"LABOUR" AS A FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT IN THE HISPANIC ECONOMIC ENLIGHTENMENT

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Abstract: This article analyses the shifting meanings of "labour" within the Hispanic economic Enlightenment, arguing that it represented a foundational and polysemic concept within the political–economic reform projects of the eighteenth-century Spanish monarchy. By examining metropolitan and colonial debates, this study shows how human labour was conceived as the principle from which both wealth and social order derived, thereby providing the normative justification for economic measures ranging from individual property rights to state intervention. Through this lens, the Hispanic world emerges as a significant —though often overlooked— laboratory of economic thinking, contributing to a more global and less Eurocentric intellectual history of political economy.
Keywords: Hispanic Enlightenment; political economy; labour; Potosí.

1.- Introduction

The concept of labour has long occupied a central position in political economy and, by extension, in the political imagination of modernity. From Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to Karl Marx's *Capital*, labour appears as the key determinant of wealth and value —whether celebrated for its productive power or condemned in its alienated form. In his classic, Smith defined labour as the "real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities".[1] Indeed, a particular conception gradually displaced alternative meanings from the eighteenth century onward: the notion that only labour producing a surplus for market exchange could be considered productive.[2]

The endorsement of this view by Classical political economy elevated it to the status of a quasi-axiom —a self-evident truth requiring no further justification— until at least the marginalist revolution, which redirected the analysis of value creation from

[1] SMITH, Adam: *The Wealth of Nations*, *Vol. I*, London, Methuen, 1904, p. 32.
[2] PERROTTA, Cosimo: *Produzione e lavoro produttivo nel mercantilismo e nell'Illuminismo*, Galatina, Congedo Editore, 1988.

labour to subjective utility. The epochal innovation attributed to Adam Smith lay in the process of abstraction: he conceived of labour as a universal medium of commodity exchange, thereby enabling an abstract understanding of the economic system as a whole and the analytical study of its laws and cycles. Building on this innovation, Classical labour theories of value had a crucial role in nineteenth-century economic reflection.[3] Moreover, this reconceptualisation positioned the division of labour as a foundational principle of the market economy. Labour thus became both the organizing principle of society —where individuals derived meaning from their specific occupational roles— and the organizing principle of the world market, in which different societies exchanged distinct products and came to be regarded as the "natural" providers of certain commodities.

Our claim is that an analogous concept of labour emerged during the eighteenth century in the Hispanic world and it operated as a fundamental concept within Enlightenment economic thought and imperial reformism. This novel semantic field was created by the writings of Spanish administrators, economists, and merchants, and their reflections offer a mirror through which to read the challenges faced by Hispanic societies in this conjuncture of imperial rivalries and aspirations for material improvements. The significance of a novel centrality of the working activity has already been suggested by Fernando Díez, who analysed how the concepts of "productive labour" (*trabajo productivo*) and "working society" (*sociedad ocupada*) shaped a modern idea of labour among Spanish authors.[4] The present article, by contrast, focuses on different conceptual associations (wealth, industry and property) and it seeks, in its final section, to highlight the conflictual character of this key concept as revealed by its inherent polysemy. To do so, our analysis also touches upon Spanish America, thus considering the broader Hispanic world as intellectually interconnected, incorporating themes and ideas originating in and about the American territories of the monarchy as integral to eighteenth-century discourses on labour.

Building on the rich body of scholarship that has illuminated the key political concepts of the Iberian *Sattelzeit*, this study redirects attention toward the economic

[3] MEEK, Ronald L.: *Studies in the Labour Theory of Value*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1973.
[4] DÍEZ, Fernando: *Utilidad, deseo y virtud. La formación de la idea moderna de trabajo*, Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 2001.

conceptual universe.[5] The epochal specificity of political economy, as Otto Brunner observed long ago, lies in the emergence —particularly in eighteenth-century Europe— of a mode of thought in which ideas concerning human economic activity increasingly derived their meaning from the logic of market exchange and production, rather than from moral, juridical, or theological frameworks.[6] The conceptual history of the Spanish economic Enlightenment, however, remains largely unexplored, as scholars have mostly focused on the institutional dimension of this story, or on internalist reconstruction of economic arguments.[7] Similarly, studies on Bourbon reformism have long emphasised the role of political economy and imperial emulation in inspiring projects of improvement, but they have rarely focused on the specific analysis of the concepts mobilised by reformers.[8]

Conceptual history, in turn, allows us to detect the changing meanings of labour in the period under analysis, as well as the fundamental role of this concept as a normative axiom that guided and legitimised the implementation of proposed reforms. Gradually emancipating itself from an earlier understanding that conceived human beings as bound to labour within a theological vision of society, in which each individual was assigned a predetermined place in the divinely ordained hierarchical order, this concept emerged within an Atlantic world in which production, commerce, and consumption had gradually become central to the political competition among empires, prompting rulers to promote the economic governance of their subjects in order to outcompete their rivals. This, in turn, points to the role of historical experience and

[5] See, for instance, FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN, Javier: "Introducción: hacia una historia atlántica de los conceptos políticos", in Javier Fernández-Sebastián ed., *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano: la era de las revoluciones, 1750-1850. Tomo 1*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales/Fundación Carolina/Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2009 and FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN, Javier: *Historia conceptual en el Atlántico ibérico: lenguajes, tiempos, revoluciones*, Madrid, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2021. Our focus does not imply that the "economy" was an autonomous field disembedded from broader cultural frameworks. See POLANYI, Karl: *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1957.

[6] BRUNNER, Otto: "La 'casa grande' y la 'Oeconomica' de la vieja Europa", in *Prismas - Revista de Historia Intelectual*, vol. 14, n. 2, 2010, pp. 117-136.

[7] See ASTIGARRAGA, Jesús: *A Unifying Enlightenment: Institutions of Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century Spain (1700-1808)*, Leiden, Brill, 2021; FUENTES QUINTANA, Enrique ed.: *Economía y economistas espanoles. Tomo 3: La ilustración*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2000. For a conceptual reading, see SÁNCHEZ LEÓN, Pablo: *Abundancia y frustración. Por una historia conceptual de la economía en la modernidad latinoamericana (I)*, Madrid, Postmetropolis Editorial, 2015.

[8] PAQUETTE, Gabriel B.: *Enlightenment, Governance, and Reform in Spain and its Empire, 1759-1808*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; TAVÁREZ, Fidel J.: *Assembling an Imperial Machine. Spanish Commercial Reform in the Age of Enlightenment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2026.

material conditions in shaping a set of ideas and concepts, as the discourses on labour and improvement were often articulated by individuals who combined their involvement in imperial administration with personal interests in commercial ventures or productive activities.[9] All the eighteenth-century authors analysed were either royal officials or merchants playing prominent roles in institutions such as economic societies —a fact that is far from incidental. Indeed, as key participants in royal administration and productive enterprise, these individuals were uniquely positioned to grasp the economic centrality of human labour, or were convinced of the necessity of promoting such ideas to better serve the monarchy.

In the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1739), the primary definition of *trabajo* is "exercise or occupation in some work or office". The remaining definitions still reflect the medieval understanding of the term, associating it with punishment, hardship, or the material outcome of human effort (the Latin *opus*). According to the Christian interpretation of Genesis, labour was associated with sin and Adam's Fall, while the classical tradition likewise attached negative connotations to it, intertwining it with slavery and the absence of freedom.[10] Accordingly, other definitions were "difficulty", "harm", "hardship", and "affliction", while in the plural form it could even denote "privation, misery, and poverty".[11] Other dictionaries of the period did not depart significantly from these definitions, except for noting that the addition of qualifying expressions could give the term more specific meanings. Thus, *trabajo del campo* referred to agricultural cultivation, *trabajo de un artesano* to manual or mechanical work, and *trabajo de entendimiento* to intellectual study.[12] Similarly, the definitions of the verb *trabajar* include meanings

[9] For a reflection on the interplay between experience and language, see LEONHARD, Jörn: "Lenguaje, experiencia y traducción", in Javier Fernández-Sebastián and Gonzalo Capellán de Miguel eds., *Conceptos políticos, tiempo e historia: nuevos enfoques en historia conceptual*, Santander, Editorial Universidad Cantabria, 2013, pp. 378-384.

[10] LE GOFF, Jacques: *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

[11] REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: *Diccionario de autoridades*, 1726-1739. Available at: https://apps2.rae.es/DA.html. [Accessed on 24 July 2026]. Original Spanish (hereafter OS): "ejercicio u ocupación en alguna obra o ministerio" [...] "dificultad" [...] "perjuicio" [...] "penalidad" [...] "molestia" [...] "estrechez, miseria y pobreza". All translations from Spanish are my own. For eighteenth-century texts, I have made extensive use of this *Diccionario*.

[12] See TERREROS Y PANDO, Esteban: *Diccionario de Castellano con las voces de ciencias y artes y sus correspondientes en las tres lenguas francesa, latina e italiana. Tomo tercero*, Madrid, Viuda de Ibarra, Hijos y Compañía, 1786, p. 675. Other dictionaries consulted include the *Diccionario de autoridades* (1791 edition) and Manuel NÚÑEZ DE TABOADA's *Diccionario de la lengua castellana* (1822).

related to the outcomes of actions and carry more positive connotations, linked to avoiding idleness and performing tasks with order and diligence. In the contemporary dictionary of the Real Academia Española, some of these meanings are still retained, alongside new definitions, including that of *trabajo* as "human effort applied to the production of wealth, in contrast to capital".[13] This article seeks to reconstruct the emergence of a new semantic field that finally crystallised into this new meaning.

To this end, the panoply of voices reconstructed highlights the "fundamental" character of "labour" in the eighteenth century, revealing it as a basic constituent of Hispanic economic thought. Projects for the reform of the imperial economy rested on the assumption that human activity constituted the primary source of the wealth of a state —an axiom without which much of this body of writing is difficult to understand.[14] Although dictionary definitions remained largely unchanged throughout the period, historical actors mobilised the concept of *trabajo* in their writings and reform proposals, investing it with new meanings and constructing a semantic field from which no discussion of the imperial economy could remain detached. This confirms that conceptual change often unfolds more slowly than the political and social transformations to which historical actors respond —and in which they participate— through their arguments and the language they employ.[15]

In the period under analysis, the concept of labour moved beyond the relatively restricted debates of theologians and jurists to circulate among a much broader range of actors, including merchants, political economists, and high-ranking officials within the Crown's administrative and governing institutions (*democratisation*).[16] As was typical of the Enlightenment, it also acquired a pronounced temporal dimension, since discussions

[13] REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 2014. Available at: https://dle.rae.es/. [Accessed on 24 July 2026]. OS: "esfuerzo humano aplicado a la producción de riqueza, en contraposición a capital".
[14] See KOSELLECK, Reinhart: "Innovaciones conceptuales del lenguaje de la Ilustración", in Reinhart Koselleck, *Historia de conceptos. Estudios sobre semántica y pragmática del lenguaje político y social*, Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 2012, pp. 199-224. For a clear-cut definition of "fundamental concept", see FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN: "Introducción", p. 27.
[15] KOSELLECK: "Innovaciones conceptuales", pp. 203-204.
[16] Although our chronological framework and sources do not allow us to trace the extension of this debate to the popular classes —a process that generally is believed to characterise the first half of the nineteenth century— the discussion of the invisibilisation of Indigenous labour in Potosí suggests that further research is needed to determine the extent to which, in contexts of intense commercialisation, the idea of labour as the source of wealth may also have been shared by those occupying the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy.

of *trabajo* came to embody expectations for the future of the monarchy. Reformers increasingly envisaged a society transformed by the ongoing programme of reform and by the growing conviction that only the more intensive application of labour to nature, combined with its valorisation through the market, could secure material prosperity and imperial strength (*temporalisation*).

This conviction gradually assumed an ideological character and consequently became a source of political conflict (*ideologisation*), as is particularly evident in the final section, which turns to Spanish American territories. Although both protagonists in the *gran debate* over the *mita* regarded themselves as advocates of economic reformism, each dismissed the other's arguments as ideologically flawed: Villava condemned Sanz's position as the product of obsolete, backward and even feudal ideas, whereas the Intendant of Potosí rejected Villava's arguments as innovations ill-suited to the particular conditions of the Spanish monarchy. Finally, the process of abstraction that the concept itself underwent —the idea that the individual labour of the Spanish vassals constituted the true wealth of the Crown— further confirms our working hypothesis.

This debate also points to the importance of Spanish America as a privileged laboratory for observing conceptual change, particularly following the crisis of 1808-10, which had been developing over several decades and did not unfold within a conceptual vacuum. [17] Labour became a major ideological battleground through which revolutionaries articulated their accusations against the Crown's mismanagement of the American territories and, in turn, justified the legitimacy of political emancipation.[18] Although a full exploration of this issue lies beyond the scope of the present article, one example may suffice. In the *Manifiesto a las naciones* (1816), through which the government of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata justified its declaration of independence of 9 July 1816 to the eyes of the European powers, one of the principal accusations levelled against Spain was that it had erected a "barrier to the country's population".[19] Alongside

[17] See FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN: "Introducción"; FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN: *Historia conceptual*; ORTEGA, Francisco: "'Ni nación ni parte integral'. 'Colonia', de vocablo a concepto en el siglo XVIII iberoamericano", in *Prismas, Revista de historia intelectual*, vol. 15, 2011, pp. 11-29.
[18] See ORTEGA: "'Ni nación ni parte integral'", pp. 22-23.
[19] *Manifiesto que hace á las naciones del Congreso General Constituyente de las Provincias-Unidas del Rio de la Plata*, Buenos Aires, Imprenta de la Independencia, 1817, p. 4. OS: "barrera a la población del país". This document also attests to the emotionalisation and internationalisation that fundamental concepts experienced during the Spanish American *Sattlezeit*.

denunciations of despotic government, this charge served to legitimise the revolutionary rupture. According to the argument, Spanish rule had left the natural resources of the Americas neglected and economically unproductive. This was presented as evidence that the Spanish monarch had failed in the fundamental duty of good government: to maximise economic production and promote the material prosperity of his dominions through labour applied to nature.

Finally, labour has also become central to recent calls for a renewed, global history of political economy.[20] Arguments that linked the productive capacity of labour to the value it generated, and to the legal entitlements derived from it, have often been taken as a proxy for participation in the conceptual world of political economy and capitalism. The global diffusion of such arguments —alongside the spread of the commodity form— offers a fruitful framework for exploring the intellectual dimensions of the worldwide expansion of capitalist modes of production in a comparative way. Thus, we aim to contribute also to this proposal, placing the case of the Hispanic Enlightenment alongside similar historical experiences, to understanding how different societies sought to rationalise the profound economic transformations of the period, and for recognising Catholic societies as integral, if distinctive, participants in the wider European processes that accompanied the rise of global capitalism.

The implications of this approach lie in recognising instances of economic modernity within historical experiences beyond the Anglo-American model, thereby challenging diffusionist or competitive approaches. Rather, this study argues that political economic reflection, understood as a form of thought that postulated a social system composed exclusively of subjects interrelated by their working activity, emerged gradually and autonomously within diverse social contexts, bound together by growing commercial interdependence, as markets, production, and exchange became central to the global political struggles between empires and increasingly shaped the lives of a widening range of communities. The association between this form of thought and political power that continued from late eighteenth century up until the present day is the peculiar and modern trait that renders the topic also relevant for the present.

[20] SARTORI, Andrew: "Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy", in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori eds., *Global Intellectual History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 110-133.

2.- Labour and wealth

The Spanish appropriation of the American gold and silver deposits was an unprecedented event that quickly convinced contemporaries of the central role played by the New World in sustaining a global economy. "The abundance of silver ores within the jurisdiction of the Royal Audiencia of Charcas is so great", exclaimed Alvaro Alonso Barba in 1640, "that even if there were no others in the world, it would suffice to fill it entirely with riches".[21] Following the arrival of European invaders, Spanish America became a crucial site for the production of commodities destined for global markets, above all silver, the "singular product most responsible for the birth of world trade".[22] After the discovery of the great mines of New Spain and Upper Peru, far-reaching commodity chains emerged around silver production, oiling the gears of the early modern global economy. The Bajío region, for instance, developed its own forms of local capitalism.[23] Likewise, the Bolivian plateau around Potosí —despite its altitude of 4,000 meters— attracted large numbers of European adventurers, as well as Indigenous workers and entrepreneurs. By the early seventeenth century, its population exceeded one hundred thousand.[24]

However, since the sixteenth century, Spanish thinkers and theologians increasingly embraced the belief that American wealth had condemned Spain to poverty.[25] Such theories rested, among other arguments, on the parasitic nature of this wealth, which had not been earned through labour but rather through plunder, theft, and violence. In his celebrated *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, Bartolomé de las Casas denounced the appropriation of the fruits of Native labour as one of the crimes committed by Spaniards in the Americas. Upon their arrival in Cuba, he wrote, they not only "destroyed and depopulated it" but also began to "take the women and children of

[21] BARBA, Alvaro Alonso: *Arte de los metales*, Madrid, Imprenta de Bernardo Peralta, 1729, p. 48. OS: "La abundancia de Minerales de Plata que ay en la Jurisdicción de la Real Audiencia de los Charcas, es tan grande, que sin que hubiera otros en el Mundo, eran bastantes à llenarlo todo de riquezas".
[22] FLYNN, Dennis O., and Arturo GIRÁLDEZ: "Born with a 'Silver Spoon': The Origin of World Trade in 1571", in *Journal of World History*, vol. 6, n. 2, 1995, pp. 201-21.
[23] TUTINO, John: *Making a New World. Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.
[24] BARRAGÁN ROMANO, Rossana: *El imperio del trabajo. Historia social de la producción de plata de Potosí para el mundo (s. XVI-XVIII)*, La Paz, Plural editores, 2025.
[25] MCCLURE, Julia: *The Empire of Poverty: The Moral-Political Economy of the Spanish Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 34-52.

the *indios* for their service and for abusing them, and to eat the food which came from their sweats and toils".[26] The expression "abuse" refers directly to the fact that a correct use of local workforce was considered legitimate —the institutions of the *encomienda* and the *repartimiento* were precisely designed to regulate this practice, while recognising that there were licit and illicit ways of doing so.

This concern stemmed from the Crown's obligation to oversee the conversion and salvation of the souls of its new vassals overseas. In the instructions issued to Nicolás de Ovando in 1501, the Catholic Monarchs established the use of Indigenous labour for the completion of works considered to be of public utility, including mining activities, in exchange for a fair wage. The subsequent Laws of Burgos (1512) and the New Laws of the Indies (1542) established the legal framework for the "good treatment and safeguard of the *Indios*", placing them under the tutelage of Spaniards who were entrusted with their maintenance and conversion in exchange for their labour. As scholars have noted, however, this attempt was based on a "fundamental paradox", since the protection of Indigenous populations was entrusted to the very individuals who had been drawn to the New World by the prospect of enriching themselves through the exploitation of local labour.[27]

During this period, labour was closely intertwined with both religious instruction and material subsistence. The directives issued to Ovando addressed the pressing need to secure workers for the construction of new settlements in a context marked by a severe shortage of Spanish colonists, as well as for gold mining, which was expected to enrich the royal treasury.[28] The New Laws established new *repartimientos*, which were, at least in principle, intended to provide for the "moderate subsistence and honest livelihood of the said first conquerors".[29] At the same time, labour was conceived

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[26] DE LAS CASAS, Bartolomé: *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, 1552. Available at: https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/brevsima-relacin-de-la-destruccin-de-las-indias-0/. [Accessed on 18 November 2025]. OS: "destruyeron y despoblaron [...] a tomar las mujeres e hijos a los indios para servirse y para usar mal de ellos y comerles sus comidas que de sus sudores y trabajos salían".

[27] OWENSBY, Bryan P.: *New World of Gain: Europeans, Guaraní, and the Global Origins of Modern Economy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2022, p. 72.

[28] PACHECO, Francisco, Francisco de CÁRDENAS, and Luis TORRES DE MENDOZA eds.: *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas, vol. 31*, Madrid, Manuel G. Hernandez, 1879, pp. 13-25.

[29] *Leyes y ordenanças nueuame[n]te hechas por su Magestad pa la gouernacion de las Indias y buen tratamiento y conseruacion de los Indios*, Alcalá de Henares, 1543. OS: "sustentación moderada y honesto entretenimiento de los dichos primeros conquistadores".

as a means of overcoming what colonial authorities regarded as the Indigenous population's natural idleness and vices. Combined with their concentration in permanent settlements, it was also expected to promote the spread and consolidation of Catholic doctrine.

During the eighteenth century, however, a new regime of power gradually manifested itself. [30] The government of populations became an increasingly central concern for European rulers and their ministers, who relied on a new form of technical knowledge —developed during the commercial expansion and imperial competition of the previous century— to identify the principles required to maximise economic output for both individual and collective enrichment: the emerging discipline of political economy.

The growth of economic reflection in eighteenth-century Europe, together with military defeats at the hands of France and England, sparked important debates within Hispanic Enlightenment thought. Intellectuals sought to design strategies for imperial economic growth by adapting contemporary political economy, which stressed the role of population and labour in generating wealth, to the specific conditions of the Hispanic world. Yet the centrality of silver mines within the Hispanic trading system, combined with the decline of the monarchy's international and economic standing vis-à-vis European competitors, alerted eighteenth-century reformers to the dangers of over-reliance on mineral wealth.

Arguments against the wealth generated by precious metals, however, were no longer grounded primarily in moral or religious concerns. In the *Auxilios para bien governar una Monarquía Católica*, composed in the 1720s, Melchor Rafael de Macanaz (1670-1760) addressed the issue. A jurist, lawyer, and economist, he served the Bourbons during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714), but his staunch regalism earned him numerous enemies at court, and after losing royal favour, he spent much of his life in exile. [31] In his *Auxilios*, he insisted that American mines enriched Spain's European rivals more than Spain itself. Instead, he argued, a monarch should foster "commerce, agriculture,

[30] PALTI, Elías José: *An Archeology of the Political: Regimes of Power from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 71-76.
[31] Biographical information on Macanaz and the other authors examined in this article can be found in the online portal *Historia Hispánica* of the Real Academia de la Historia. Available at: https://historia-hispanica.rah.es/. [Accessed on 21 July 2026].

manufactures, and the transformation of domestic products, stimulating each of these branches with diligent and meticulous economy".[32]

A good vassal was no longer expected merely to be a good Christian; he was also required to become a productive agent, contributing to the enrichment of the political community.[33] To remedy its past errors, Macanaz argued, the Crown needed to establish a new system of imperial economic governance aimed at developing its vassals's individual capacity to generate wealth through labour. American wealth would no longer be a source of backwardness but would finally contribute to elevating Spain's power to the level of its European rivals.

This aspiration would find its most convincing expression in the *Nuevo sistema de gobierno económico para la América*. Published in 1789 as an appeal for Charles IV's patronage of ongoing economic reforms, the text had probably been composed roughly half a century earlier by Macanaz himself and had already circulated widely within governmental circles in manuscript form.[34] Its purpose was to lay down the principles for a new economic governance of the empire. The first rhetorical move was therefore to justify why the older maxims of rule had produced such pronounced economic backwardness compared to Spain's rivals —a leitmotif of Spanish economic thought since the age of the *arbitristas*.[35]

While recognising the merits of the *conquistadores* and the architects of early colonial policy, the text emphasised that the "spirit of conquest" (*espíritu de conquista*) had

[32] MACANAZ, Melchor Rafael: *Auxilios para bien governar una Monarquía Católica*, Madrid, Imprenta de D. Antonia Espinosa, 1789, p. 49. OS: "comercio, agricultura, manufacturas, y fábricas de los productos del país, fomentando cada ramo de estos con prolija, y esmerada economía".

[33] This shift was a gradual process. Between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, theologians and secular thinkers first recognised *de facto* the growing centrality of concupiscence, acquisitive behaviour and consequently commercial relations in sustaining and structuring the social order. Later, certain authors fully legitimated a positive view of commercial society, provided it could be reconciled with the precepts of Catholic doctrine. Within this debate, a central place was occupied by the role of the sovereign in directing human passions toward the common good, as well as by the concept of *amor propio* (self-love), understood as a divine principle capable of tempering vices while sustaining human natural sociability. See VIEJO YHARRASSARRY, Julián: *Amor propio y sociedad comercial en el siglo XVIII hispano*, Bilbao, Universidad del País Vasco, 2018.

[34] Recent scholarship has convincingly argued for Macanaz's authorship instead of José Campillo y Cossío, see TAVÁREZ, Fidel J.: "A New System of Imperial Government: Political Economy and the Spanish Theory of Commercial Empire, ca. 1740–50", in Jeremy Adelman ed., *Empire and Social Sciences: Global Histories of Knowledge*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 15-30.

[35] MCCLURE: *The Empire of Poverty*.

guided the acquisition of American territories, and this was soon followed by the greed of "extract treasures" (*sacar tesoros*) from the Indies, rather than promoting wealth creation through labour. Ignorance of economic laws, compounded by a subsequent "general lethargy" (*letargo general*), prevented Spain from engaging in the drive for colonial economic development that had animated France and England and secured their prosperity and power.

Henceforth, however, the "spirit of commerce" (*espíritu de comercio*) had to inspire imperial economic governance if Spain was to compete successfully with other powers. Commerce was conceived as the very "sinew" (*nervio*) and "blood" (*sangre*) of the state, while an active population was understood as the greatest wealth a sovereign could command —provided that the population was inclined towards the pursuit of the state's true interests. In the case of the American territories, a central task was to transform Indigenous peoples into useful and industrious vassals, since they represented "the richest mine in the world, which must be rendered productive with the utmost economy".[36] Subjects and communities were thus assessed in terms of their capacity as productive agents, whose ability to generate wealth through labour had to be stimulated and directed by law.

A central recipe for regenerating the monarchy's economy was to transform millions of Indigenous vassals into "useful and industrious" (*utiles y industriosos*) subjects —namely, producers of commodities— through improved economic governance to stimulate their economic output. Among the proposals was the distribution of land in individual property, alongside encouragement of artisanal production and monetary circulation, for, as the *Nuevo sistema* noted, "the land will never be properly cultivated, nor will a man ever labour for another with the same effort he would devote if the fruits of his work were his own".[37]

[36] CAMPILLO Y COSSÍO, José: *Nuevo sistema de gobierno económico para la América*, Madrid, Imprenta de Cano, 1789, p. 55. OS: "la mina más rica del mundo, que se debe beneficiar con la más escrupulosa economía".

[37] CAMPILLO Y COSSÍO: *Nuevo sistema de gobierno*, p. 83. OS: "la tierra nunca estará bien cultivada, ni el hombre hará más trabajando para otro, lo que haría si el producto de su trabajo fuese suyo". The term *trabajo* has generally been translated as "labour" and, more occasionally —particularly in its verbal form (*trabajar*)— as "work" for stylistic reasons. A discussion of the conceptual distinction between the English terms "labour" and "work" lies beyond the scope of this article.

The granting of land ownership would also allow Indigenous peoples to escape the state of dependency into which harmful laws and unscrupulous Spaniards had forced them. The sixteenth-century discussions on the moral and juridical imperative of protecting Indigenous vassals from abuses had already touched the issue of property rights. In his famous work, Francisco de Vitoria (1483-1546) advanced influential theological, moral, and legal considerations to demonstrate the natural rights of the American populations, including the right to property over their lands, and thus dominion over material goods.[38]

As noted, by the second half of the eighteenth century, new considerations inspired by a more utilitarian and secular vision of society and of the individuals who composed it were replacing older arguments. Economic reasoning began to serve as a basis for legitimising the rights of Indigenous Americans, particularly through the notion that maximising each individual's capacity to generate wealth was essential to strengthening the power of the state. In this regard, Miguel Antonio de la Gándara (1719-1783) regarded the widespread idleness of the *naturales* as a direct consequence of the fact that "those who devote their own sweat to the happiness of others are greatly discouraged from working".[39] Only through the granting of land ownership and the encouragement of American production could the maxim be realised that "there never was a rich Prince with poor vassals; nor there will never be a poor Prince with rich vassals".[40] The *Apuntes* represented an extensive programme of monarchical reform, composed while Gándara was residing at the Neapolitan court of the future Carlos III, only a few months before he left Italy to succeed his father to the Spanish Crown in 1759.

[38] DE VITORIA, Francisco: *Relectio de Indis*, 1538. Available at: https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/relectio-de-indis-a-victoria-anno-1538/. [Accessed on 18 November 2025].

[39] DE LA GÁNDARA, Antonio: *Apuntes sobre el bien y el mal de España, escritos de orden del Rey* (1759), in *Almacén de frutos literarios inéditos de los mejores autores españoles. Tomo* 1, Madrid, Imprenta de la viuda de López, 1820, p. 204. OS: "desmaya mucho el trabajo quien dedica sus sudores a la felicidad ajena".

[40] DE LA GÁNDARA: *Apuntes sobre el bien y el mal*, p. 27. OS: "con vasallos pobres, nunca hubo Príncipe rico; y con vasallos ricos, jamás habrá Príncipe pobre".

3.- Labour and industry

Projects of economic reform based on the conception of labour as a source of wealth creation were not limited to American vassals but concerned also those living in the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, the perceived urgency of reforming economic governance and enhancing individual capacity to generate wealth fostered new understandings of the central role of labour in the functional organisation of society. At the same time, this accompanied the emergence of an idea of society as an aggregate of individuals broader than the local community and bound together by principles other than religious belonging, such as that which had once defined the Catholic *ecumene*.

In this regard, it is necessary to introduce a new concept —that of "industry" (*industria*)— understood as "dexterity or skill in any art".[41] Far removed from its nineteenth-century connotations, in eighteenth-century Spain it referred to a notion close to that of labour, though with a more specific emphasis on the positive specialisation of individual activity. One can thus observe a gradual transformation, as this concept came to be regarded as the very organising principle of human society.

The work that most clearly reveals the centrality of "industry" is, without doubt, the *Discurso sobre el fomento de la industria popular* by Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes (1723-1802), one of the most influential economists in the Hispanic world, both because of his intellectual contributions and the prominent positions he occupied within the administration of Carlos III. Written in 1774, the treaty became a bestseller of its day thanks to royal sponsorship, which financed the printing and distribution of 30,000 copies. It was also the most widely known work of the Spanish economic Enlightenment abroad, translated into Portuguese, German, Dutch, and Italian. The treatise served as a concise manual with two principal aims: to persuade readers of the necessity of productive occupation for every member of society, and to encourage the establishment of economic societies throughout Spain. Though it introduced few theoretical innovations, the *Discurso* faithfully embodied the applied nature of Spanish economic thought and the Crown's commitment to supporting the initiatives of reform-minded intellectuals.[42]

[41] REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: *Diccionario de autoridades*. OS: "Destreza o habilidad en cualquier arte".
[42] LLOMBART, Vicent: *Campomanes, economista y politico de Carlos III*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1992, pp. 235-269.

The text opens with a fundamental social axiom for Campomanes: that man is born "subject to the obligation to work in order to earn a living and avoid the harmful corruption of idleness".[43] If labour derives first and foremost from the basic imperative of self-preservation, its moral qualities are no less significant, for only the active individual can escape the degradation that idleness inevitably brings. To this principle, Campomanes adds a diagnosis of Spain's particular condition, framed through the lens of decadence we have already outlined. Whereas in earlier times towns and villages had prospered through the widespread diffusion of textile production, by the mid-eighteenth century that former wealth had vanished, women were left without employment, and labourers and smallholders risked falling into destitution. Only by increasing individual productivity could this decline be reversed —namely, through the stimulation of "industry" among Spain's popular classes.[44]

"Popular industry" was understood as the specialised craft suited to the economic and intellectual capacities of the working population, and according to Campomanes those specialised activities were domestic textile production and processing. In practical terms, then, "industry" here refers to forms of employment that generated a surplus for the market, thereby enabling peasant families or smallholders to augment their income and improve their condition. Campomanes presented the intensification of labour within peasant households as an unavoidable necessity to ward off the spectre of beggary. It was indeed essential to construct the category of the "poor" (*gente pobre*) in order to legitimise the imposition of work as the sole path out of this condition.[45]

By calculating the wealth that could be produced by Spanish women —most of whom remained unemployed according to Campomanes— the *Discurso* undertook a conceptual operation similar to that of the *Nuevo sistema* when it demonstrated the utility of transforming American Indigenous peoples into useful vassals. The individual was

[43] CAMPOMANES, Pedro Rodríguez: *Discurso sobre el fomento de la industria popular*, Madrid, Imprenta de Antonio Sancha, 1774. Available at: https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/discurso-sobre-el-fomento-de-la-industria-popular--0/. [Accessed on 18 November 2025]. OS: "sujeto a la pensión del trabajo para adquirir su sustento y evitar los perjudiciales estragos de la ociosidad".

[44] This desire for stimulating individual labour explains the central place of emulation and education in Spanish political economy. See SÁNCHEZ LEÓN, Pablo: "Science, Customs, and the Modern Subject: From Emulation to Education in the Semantics of Spanish Enlightenment", in *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, vol. 12, n. 1, 2017, pp. 98-120.

[45] See BOLUFER PERUGA, Mónica: "Entre historia social e historia cultural: La historiografía sobre pobreza y caridad en la época Moderna", in *Historia Social*, vol. 43, 2002, pp. 105-127.

conceived as a productive subject capable of generating a determinate quantum of wealth, whose aggregate would contribute to the overall prosperity of the nation. In this way, economic reflection began to conceptualise human labour as abstract labour, while at the same time acknowledging its concrete effects in transforming material reality. For Campomanes, the "mass of ordinary people" embodied the "strength of a Nation", just as "the popular industry is the true sinew to sustain its vigour".[46]

The conviction that the social order was founded upon individuals bound together by the obligation to work was gaining ever firmer ground among Spanish authors, while the newly founded economic societies quickly became key centres for the development and dissemination of the economic science. The Basque merchant and economist Nicolás de Arriquíbar (1714-1775) embraced this principle in his *Recreación política*, an influential treatise written to refute Marquis de Mirabeau's *L'ami des hommes, ou Traité de la population* (1756-58) before the Sociedad Bascongada de Amigos del País. Although absent from the traditional canon of economic thought, Arriquíbar exerted considerable influence in Spain as one of the founders of the Sociedad Bascongada, a highly active institution devoted to education and the diffusion of economic science, and his ideas reached as far as the coasts of New Granada.[47]

In his discussion of the nature of "industry", Arriquíbar argued that "the most legitimate and reliable" wealth of the state was the value created by the aggregate of all forms of labour performed within the kingdom, "without which the most precious mines, the most splendid armies and navies, are nothing more than ephemeral goods that vanish like smoke".[48] This formulation exemplifies the process of abstraction characteristic of political economy: the diverse values generated by human labour were conceived as combining into the aggregated wealth of the monarchy, which was in turn equated with imperial power. For Arriquíbar, this understanding of labour as the foundation of both individual wealth and political strength was bound to a precise anthropological vision,

[46] CAMPOMANES: *Discurso*. OS: "gran número de la gente común [...] la robustez de una Nación [...] la industria popular es el verdadero nervio para sostener su pujanza".
[47] OLANO PAREDES, Carlos Manuel: "La Aritmética Política a través de los textos de Nicolás de Arriquíbar y la Sociedad Bascongada en el Virreinato de la Nueva Granada", in Jorge Martínez Montero ed., *Las Reales Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País: Nuevas aproximaciones (siglos XVIII-XXI)*, Oviedo, Instituto Feijoo de estudios del siglo XVIII, Ediciones Trea, 2024, pp. 237-262.
[48] ARRIQUÍBAR, Nicolás: *Recreación política. Segunda parte*, Vitoria, Tomas de Robles y Navarro, 1779, p. 22. OS: "la más legítima, y la más segura [...] sin los cuales las más preciosas minas, los ejércitos y armadas más brillantes, no son más que unos bienes momentáneos, que se desvanecen como el humo".

in which human beings realized their very essence only through their labour benefiting the political community. "A man without a work is a dead man for the state", he declared, reflecting on the causes of demographic decline in contemporary states. Conversely, "a man with an occupation is a living plant, which not only produces but also reproduces itself; and this occupation constitutes his political life".[49]

The Basque articulates a vision of political economy that extends far beyond the narrowly economic, presenting instead a normative account of how social order should function —an order that the state, through the direct and indirect stimuli of legislation, was expected to foster. He conceived society as composed of "a mutual and continuous dependency that men have on one another".[50] This interdependence materialized through labour, which bound together all classes: rich and poor, farmer and craftsman, merchant and man of letters or religion, "everyone, in their respective class, is bound to work, with no one exempt from this sacred precept".[51] Given that this reciprocal dependence was understood as a law of nature, the obligation to labour —defined as surplus-producing labour— became a necessary condition of social life. As he concluded, "man was born for work, just as a bird was born to fly; and the desire to live without working is not only against the order of providence but also against society's interest".[52]

4.- Labour and property

The association between labour and landed property constitutes the final semantic field explored, reflecting its central role as a normative framework governing the appropriation of land by individuals, families, and communities throughout the

[49] ARRIQUÍBAR, Nicolás: *Recreación política. Primera parte*, Vitoria, Tomas de Robles y Navarro, 1779, p. 46. OS: "El hombre sin ocupación, es hombre muerto para el estado [...] el ocupado es planta viva, que no solo produce, sino que se propaga; y esta ocupación es su vida política". According to the *Diccionario de Autoridades*, *ocupación* was a synonym for *trabajo*.

[50] ARRIQUÍBAR: *Recreación política. Primera parte*, p. 48. OS: "una mutua y continua dependencia, que los hombres tienes unos de otros".

[51] ARRIQUÍBAR: *Recreación política. Primera parte*, p. 49. OS: "cada uno en su clase, están sujetos al trabajo, sin que ninguno se pueda eximir de aquel sagrado precepto".

[52] ARRIQUÍBAR: *Recreación política. Primera parte*, p. 50. OS: "el hombre nació para el trabajo, como el ave para el vuelo: y el querer vivir sin trabajar, es, no solo contra el orden de la providencia, sino también contra el interés de la sociedad".

Hispanic world.[53] As discussed in relation to the *Nuevo sistema*, reformers attached particular importance to the question of how landed property should be distributed in order to improve cultivation and increase agricultural output. This concern stemmed from the widely shared conviction that agriculture formed the foundation of the imperial economy, supplying the raw materials that industry processed and commerce exchanged. Yet, while the issue of property has often been examined in relation to the rationalisation of economic activity and the expansion of cultivated land within the framework of agrarian thought, the conceptual implications of the centrality of landownership in reformist discourse have not yet been fully explored.[54]

As early as 1766, the Crown ordered the creation of an *expediente* to gather information on the state of agriculture across the various regions of the Peninsula, with the aim of formulating appropriate measures to eliminate abuses in both legislation and agricultural practice. The results of this extensive inquiry were published in 1784 in the *Memorial ajustado sobre el establecimiento de una Ley Agraria*, which also included contributions by Pablo de Olavide, Intendant of Seville (1725-1803). Olavide had meanwhile overseen the colonisation project of the Sierra Morena, where the distribution of small individual plots of land to settler families served as the foundation for the creation of new agricultural communities in an uninhabited region between Madrid and Seville. In a later work, the Peruvian-born reformer clarified the essential function of landownership within this reformist vision, as it encouraged greater individual productivity through a stronger attachment to labour, "which cannot be expected of a man who is not secure in the land on which he works".[55]

Agricultural concerns likewise inspired what became the most influential writing produced by Spanish economists of the period: the 1795 *Informe sobre la ley agraria*

[53] HERZOG, Tamar: *Frontiers of Possession: Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 119-126.
[54] See GARCÍA SANZ, Ángel: "La Reforma Agraria de la Ilustración: proyectos y resultados. El precedente del arbitrismo agrarista castellano", in Ángel García Sanz and Jesús Sanz Fernández eds., *Reformas y políticas agrarias en la historia de España*, Madrid, Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentacion, 1996, pp. 161-200. For the ideas on property and agricultural improvement of specific thinkers, see also LUNA, Pablo F.: "El intocable dominio y las reformas de la posesión: los planteamientos de Campomanes", in *Tiempos Modernos*, vol. 12, n. 2, 2005, pp. 1-26; LUNA, Pablo F.: "La propriedad y el trabajo en la reflexión de Jovellanos", in *Revista Asturiana de Economía*, vol. 45, 2012, pp. 75-95.
[55] OLAVIDE, Pablo: *El Evangelio en triumpho. Tomo quarto*, Valencia, Imprenta de la Orga Hermanos, 1798, p. 168. OS: "lo que no es posible esperar de un hombre, que no está seguro de la tierra en que trabaja".

by Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos (1744-1811).[56] Labour, indeed, stands at the centre of the theoretical frame sustaining the work. In reconstructing the history of Spanish agriculture and the origins of the civil institutions that had accompanied the social evolution of humankind, Jovellanos introduces the central concept of "property of labour" (*propiedad del trabajo*). According to the Asturian thinker, man received from God the command to live by his labour, the right to appropriate land, and a natural inclination (*amor propio*) to earn his subsistence through work. This principle of self-preservation also structured the emergence of social coexistence: once men gathered into communities, they divided the ownership of land, and thus the sphere of individual interest came to be perfected in relation to the specific object of each individual possession. The drive to improve and multiply production led, in turn, to the emergence of "another kind of property, different from land property; that is, the property of labour was born".[57]

Through this formulation, Jovellanos elevates labour to the status of a governing principle of human activity, shaping both the moral and material responses to the impulses of *amor propio* as social complexity increased.[58] The recognition that "[land] rewarded greater labour with greater yields" marked the moment when individual effort came to be measured against the desire for its products —and when labour itself began to constitute a legitimate title to property.[59] However, Jovellanos did not regard labour as the sole foundation of property, or as a pre-political right capable of legitimising resistance to oppressive rulers —even if, as Pablo F. Luna noted, he enshrines it with a creative function, capable of transforming social reality.[60] Rather, the reflection of the Asturian minister was firmly framed within the broader project of Catholic Hispanic Enlightenment, as signalled by the relevance of *amor propio* in his argument.

[56] See JOVELLANOS, Gaspar Melchor: *Escritos económicos*, Madrid, Real Academia de Ciencias Morales y Politicas, 2000.
[57] JOVELLANOS: *Escritos económicos*, p. 198. OS: "otra nueva propiedad distinta de la propiedad de la tierra; esto es, nació la propiedad del trabajo".
[58] Jovellanos' understanding of the *ley de amor* as the principal social bond reconciled Catholicism, self-interest (*amor propio*) and commercial society. See VIEJO YHARRASSARRY: *Amor propio y sociedad comercial*, p. 119.
[59] JOVELLANOS: *Escritos económicos*, p. 198. OS: "a mayor trabajo correspondía siempre con mayores productos".
[60] LUNA: "La propriedad y el trabajo".

During the same years, Jovellanos articulated with great clarity the centrality of labour to all forms of economic activity in his *Introducción a un discurso sobre la economía civil* (1796-1797). After demonstrating that economic prosperity rested on the interdependence of agriculture, industry, and commerce, he defined agriculture as the art of applying labour to cultivation, industry as the art of applying labour to natural products, and commerce as the art of applying labour to their transport, distribution, and sale. Since these activities were commonly regarded as the "sources of prosperity", the logical conclusion was that "the perfection in the art of performing labour" constituted the principal source of wealth.[61]

Those who immobilised labour, therefore, were objects of particular criticism. It is noteworthy that, in this regard, the old trope of the pernicious effects of American wealth resurfaced in the late eighteenth century. In a letter concerning agriculture and property in Asturias, he observed that those who emigrated to America and returned home wealthy posed a serious threat to the regional economy. Once back, they contributed to the harmful practice of purchasing and perpetually entailing landed estates thanks to the riches accumulated overseas.[62] By withdrawing land from circulation —land that might otherwise sustain the speed and vitality of economic exchange— such practices were seen as detrimental to the overall dynamism of the economy.

Finally, another voice in this discussion is that of Francisco Cabarrús (1752-1810). A member of the same generation of economists as Jovellanos and the man behind the foundation of the National Bank of San Carlos (1782), he held views considerably more radical than those of his Asturian friend. His *Cartas sobre los obstáculos que la naturaleza, la opinión y las leyes oponen a la felicidad pública* were published in 1808, at a moment of profound crisis for the Spanish monarchy, which had failed to resist Napoleon's armies. While Jovellanos's *Informe* was seen as the "immortal project" that consecrated him within the pantheon of Spanish and European economic thought, Cabarrús's own reflections offered a commentary on, and in part a critique of, its analysis of the obstacles hindering

[61] JOVELLANOS, Gaspar Melchor: "Introducción a un discurso sobre la economía civil y la instrucción pública", in *Revista asturiana de economía*, vol. 45, 2012, p. 185. OS: "fuentes de la prosperidad [...] la perfección del arte de aplicar el trabajo".
[62] JOVELLANOS: *Escritos económicos*, p. 524.

Spain's progress toward prosperity. He began his argument by observing that the disorder of political communities arose from legislators pursuing their private interests at the expense of the common good. The experience of the French invasion compelled the economist to reflect on the decadence of Spain's political and economic system, which had led to the present crisis. A thorough examination of contemporary Spanish legislation, he argued, required a return to the origins of political societies in order to discern when and why the Spanish monarchy had deviated from a balanced social evolution.

Labour occupies a central place in the social anthropology outlined in the *Cartas*. It is labour, Cabarrús contends, that generates property— and simultaneously gives rise to society itself. Property rights, he argued, emerged when an individual and his family worked a piece of land, thereby legitimising their possession of it. At this stage, society did not yet exist. It came into being only when

> [families] understood the necessity of coming together in order to collectively protect the property and security of each individual: this has been, is, and will forever remain the social pact: its purpose is to safeguard individual security and property, and society can therefore do nothing against those rights that precede it.[63]

In contrast to earlier elaborations, property was not conceived by Cabarrús as a means of securing the maximisation of individual labour and, consequently, productivity. Rather, it was regarded as a fundamental natural right —a pre-political entitlement grounded not in divine intercession but in the application of individual labour to nature. Cabarrús's labour theory of property closely echoed John Locke's formulation, as also suggested by the use of the well-known comparison with the empty grasslands of North America as a representation of the natural state of human communities.

Property also served as the key through which Cabarrús interpreted the failures of Spain's contemporary economy. In his reconstruction, a decisive turning point in the country's political and economic decline occurred when legislative power was entrusted to "a body composed of men, almost entirely without property and, for that very reason,

[63] CABARRÚS, Francisco: *Cartas sobre los obstáculos que la naturaleza, la opinión y las leyes oponen a la felicidad pública*, Vitoria, Imprenta de Don Pedro Real, 1808, p. 9. OS: "[las familias] comprehendieron la necesidad de reunirse para que todos juntos protegiesen la seguridad y la propiedad de cada uno: tal es aún, tal fue y será siempre el pacto social: se dirige à proteger la seguridad y la propiedad individual, y por consiguiente la sociedad nada puede contra estos derechos que la son anteriores".

enemies of property itself".[64] These men, rather than applying the law, presumed to interpret it —an arbitrary and intolerable stance for anyone who believed in the unity and rationality of legislation. This "body" was none other than the Catholic Church. The delegation of legislative authority to religious institutions marked, in Cabarrús's view, the origin of Spain's political disorder, a condition perpetuated under the stewardship of inept administrators. The French Revolution and the collapse of the Spanish Bourbon monarchy opened up, for a short time, the conceptual possibility of radicalising the Hispanic economic Enlightenment by incorporating a virulent anticlericalism into projects for economic reform.

5.-Labour and Conflict (in the Upper Peru)

The polysemy of the concept of labour is not an incidental intellectual feature of this history. Rather, it signals the elevation of "labour" to a foundational concept of the age, as the discursive field it generated provides a privileged vantage point from which to examine the conflicts unfolding among social actors who mobilised different rhetorical strategies in order to gain intellectual authority or to legitimise support for their political positions.[65] To conclude this study, we shall therefore return to Spanish America, in particular to nowadays Bolivian highlands, in order to analyse the polysemy of labour in action as it shaped the famous *gran debate* over the *mita* (1793-1794) between the Intendant of Potosí, Francisco de Paula Sanz (1745-1810), and the Fiscal of the Audiencia of Charcas, Victorián de Villava (1747-1802).

The dispute is well known in the historiography, and Rossana Barragán Romano has recently provided an indispensable analysis that highlights its significant influence on debates in Upper Peru and the Río de la Plata, resonating later in the discussions of the Cádiz Cortes, which led to the formal abolition of the *mita*.[66] There is therefore no need to rehearse here the well-established features of the controversy. Instead, this

[64] CABARRÚS: *Cartas*, p. 13. OS: "á un cuerpo compuesto de hombres cuasi todos sin propiedad, y por lo mismo enemigos de ella".
[65] KOSELLECK, Reinhart: "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History", in *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 75-92.
[66] BARRAGÁN ROMANO: *El imperio del trabajo*, pp. 451-548.

section considers conflictive meanings of labour as a central point of contention between these two figures.

To begin with, Sanz and Villava were both exponents of Enlightenment economic reformism and thus shared many ideas regarding the necessity of stimulating the productivity of the empire and the importance of labour as the origin of wealth. Indeed, returning to the initial epistolary exchanges between them, one finds evidence of mutual appreciation, as they both operated within a similar political-economic mindset.[67]

Their fundamental divergence, however, concerned the legitimacy of political authority to compel Indigenous populations to work —a position closely linked to Villava's engagement with constitutional culture, then emerging from political-economic reflection.[68] Sanz, by contrast, embraced the economic diagnostics promoted by the new science while rejecting its political implications —especially the push towards constitutional respect for individual rights. He instead regarded the hierarchical segmentation of the monarchy's vassals into groups of differing status as natural and was instead profoundly shaped by Bourbon regalism and its doctrine of strengthening the rights of the Crown vis-à-vis other jurisdictional authorities.

In his *Discurso*, Villava linked the ignorance of the true origin of wealth at the time of the conquest —and the greed of the *conquistadores*— to the institutionalisation of the *mita* system, designed to provide labour for silver extraction from the Cerro Rico. Consequently, Indigenous populations were said to have developed a particular indolence and aversion to labour, caused by two centuries of oppressive legislation that hindered the development of *amor propio*, more complex desires and consumption patterns, and therefore any will to improve their economic condition through work. Potosí thus exemplified the fragility of wealth based solely on precious metals and its tendency to generate oppression and inequality.[69]

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[67] GONZÁLEZ PIZARRO, José Antonio: "Reexamen de una polémica sobre la legislación minera indiana a fines del siglo XVIII. Los discursos y cartas de Victorian de Villava y Francisco de Paula Sanz (1793-1795)", in *Revista chilena de Historia del Derecho*, vol. 13, 1987, pp. 201-203.

[68] See PORTILLO VALDÉS, José M.: *La vida atlántica de Victorián de Villava*, Madrid: Doce Calles, 2009; PORTILLO VALDÉS, José M.: "Constitucionalismo antes de la Constitución. La Economía Política y los orígenes del constitucionalismo en España", in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, *Colloques*, 2007. Available at: http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/4160. [Accessed on 18 November 2025].

[69] LEVENE, Ricardo: *Vida y escritos de Victorián de Villava*, Buenos Aires, Peuser, 1946, p. xxiii.

His years in Charcas, the resonance of the dispute, and his appreciation of the extraordinary difficulty of reforming imperial structures convinced Villava of the structural need to change the mode of governing the American territories if the monarchy hoped to avoid losing them. Thus, in 1797 he drafted a general plan of reform which, in its chapter on the American dominions, once again reproduced the common stereotypes concerning the conquest and the Spaniards' alleged lack of economic knowledge. Their ignorance, according to the Fiscal, hid to them the fundamental fact that "the true riches of any Country are its people, not gold and silver".[70] Therefore, Indigenous labour was exploited for the sake of precious metals, and this inhuman practice was even institutionalised by arguments on the natural inferiority of the local populations. Implicitly referring to his attempt to abolish the *mita*, he commented that "notwithstanding the philosophy of this century and its bright writings against this violence", no one dares to suppress it "for the sake of the sacred metal".[71] Reading the reality of Potosí through a concept of labour inseparably tied to its capacity to generate individual (political) rights, Villava looked with melancholy upon the impossibility of eradicating what he regarded as a barbaric practice. In doing so, he anticipated the conceptual debate centred on the relationship between individual labour and rights that would feed the socio-political conflicts unfolding after the imperial crisis of 1808-1810.[72]

As noted, Sanz also recognised the centrality of human labour as the principal factor in the creation of wealth. Thus, a dismissive attitude towards work was, in his view, unacceptable in a Spanish vassal. He believed that "if the wealth of a state is nothing more than the product of labour of its people, it is necessary for the Government to encourage and even compel them to pursue those occupations that brings utility both to themselves and to the nation". [73] Sanz supported this claim by citing Antonio

[70] VILLAVA, Victorián: *Apuntes para una reforma de España, sin trastorno del gobierno monárquico, ni la religión* (1797), in *Revista de la Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*, vol. 30, n. 7/8, 1943, p. 1105. OS: "las verdaderas riquezas de cualquiera País son los hombres, y no el oro y la plata".
[71] *Ibidem.* OS: "a pesar de la filosofía de este siglo y de sus escritos luminosos contra esta violencia [...] por lo sagrado del metal".
[72] ORTEGA, Francisco A.: "The Conceptual History of Independence and the Colonial Question in Spanish America", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 79, n. 1, 2018, pp. 89-103.
[73] CORTES SALINAS, del Carmen: "Una polémica en torno a la mita de Potosí a fines del siglo XVIII. El discurso de Francisco de Paula Sanz a favor de ella", in *Revista de Indias*, vol. XXX, 1970, p. 191. OS: "si las riquezas de un estado no son otra cosa que el producto del trabajo de los hombres, es necesario que el Gobierno incline y aún obligue a estos a aquellos trabajos que pueden dar utilidad a ellos mismos y a la nación".

Genovesi's *Lecciones de Comercio* —an author well known to his opponent[74]—, arguing that the fundamental social pact required that "there would be no person in the civil body who did not serve some purpose, provided that they were capable of doing so", the government acting as guarantor of this agreement.[75] It was therefore legitimate to force Peruvian *indios* to work, as this appeared to be the only way to transform them into useful vassals and to sustain the exploitation of the mining centre that underpinned the imperial economic system in the Southern Cone.

Moreover, Sanz considered the *mita* a convenient mechanism for turning the Indigenous population into useful vassals because coerced labour was a necessary measure: experience had shown, he argued, that Peruvian peoples resisted incorporation into Spanish commercial society and the adoption of commercial — thus civil— manner. In Potosí, where the only viable productive activity enabling participation in a market economy was silver-mining, coerced labour was the only means to make them productive vassals.

After a decade in the region, Sanz observed that even when surrounded by Spanish commodities, the Peruvian *indio* "do not move to desire them".[76] Indigenous communities adhered to their own customs, he believed, and even their wealthier members were not animated by the acquisitive and commercial spirit that marked civilisation. The Intendant agreed with Villava that individual emulation and indirect means were the best ways to erode "backward" customs, and he praised the recent abolition of the *repartimiento*. However, he noted in despair that notwithstanding the abolition, the Indigenous worker appeared irreducible to Spanish culture, as "neither the sight of comforts themselves and of cleanliness, nor the promise of greater profit, reduces him to the regular condition of other men".[77]

This debate encapsulates the forms of polysemy of the concept of labour described throughout this study and manifest the polemical character it assumed in a

[74] ASTIGARRAGA, Jesús and Javier USOZ: "Del A. Genovesi napolitano de Carlo di Bourbone al A. Genovesi español de Carlos III: la traducción española de las Lezioni di commercio de V. de Villava", in *Cuadernos de Historia del Derecho*, vol. 15, 2008, pp. 293-326.
[75] CORTES SALINAS: "Una polémica en torno a la mita", p. 196. OS: "no hubiese en el cuerpo civil persona que no sirva para algo como esté apto para ello".
[76] CORTES SALINAS: "Una polémica en torno a la mita", p. 146. OS: "no se mueve a desearlas".
[77] CORTES SALINAS: "Una polémica en torno a la mita", p. 149. OS: "ni la vista de las comodidades mismas y del aseo, ni la mayor ganancia lo reduce a la clase regular de lo demás hombres".

specific socio-historical context. Both Sanz and Villava began from the recognition of the central role of human labour in generating wealth (Section 2), a characteristic that became constitutive of a normative and abstract vision of society in which each individual or vassal must engage in productive labour for the common good (Section 3). Consequently, labour acquired a generative character in relation to the social system and to individual rights —a quality whose priority vis-à-vis the political pact between sovereign and governed could be invoked either to defend the individual's right to act or resist state power, or to legitimise the state's interference in the private sphere of the vassal by obliging them to fulfil their social duties (Section 4).

The principal difference between the two men, then, lay in their understanding of the nature of the Indigenous population of Upper Peru. Villava's universalism — grounded in the belief that human nature is everywhere the same and therefore that the same laws should apply to all— stood in stark contrast to Sanz's anthropology of difference, which assessed human groups according to their capacity (or incapacity) to attain civilisation through labour. It is important to note, however, that Sanz's geographical determinism was not structured according to rigid racial categories: he attributed Andean Indigenous "indolence" not to their condition as *naturales* but to the specific geo-cultural context in which they lived. For instance, he noted that the "Patagonian *indios*" he met in Buenos Aires were amused and attracted by European commodities and comfort, signalling their potential "acculturation" by the means of commerce and emulation. Villava, instead, attributed their aversion to labour to the detrimental legislation, which by not conforming to natural law was responsible for the moral degeneration of Andean populations.

Their crucial point of convergence, however, lay in a shared "invisibilisation" of Indigenous labour and in the silencing of Andean perspectives on their role within the socio-economic order of Potosí.[78] They just arrived at it from opposing standpoints. Villava, for his part, belonged to a late-eighteenth-century current of thought that expressed concern for the condition of the *naturales* —an early "humanitarian" attitude, rooted in Catholic doctrine and natural law, and exemplified by the writings of Francisco

[78] The first step toward a new understanding of the socio-economic history of Andean mining is to critically evaluate the subordinate position historically reserved for Indigenous labour. See BARRAGÁN ROMANO: *El imperio del trabajo*, pp. 36-53.

de Vitoria and Bartolomé de Las Casas. Sanz, on the other hand, acted as a champion of the interests of the *azogueros* —the great mine-owners whose objective was to secure low-cost control of Indigenous labour in order to maintain profitable margins in silver extraction. To do so, he had to oppose politically and legally the forms of silver production outside *azogueros*'s control —practices that offered autonomous miners (*k'ajchas*) or *trapicheros* greater opportunities for individual gain. While Villava had only a limited grasp of the complexity of the labour regime in Potosí, sustained as it was by Indigenous communities, Sanz deliberately obscured this reality in order to favour his own supporters, thereby underscoring the essential dependence of silver extraction in Potosí on the labour of hundreds of *mitayos*.[79] The result, however, was broadly similar: both positions contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Potosí's productive world and Indigenous indolence toward productive activities.

To conclude, it is important to emphasise the fruitful perspectives that arise when central sites in the development of global capitalism —such as Potosí— are considered as places of conceptual politico-economic innovation. Understanding conceptual change as inextricably linked to the socio-economic context allows us to see that, where the laws of motion of society and community reproduction increasingly came to be dictated by the rhythms of global markets, conceptual transformations followed, helping to rationalise the social changes that historical actors saw unfolding before their eyes. Regarding the Indigenous labour on which silver extraction depended, Spanish officials in the Potosí were aware already in 1692 that "the *indios* are the sole foundation of this great machine called *mita* [...] in the absence of the *indios* its opulence and wealth of metals will disappear".[80] At the same time, the Indigenous people were far from the indolent figures depicted by Sanz: although constrained by highly coercive social structures and obligations, they attempted to take advantage of the economic system built upon European greed for precious metals. Discussing the shortage of labour in 1626, the representatives of the *azogueros* noted that Indigenous workers were evading their

[79] Sanz was well aware of *k'ajchas*' activities, as those are described in a history of Potosí written in 1791 by his close collaborator, Pedro Vicente Cañete. See CAÑETE, Pedro Vicente: *Guía histórica, geográfica, física, política, civil, y legal del Gobierno e Intendencia de la Provincia de Potosí*, Potosí, Editorial "Potosí", 1952.

[80] The Virrey of Perù, Count of Monclova, quoted in BARRAGÁN ROMANO: *El imperio del trabajo*, p. 233. OS: "son los indios todo el fundamento de esta gran máquina de la mita [...] en faltando los indios faltara [...] su opulencia y riqueza de metales".

obligations: as "as it is natural, they do not want to work [...] where there is not profit, and so they leave and hide [...]. The *indios* want to work in rich mines, because there they stole a great deal of valuable ore, which then they openly sell in the market square of Potosí".[81] This story, however, still awaits thorough investigation.

6.- Conclusions

This study reconstructed relevant conceptual fields surrounding "labour" within the Hispanic economic Enlightenment, positioning it as a foundational element in the social and economic reform projects of the Spanish monarchy. During the eighteenth-century *Sattlezeit*, the concept of labour underwent a crucial transformation, moving from moral, juridical, and theological considerations to become a central principle of the new science of political economy. Spanish intellectuals sought to adapt contemporary economic ideas —which stressed the role of population and labour in generating wealth – to the specific conditions of the Hispanic world.

Works like the *Nuevo sistema* emphasized the necessity of transforming vassals (including Indigenous ones) into productive subjects, useful to the Crown through the stimulation of their *industria* (skill or industry). Through figures like Campomanes and Arriquíbar, labour was conceptualized more abstractly, becoming the true measure of the aggregated wealth of the kingdom, distinguished from parasitic wealth derived from precious metals. This view postulated a social system whose members were interconnected by the necessity and obligation to work (understood as activity producing a surplus). The growing centrality of labour also reshaped conceptions of property, transforming it from a normative legal framework rooted in customary practice into an object of increasingly abstract economic reasoning. Although Jovellanos did not go as far as considering labour as the sole foundation of property, he elevated the concept of *propiedad del trabajo* to a governing principle, legitimizing individual effort and opening the doors for the creative role labour could have in transforming society. Cabarrús, with

[81] Quoted in BARRAGÁN ROMANO: *El imperio del trabajo*, p. 200. OS: "como es cosa natural, no quieren trabajar [...] donde no hallan ganancia, y así se ausentan y esconden [...]. [Q]uieren trabajar los indios en minas ricas, porque en estas hurtan mucho mineral rico, que después sacan a vender públicamente en la plaza de Potosí".

a more radical vision, defined the labour-based property as a pre-political natural right that founded society itself. The polysemy of the concept and its conflict-ridden nature clearly emerged in the *mita* debate between Villava and Sanz. Both shared the idea that it was the principal factor in generating wealth. However, Villava used the labour-rights nexus to condemn forced labour based on a universalism grounded in natural law, while Sanz, adhering to Bourbon regalism, justified the obligation to work to transform the American Indigenous populations into productive vassals and sustain the empire, based on an anthropology of difference. This conceptual conflict highlights how labour was used both to claim individual rights and to legitimize state interference in the private sphere, a peculiar trait of modernity.

The increase in individual productive output can thus be understood as a central objective of the Hispanic Enlightenment. As the texts discussed were produced by or addressed to the imperial administration, this study demonstrates the importance of integrating the state into the history of economic thought—and into economic history more broadly. Doing so allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the transformations that reshaped early modern Europe alongside the expansion of overseas and domestic trade. Indeed, to better historicise economic practices, socio-cultural change, and the emergence of modern capitalism, the state must be viewed as a proactive agent in this process —not merely as a neutral institutional playing field composed by archaic legislative obstacles to be removed to foster the supposedly natural development of commercial propensities inherent in human nature.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the centrality of the concept under analysis within economic thought across the Hispanic world, showing how the increasingly prominent importance of economic output for governing imperial formations had intellectual and social consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. Approaching the rise of economic reflection as the product of engagement with one's own social world thus offers a perspective capable of generating a non-Eurocentric history of economic thought – one that examines the key concepts through which different societies confronted the social transformations brought about by growing interdependence with global markets. Such an approach may contribute to the

construction of a more inclusive canon of the history of economic thought, no longer determined solely by the historical experience of a reduced part of the world.

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