October 2017

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Recommended Citation

Gil-Osle, Juan (2017) "Vizcaínos: The Scourge of the Empire and Uncomfortable Identities," *BOGA: Basque Studies Consortium Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

[10.18122/boga/vol5/iss1/4](https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/boga/vol5/iss1/4)

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Vizcaínos:
The Scourge of the Empire and
Uncomfortable Identities

Juan Gil-Osle, PhD

"Then he shewed them...
the nature of the Spanyardes,
howe they are sluttysse and lousy."
~Lord Berners, 1525, OED entry on "sluttish"

"Quejábase una vizcaína de los castellanos,
porque podaban las viñas, diciendo que si
las dejasen crecer, podría ser que allegasen a Vizcaya."
~Melchor de Santa Cruz, *Floresta española*,
quinta parte, cap. 1, "De vizcaínos," 18

Insults were and are a reality, but their presence in early modern literature is overwhelming.¹ The British, like Lord Berners, insulted Spaniards, Spaniards insulted Basques, Basques insulted people of the Malabar coast, and so on. The list and

¹ This article would not have been possible without the help of Kimberly C. Borchard, Katie Brown, Erika Bondi, Roslyn Frank, Mikel Lorenzo Arza, Tatiana Alvarado Teodorika, Marcial Rubio Áñez, Óscar Álvarez Gila, Sharonad Fredrick, Juliann Vitullo, Joel Gereboff, among others. I thank all of them for their suggestions to improve the content and the form of this essay.

combinations of offenders and offended would be endless. To narrow the scope of this analysis I will focus on the case of the Basques, or *Vizcaínos*, as they were known at the time.

What a *Vizcaíno* is in the literature of the 16th and 17th centuries has always been a puzzle due to the different uses given to the word. The connotation of the term *Vizcaíno* can go from an insult similar to “thief,” “traitor,” even “Portuguese,” to, in other cases, “stupid,” “gregarious,” or simply different. In other words, the *Vizcaíno* is a paradigmatic.

Other, which seems to have become an insider Other (nothing could be more enervating for some in Spain, or more nostalgic for others than the “insiderness” of this quintessential Other).² And unfortunately, in this case, otherness has been the companion of both hate and nostalgia, which seem to be extreme emotional expressions that justify numerous slanders, acts of violence, and overcompensations.

“The *Vizcaíno* effect” has become a systemic mark in the understanding of Spanish and Basque identities in the long process of nation building, probably based on the long term construction of misperceptions, miscommunications, and opportunistic manipulations of all sorts. These misperceptions are not far away from hate speech. According to constructivist theories of ethnic conflict, hate has a political and economical advantage: “Bigotry provides the members of society and its rulers with a number of important economic and status advantages” (Levin 76); perhaps, it is within an economy of *status quo* that insults can be understood.³ One critical moment for any community’s status quo is the creation of the nation, with its boundaries, language, centralized institutions, and

² According to a study, in 2015, from the Uppsala University, Sweden, the Basque genome has remained distinctive since the Neolithic Period (between twelve to ten thousand years ago): “In summary, our ancient genomic sequence data from the El Portalón individuals and our analyses suggest the following model of events: The incoming early farmers, who could have spoken a non-Indo-European language, assimilated resident hunter-gatherers, with this admixed group becoming the ancestors of modern-day Iberian groups. Basques remained relatively isolated (compared with other Iberian groups) with marked continuity since the Neolithic/Chalcolithic period, but not since the Mesolithic (contrary to refs. 8, 9, and 26). Later migration into Iberia, possibly during the long reign of the Roman Empire and the 7th to 13th century period of Moorish rule of the peninsula, led to distinct and additional admixture in all Iberian groups but the Basque population (23)” (Günther 5).

³ Levin asserts that “Getting the dirty work done is hardly the only economic benefit derived from hate and prejudice. Depending on prevailing economic circumstances, the members of a society may become more active in seeking new avenues to assuring their own economic and status survival. When they are threatened, some may attempt to eliminate their competitors for scarce resources. Because of their vulnerability as stigmatized “outsiders,” minority group members make especially effective targets of hate and hostility” (Levin 78).

religious identity. In the nation building process hate has been proven useful by many scholars, for instance in 19th-century Poland: “nationalism became a mass movement ... an ideology of hatred in conjunction with—but *not simply because of*—its reconfiguration as a vehicle for popular politics” (Porter 5); or in Germany and Rwanda in the past century, “The Rwandan genocide is reminiscent, in some ways, of events during World War II ... against ... people were though to stand in the way of establishment of a Nazi nation...” (Sternberg, *The Nature* 3); or in early modern Spain with systematic annihilation of Jewishness and Islamic identities, languages, rites, political powers etc., among many others.⁴

Let’s recall that in a funny conversation between Sancho and Don Quixote about the author of the true history of the Knight of la Mancha, whereas Don Quixote is anxious about how the Muslim “Cide Hamete Benengeli” has painted his honest love, Sancho is concerned about the Moorish writer stating clearly that he is an old Christian, and that, as a consequence, he hates Jews (Cervantes 603-04)⁵ y cuando otra cosa no tuviese sino el creer, como siempre creo, firme y verdaderamente en Dios y en todo aquello que tiene y cree la Iglesia Católica Romana, y el ser enemigo mortal, como lo soy, de los judíos.” (603-04)

Many times similar comments pass by as humoristic in our readings of the early modern literature, but perhaps it is pertinent to locate them as a part of the so-called “Triangular Hate Scale” (Sternberg, *The Nature* 217). First comes the verbal negation of intimacy with the target group, later passions are verbalized; finally there is a commitment to act and propagate the sentiment of hate (Sternberg, *The Nature* 217). Sancho expresses a second stage verbalization in the hate scale, or perhaps even a third level since his words have spread around the world, and he is conscious of the existence and success of the *Don Quixote* book. Perhaps Sancho echoes the numerous “fictional pseudohistories” written at the time, which were symptomatic of difficult negotiations with the past and

⁴ There are different approaches to the question of exclusion in nationalisms. For instance, E. J. Hobsbawm considers that nationalism is not associated with the early modern period, and that its expansionist and inclusivism nature is related to evolutionary ideas. Small nationalities “were even reconciled to the loss of what could not be adapted to the modern age” (35). For Anthony W. Marx, on the contrary, asserts that this “image of European nationalism as civic” is a “particular historical focus, it hides as much as it reveals” (114).

⁵ y cuando otra cosa no tuviese sino el creer, como siempre creo, firme y verdaderamente en Dios y en todo aquello que tiene y cree la Iglesia Católica Romana, y el ser enemigo mortal, como lo soy, de los judíos.” (603-04)

the present of the Iberian peninsula (Fuchs 399).

Hundreds, and even thousands, are the examples that I could call to mind in the task of defining the social uses surrounding the word *Viscaíno* according to documents from the 16th and 17th centuries. In order to avoid an excess of information, I will reduce the examples to the ones given by a handful of authors. Some are very well known, such as Miguel de Cervantes, others are well established in the field of colonial literature, such as Álgar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, and Catalina de Erauso; while others might be secondary to the Peninsular and Colonial literary canons, for instance Diego Muñoz Camargo, González de Zúñiga, and Francis Xavier.

The Basque speaker is a humoristic literary character, referred to as a *Viscaíno*. Without a doubt, the most famous *Viscaíno* of the times is the character in *Don Quixote* who fights with the eternal knight of *La Mancha*. Both of the fencers, Don Quijote and the *Viscaíno*, are ridiculed in the text by Cervantes in a way that was normal at the time. The provincialism of Galicians, Catalonians, Andaluzians, as well as *Vizcaínos* seems to have been an effective humoristic trick:

Sabido es que en las colecciones de cuentos chistosos de Melchor de Santa Cruz y Francisco Asensio, divididas por secciones y temas, hay una sección de cuentos sobre Vizcaínos, pero todos hacen hincapié en su simplicidad o falta de expresión idiomática en castellano. (Caro Baroja, *El señor inquisidor* 213)

Vizcaínos as unarticulated and simple-minded peoples have appeared in jokes of all types in the written and oral traditions.⁶ Nevertheless, other authors' representations of *Vizcaínos* and their languages cannot be understood as humoristic; instead they give us invaluable insight into linguistic definitions of language, xenophobic uses of ethnicity, and ideological struggles for power. In fact, *Vizcaínos* are hostile others which help to define the selves and the texts of a large cultural production.⁷ This history of cultural production of antagonisms is in connection with the long history of ethnic slurs against northerners of non-Castilian language. For Joxe Azurmendi, in *Espainolak eta euskaldunak* [*Españoles y vascos*], this history of ethnic slurs would have started with the Germanic

⁶ *Floresta española de apotegmas* I, 5a parte, cap. I; vol II clase IV, cap I; III, clase IV, cap. I.

⁷ According to Harold Ram Vesser, "selves and texts are defined by their relation to hostile others (despised and feared Indians, Jews, Blacks) and disciplinary power (the King, Religion, Masculinity)" (xiii).

kingdoms established in Castile and France after the destruction of the Roman Empire.⁸ In fact, Azurmendi might have a point since in Spanish Medieval and early modern historiography Visigoths are not only Spaniards, but also protagonists of the Spanish nation's "foundational myths."⁹ From this perspective the phenomenon is a permanent one, and calls for deeper analysis beyond circumstantial data and contemporary confrontations.

Somewhere at the heart of these adamant rejections must be some ahistorical reasons. One might consider that the unintelligible language systems used by Basque speakers form such a formidable insulating wall that projects of linguistic unification under a single and universal code result in frustration and rejection. As a consequence, the question of language is even more complicated by compensatory reactions. For instance, it is not clear that everyone considered Basque to be a language, or what constituted the communities of *Vizcaino* speakers. To be sure, in the early modern period, an explanation would be that Basque was not a language because it did not have political and military power behind it, and because it remained mainly an oral linguistic code.

In the sixteenth century, and up until very recently, the Basque language was characterized as an extravagant system of communication without a clear status or filiations, and with many names, such as *Vizcaino*, *vascongado*, *vascuence*, *vasco*, *euskera*. For instance, between 1537-55, Álgvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca compared the *Viscaino* language to the variety of languages spoken by the natives of *Pimería*, which impeded tribal communication.¹⁰ To ease the consequences of this Tower of Babel, caused by the hundreds of languages spoken among the peoples encountered by Cabeza de Vaca and his group, the natives used—he says—the “*primahaitu*” language:

Así les respondieron a los cristianos y lo mismo hicieron saber a los otros por una lengua que tenían entre ellos, con la que nos entendíamos y que llamamos propiamente *primahaitu*, que es como decir *vascongados* que de las más de cuatrocientas lenguas entre las que anduvimos, era usada entre ellos sin tener otra en común por aquellas tierras. (94, my emphasis).

What exactly the *Primahaitu* was remains unclear. But the term has a long history since

⁸ Traditional historiography considers that Visigoths are Spaniards.

⁹ See Ryjik's discussion on the topic.

¹⁰ Today's border region between Arizona and Sonora. The report about his trip was first written in 1537. The first printed version is published in 1542, the second, in 1555.

Cabeza de Vaca used it in Spanish. It comes from the Uto-Aztec languages spoken by the Pima people (O'odham Nation) and other groups in the Tepima Corridor in Arizona and México (Images 1 and 2). Today, the term appears in the Oxford English Dictionary, and in the *Corpus del Diccionario Histórico* on the *Real Academia* website.¹¹

**AMERICAN INDIAN
LANGUAGES: THE
HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS
OF NATIVE AMERICA.**

Campbell, Lyle., 2000, c1997, p. 358.

OXFORD STUDIES IN
ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS

**American Indian
Languages**

The Historical Linguistics of
Native America

Lyle Campbell

MAP 6 Uto-Aztecan Languages

(redrawn after *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 10, p. 114)

Image 1. Pima and the other Uto-Aztecan languages.

¹¹ "Pima, adj. Spanish, shortening of Pima Ayto, from Pima pimaha'icu 'nothing', perhaps a shibboleth" (OED. Oxford English Dictionary).

Cabeza's journey and the Tepima corridor

Image 2. From Adorno, Rolena. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar, 16th cent. *Relación y comentarios. English & Spanish*. University of Nebraska Press (1999); and from 2013 Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, A.C. (Reproduced by permission)

Unlike Pigafetta's book on his circumnavigation of the earth in Magellan's expedition, the *cronista* of *Naufragios*, unfortunately, does not provide specifics about this pidgin. While explaining to the king of Spain what the *primahaitu* could be like, Cabeza de Vaca equals this *primahaitu* to the "vascongados" (Basque speakers).

For a Basque speaker, this explanation is a non sequitur. Unless he really means what he says: the *primahaitu* is not the langue of anyone, but is just a pidgin, as the "vascongados" who live around the Gulf of Biscay, use a comparable pidgin to understand each other.

The lack of knowledge of the Basque reality in Cabeza de Vaca is baffling, and somewhat dangerous for someone who is giving testimony to Charles V of the lands and peoples that he encountered (according to the legend, Charles V knew some Basque, learned from his

confessors).¹² The consequence is that Basque is equated with pidgins and probably non-written language, and therefore with Barbarians; for Las Casas the second type of Barbarian is one who does not have a written linguistic code (Pagden 127-32). But Cabeza de Vaca is right about the fact that *Vizcaínos* have many dialects that could be unintelligible to each other; therefore, *Vizcaínos* or *vascongados* must have resorted to various types of accommodations to communicate effectively when needed. Nevertheless, without being an insult, this downshift to the status of pidgin is serious, and some level of aggression is operating under Cabeza de Vaca's misperception.

Other writers, such as Diego Muñoz Camargo (*novohispano*) and Gonzalo de Zúñiga (*sevillano*), use the word *Vizcaíno* as an insult and as racist slander.¹³ Gonzalo de Zúñiga in 1561 writes a puzzling *relación de indias* where he washes away any trace of himself as a rebellious *conquistador* (Borchard 47). In his manipulative report, he underlines his unquestioned loyalty to the king and the evil nature of the Basque Lope de Aguirre and the other *Vizcaínos* on Aguirre's side:

Y eran todos Vizcaínos y marineros y gente de costa y de poca honra, a los cuales, como den lugar para robar y andar en vicios, como él les daba, es gente muy maldita y muy mala. (14)¹⁴

The accusations of dishonesty against the people of the coast are not unique; and the concomitance of costal residency with pirate activities is not new—even inland Basques would say the same about the shore people. What interests me here is that the implications of these views result in the lack of belonging to the right community and vice-versa. Tamar Herzog, in her research on early modern Spanish identities, has brought up the idea that Spanishness was a performance of “membership in a religious and civic community” within the whole geographical span of the empire. As a result, Spaniards “behaved like Spaniards, using Spanish clothes, speaking Spanish, and

¹² “Nuestro Señor quisiese traerme adonde ahora estoy, pudiese dar testimonio de mi voluntad y servir a Vuestra Majestad” dice en su Proemio (12).

¹³ Racism as a consequence of biopolitics was already operative in the early modern Hispanic world; see Francisco Vázquez García.

¹⁴ Other meaningful quotations from Zúñiga are: “respondía [Orsúa] que no había menester guarda, donde tenía tantos Vizcaínos de su banda, que a la primera palabra que en vascuence les hablase vendrían todos a morir por él; y ellos fueron los primeros en el motín y en su muerte” (10); “Fueron de voto algunos que matasen a Lope de Aguirre, pues le quitaban el cargo, porque tenía muchos amigos Vizcaínos, y era hombre belicoso...” (13); “Y eran todos Vizcaínos y marineros y gente de costa y de poca honra, a los cuales, como den lugar para robar y andar en vicios, como él les daba, es gente muy maldita y muy mala” (14); “...juntamente con los otros Vizcaínos que le ayudaban” (16); “se levantó un vizcaíno, muy peor que andaluzado” (26).

associating with non-Indians” (Herzog, “Can You Tell” 148-49). Geographical and genetic background became increasingly inefficient in an era of global mestizo minds (Herzog 149-50; Gruzinski 3-4). Acculturated Iberians were expelled from the Spanish networks, while indigenous elites enlisted themselves into the Spanishness performance. Some Basques seem to fall into an insufficient performance of Spanishness, in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as in the rest of the Crown’s global territories.

The word *Vizcaíno* as a signifier of unwelcomed people could be even stronger as a marker of insufficient performance of Spanishness. In this regard, Zúñigas’s descriptions sound naïve compared to the sweeping generalizations written by Muñoz Camargo, a descendent of the native elites. For this Spanish-American man born in New Spain the *Vizcaínos* are one of the scourges of the Empire, along with Jews, Muslims, and impoverished unproductive people:

Estas y otras fanfarrias y locuras dicen, que jamás acaban de blasonar del arnés, y ansí cuando algún español los maltrata, le dicen que es mal cristiano, que no es hidalgo ni caballero, porque si lo fuera que sus obras y palabras fueran modestas como de caballero pero que debe de ser villano, moro o judío o vizcaíno. Y al remate cuando no le hallan vituperios con que podelle vituperar le dicen, al fin eres portugués, pensando que en esto le ha hecho muy grande afrenta. (128-29)

This quote comes from a passage where Muñoz Camargo describes the belligerent behavior of descendants of the native nobility. Native local aristocrats refused to do filthy work in the community and, therefore, they insulted the Spaniards who mistreated them. Leaving aside the political and colonial struggles between Spaniards and Portuguese encoded in the foul language that Muñoz Camargo describes, the gradation of the insults is telling us that there are three axes in the semantics of this series of insults: unproductivity, religion and language. The term “villain” refers to social unproductivity issues, Moors and Jews relate to religion, and *Vizcaíno* and Portuguese to linguistic systems; all of them refer to different political and economic competitors in the process of building the Spanish nation around the globe. In fact, the first two—unproductivity and religion—are a big part of the analysis of racism and bio-politics in early modern nation building of Spain (Vázquez García). Perhaps, the foul language of hateful insults must be included in the analysis of Spanish early modern bio-politics.

There is a short leap from questioning the insider quality of a person to suspecting treason.

Muñoz Camargo, a descendant of native leaders makes this substantial statement, which can be interpreted in terms of Herzog's approach to the issue of Spanish identity outside of the peninsula. Members of the native elites, when mistreated by original European Spaniards, disqualify them as not belonging to the right community, the Spanishness credo being forged around the world. To be sure, upon glancing at colonial texts, it is not difficult to come across *Vizcaíno* as a signifier of traitor. Zúñiga is not unique in that respect. Pero Hernández, Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's secretary, writes in his *Comentarios* about Cabeza de Vaca's time in Paraguay. Hernández makes clear from the beginning that upon his arrival to *Isla Catalina*, Cabeza de Vaca hears about the treason committed by his rival, who is described as a *Vizcaíno* (157-58).

This account describes the rivalry between Domingo de Irala and Núñez Cabeza de Vaca for governance of the region, and provides space for an incessant exhibition of insults based on race and cultural categories. Pero Hernández always refers to Domingo de Irala as the *Vizcaíno*, underlying at every turn his deplorable persona. Irala is not the only *Vizcaíno* portrayed as a traitor in early modern literature and history. The *vascongado* Pedro Navarro—known as Count Oliveto—would be another perfect example of a traitor. Navarro, a soldier of fortune, conquered a number of cities in Northern Africa under Cardinal Cisneros, but he ended up working for the French enemy against Castile. The Basque Catalina de Erauso and his picaresque biographical narration as a soldier in America is another place to look for numerous slanders and treasons involving *Vizcaínos*.

As a counterbalance, I could mention the insults used by a *Vizcaíno* against other groups, for instance the missionary Francis Xavier's slanders against the Brahman elite in the Malabar Coast, India (Javier 1996, 112-15). Xavier's cultural insensitivity and harsh criticism in his description of the Brahmans of the Malabar Coast proves equally distasteful to modern sensibilities. He describes them in turn as idiots, conmen, uneducated, and evil. Paradoxically, he also asserts that the Brahmans are his confidants, and that they believe him to be wiser than all of them (Javier 1996, 112-15). From his unwaveringly traditional theological standpoint, Xavier portrays the Brahman elite of India as an "other," through this act of alienation suggesting that south Asian culture and high-caste Asians are inappropriate rulers for the new Christian flock that he is creating. Concerning the theological contents of his Xavier's writings, it has been said that:

we must not project our mentality and our preferences on Francis and his catechesis. If the Masters of Paris distinguished themselves in their preaching, it was not, in any way, in their theological update or in their opening to new dogmatic formulations, but by their scrupulous fidelity to traditional theological formulations ... We would like to find in the theology of Francisco glimpses of modernity that responded to our theological conceptions. But there is nothing of that in his writings. The revolutionary of Francisco is in his poor life, his attention to the marginal and his catechetical methods, not in the theological contents that are the usual in the Roman Catholic West of his time."¹⁵

According to Frédéric Conrod, the historical irony is that Xavier dogmatism has ended in the assimilation of his image into the Hinduism pantheon: "It is frequent to encounter his miniature plastic statue or that of Christ next to that of Ganesh in people's cars or houses. Xavier has been integrated into cultural Hinduism as the reconciler between West and East, but certainly not in the terms that the saint established in his spiritual narrative and registered throughout his correspondence with Loyola, Rodriguez, and the King of Portugal. Xavier's binary cosmology was therefore interpreted against its own conditioning. But the abundant visual representations of the saint, combining a reassuring feminine gaze with a youthful man's body, have served to present another, partial aspect of the saint among many that complete one another. Xavier's image is another medium of the Hindu *darsan*, the direct communication with the image in which the deity expresses emotions and love, and then presents himself in order to bless the viewer. Perhaps the highly pictorial nature of the Roman Baroque and that of Hinduism had too much in common.

In spite of potential theological contradictions, the *darsan* is a Hindu practice compatible with the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*" (Conrod 110-11). In Xavier's letters, "evil" becomes a common epithet for Muslims, Brahmins, and Bonzes who, in addition to the corrupt Portuguese, were the deadly enemies of his mission (Ruiz 85).

Nevertheless, in his contemporary homeland, Navarra, his status (or non-status) as a

¹⁵ "no debemos proyectar sobre Francisco y sus catequesis nuestra mentalidad y nuestras preferencias. Si en algo se distinguieron los Maestros de París en su predicación no fue, de ninguna manera, en su actualización teológica ni en su apertura a nuevas formulaciones dogmáticas, sino por su escrupulosa fidelidad a las formulaciones teológicas tradicionales... Nos gustaría encontrar en la teología de Francisco atisbos de modernidad que respondieran a nuestras concepciones teológicas. Pero no hay nada de eso en sus escritos. Lo revolucionario de Francisco está en su vida pobre, su atención a los marginales y sus métodos catequéticos, no en los contenidos teológicos que son los usuales en el Occidente católico romano de su época" (Ruiz 85-86).

Vizcaíno is a political statement, but his own self-fashioning in 1544 as *Vizcaíno*, and *Portuguese*, bears meaning: “como ellos no me entendiesen, ni yo a ellos, por ser su lengua natural malavar y la mía vizcaína” (Xavier, Cochín 15 de enero 1544, 20th letter). Today Xavier is considered a Spanish Jesuit since his family castle is in Navarra, Spain. Furthermore, during Franco’s dictatorship (1939-75), his image became associated with representatives of the fascist regime. As a result, since Franco’s death, Xavier’s image has been politically overexploited in books, radio talks, newspaper articles, etc.¹⁶ The fact that during the 20th century Xavier was emptied of his *Vizcaíno* speaker identity makes me think of this word as a crucible of miscommunication at least from the 16th century until the present-day echoes of early modern slanders against *Vizcaínos*.

All in all, these early modern examples and counter examples share *Vizcaínos* as subjects and objects of vexing speeches. These injurious words overlap in representing indignation as caused by power struggles: confrontations between missionaries and local religious leaders, colonizers and local powers, different colonizing individuals, etc. Reading Martha C. Nussbaum’s and James Q. Whitman’s thoughts on law, ethics, and disgust, provoked by the “colorful shaming penalties” inflicted by Abu Ghraib personnel, one can not help but be struck by the assertion that “[t]he human animal is capable of behaviors unimagined by our rational act models, and even by our most resolutely ‘behavioral’ brands of law and economics” (Whitman 2701). Struggle is at the base of everything, and disgust represented in the examples above could be read in many ways (as manifestations of humor, nationalism, competition, otherness, self-righteousness, etc.), but the question of hate and slander in early modern literature in Spanish calls for deep analysis, since I am not certain that the anti-egalitarian sentiment they distill has been overcome.

¹⁶ See Gil-Osle’s “Nations and Legacy: The Case of Saint Francis of Xavier.”

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