Earth. We have witnessed many historical processes that gave birth to the World System we know nowadays. In doing so, we have proposed a whole way to interpret History. As a result, we have come to conclude that answering the questions to which we were drove by history have taught us to think in terms of world relationships, processes and interdependences. The study of processes and relationships of the past has shown us how long back they reach, and where we can find the roots of things that actually affect all of us nowadays. Moreover, this has shown us the importance of the study of periods of the past that might seem already overcome or of regions of the world that might seem too far away to have an influence on us. However, the study of historical processes that happen in the world level have shown us the value of conceiving History as a science of global processes. We have not referred to the enormous amount of events that happened in the 19th and 20th centuries, that led to the nowadays Globalization process. These things can be a subject for many other articles. Nevertheless, the subjects we have discussed here invite us to ask ourselves about what happened in past centuries and, more than this, to question ourselves about the processes that are affecting us nowadays and will affect us in the future.

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- 25. Pacquier, op. cit., pp.229-233.
- 26. Tutino has produced many books on the subject of revolutionary social movements in northern Mexico that touch the theme. He has exposed his ideas recently in the presidential session of the XXIX LASA congress held in Toronto, Canada, in October 2010, under the title "Between global transformations and popular mobilizations: making nations in the Americas." A synthesis of his ideas can be found at http://photos.state.gov/libraries/america/475/pdf/Tutino%20 -%20Global%20Transformations%20and%20Revolutionary%20Freedoms.pdf

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