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Hispanisms and Whiteness in Conservative Andean Public History

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Abstract: This article examines the construction of conservative public histories in the Andean countries, exploring their continuities and transformations into the 21st century. Rather than viewing history solely as discourse, I approach it as a series of commemorative and communicative practices that project racialized imaginaries publicly. From this perspective, I analyze how conservative public history, linked to Hispanist ideologies, shaped ideas of racial hierarchy both nationally and transatlantically. Particular attention is given to the alleged historical objectivity claimed by neo-Hispanist discourse, its strategic connection to mestizaje as a whitening ideology, the diplomatic use of historical narratives, and contemporary expressions of whiteness through Hispanist rhetoric in media. My aim is to illuminate these critical intersections, opening a broader debate on racialization within the field of public history.

Keywords: public history; whiteness; Andean countries; Hispanism; mestizaje; diplomacy

1 On White Diplomatic Hispanism

> The racism of whiteness only requires that the internalization
>
> of the capitalist *ethos* be made evident in some way…
>
> Bolívar Echeverría[1]

One of the key diplomatic milestones in Spanish-speaking countries was the *Exposición Histórica-Americana de Madrid* in 1892. Its historical nature allows us to trace a network of meanings and connections associated with Hispanism and the Hispanic commemoration of this cultural phenomenon. From the late 19th century onward, October 12 was commemorated as the *Día de la Hispanidad* also referred to as *Día de la Raza*, understood as a "mixture."[2] This commemoration provided an international framework that facilitated the erection of monuments honoring conquistadors, the glorification of religious missions and the Catholic Church, the sanctification of its heroes, and the establishment of various Hispanic commemorations across Latin American cities throughout the 20th century. During the consolidation of the Francoist dictatorship, multiple *Institutos de Cultura Hispánica* – active since 1945 – were established, directly linked to diplomatic policies. Other strategies of this conservative public history included organizing the Seville Exposition in 1929 and founding the Museo de América in Madrid through a decree issued in April 1941.

Diplomacy, both as a concept and in practice, has evolved historically and has operated differently across various contexts. However, in its most contemporary sense, it is closely linked to the idea of representation and negotiation, elements that make it a communicative gesture.[3] Rather than defining what diplomacy *is*, my focus in this article is on what it *does*, how it operates, and what it sets in motion within a broader framework. From the late 19th century onward, much of the Hispanist phenomenon functioned within the realm of diplomacy, framed by a series of celebrations that reinforced what was called "Spanish pride" – a term used in the 19th century by the Peruvian diplomat Pedro del Solar. This sentiment became visible in celebratory gestures commemorating Columbus's arrival in the Americas, as well as in the gifting of archaeological or historical objects by Latin American delegations to the Spanish monarchy. These narratives exalted racial mixing and the triumph of Hispanic civilization over Indigenous American worlds during the conquest.

1 Bolívar Echeverría, Modernidad y blanquitud (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2010), 64.

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2 The date was known as the "Discovery of America," carried out by Christopher Columbus. Following the Hispano-American Historical Exposition held in Madrid in 1892, commemorations began in Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. Over the course of the twentieth century, more nations joined in this celebration.

3 Thierry Balzacq, Frédéric Charillon, and Frédéric Ramel, "Introduction: History and Theories of Diplomacy", in *Global Diplomacy* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 1–16.

Hispanism, understood as a transatlantic link between the Iberian Peninsula and its former colonies, gained renewed momentum in the late 19th century. Its reception varied across countries, shaping national historical identities in different ways. In Mexico, for example, it oscillated between acceptance and criticism, but was gradually displaced with the institutionalization of the post-revolutionary state by currents such as Indigenism, Latin Americanism, and Indo-Americanism.[4] Beyond intellectual discourse, Hispanism also served as a moral and political framework. Spanish heritage – rooted in Christian doctrine, language, and racial constructs – became a pillar of public morality, reinforcing the Catholic Church's tutelary role in culture and in the fight against materialist and ideological threats.[5] Within this vision, Spain positioned itself as the epicenter of an imagined Hispanic governance model, structured around four key pillars: the promotion of the Spanish language, the exaltation of the Catholic monarchy and Catholicism, the significance of genealogy and Iberian surnames, and the propagation of a civilizational ideal justified by the conquest.[6]

This ideological framework was not limited to discourse; it was actively reinforced through diplomatic and cultural exchanges. Diplomatic praxis functioned as an exercise in calculated cunning or strategic flattery,[7] revealing how the past was negotiated not only as a commodity but as a condition of existence and affirmation, producing contradictory and complex effects. Some of the most well-known cases include the gifting of archaeological gold, such as the *Tesoro de Quimbaya*, donated in 1892 by the authorities of Colombia's *La Regeneración* governments to Queen María Cristina of Spain during the Madrid Exposition, and the offering of Inca artifacts by the Ecuadorian government, under conservative president Gabriel García Moreno, to Queen Victoria of England in 1862. These gifts were not mere gestures of goodwill; they were strategic maneuvers aimed at securing benefits and concessions in diplomatic affairs, territorial disputes, resource exploitation, or global trade agreements. The circulation of these objects reflected the broader context of resource extraction and cultural appropriation. Many had been acquired through mining, exploration, or *huaquería*[8] – often linked to artifact trafficking – and were highly sought after by collectors and major European ethnographic museums. At the time, archaeology as a discipline was only just being established. There was no genuine scientific interest in these materials; rather, they were primarily valued for their aesthetic appeal, driven by an exoticizing fascination with their golden allure.

This fascination with material culture culminated in large-scale exhibitions that reinforced the ideological foundations of Hispanism. The 1892 Exposition in Madrid gathered approximately two hundred thousand objects, presented as "authentic and original" American riches in a format that evoked an open history book. Artifacts contributed by various Latin American countries were arranged within a progressive temporal framework, reinforcing the idea of the American continent as an extension of Spain's civilizing mission – a "reminder of past greatness" meant to be celebrated and perpetuated.[9] The organizing committees of each country, composed of diplomats, collectors, and intellectuals, played a crucial role in shaping historical narratives about pre-Columbian civilizations. Many of these individuals later contributed to the founding of historical academies and museums in the early 20th century or were closely aligned with conservative political agendas in their respective countries.

2 Hispanisms in Transition: From the 19th to the 20th Century

The construction of Hispanic knowledge about the past gained momentum in the Andean region during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, largely driven by conservative intellectuals. This process materialized through discourses, practices, and the implementation of public policies – often intermittent or shaped by specific political circumstances – promoted by certain political sectors in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador.[10] These intellectuals,

4 Aimer Granados, "Hispanismos, nación y proyectos culturales Colombia y México: 1886–1921. Un estudio de historia comparada," *Memoria Y Sociedad* 9, no. 19 (2005): 5–15, 7.

5 Miguel Urrego, *Intelectuales, Estado y Nación en Colombia. De la guerra de los Mil Día constitución de 1991* (Bogotá, Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2002), 43.

6 See Ernesto Capello, "Hispanismo casero: la invención del Quito hispano," *Procesos: revista ecuatoriana de historia* 20 (II Semestre, 2003-I Semestre, 2004): 55–77; María Elena Bedoya, *Antigüedades y nación. Coleccionismo de objetos precolombinos y musealización en los Andes, 1892–1915* (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2021); Guillermo Bustos, *El culto a la nación. Escritura de la historia y rituales de la memoria en Ecuador, 1870–1950* (Quito: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2017).

7 Bedoya, *Antigüedades y nación*, 32.

8 *Huaquería* refers to the looting or illegal digging of huacas – sacred sites in the Andes – to obtain archaeological objects such as gold pieces or ceramics. The term comes from the Quechua word huaca, meaning a sacred place or object.

9 Isidro Sepúlveda, *El sueño de la Madre Patria. Hispanoamericanismo y nacionalismo* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2005), 10.

10 The term "Andean" is used here in a geopolitical sense to connect the Hispanist phenomenon across Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. The absence of other countries often considered Andean, such as Venezuela and Bolivia, points to a conceptual issue that may be problematized in future research.

members of white elite circles, sought to craft a national origin narrative based on a linear conception of time, aligned with European universal history and the racist, eugenicist theories of the period. This vision was not only integrated into emerging historiographical discourse but also translated into practices that positioned "civilization" as a foundational principle and *mestizaje* as the national paradigm.[11] Within this framework, a scientific community took shape, led by a legitimized white, male voice that imposed racial and gender hierarchies in the construction of the past.

Several Hispanist historians in the Andean region not only promoted this ideology through their publications but also played a key role in managing historical heritage, promoting museums, organizing archives, and shaping public monuments. Figures such as Jacinto Jijón y Caamaño, Carlos Manuel Larrea, and Federico González Suárez in Ecuador; José de la Riva-Agüero y Osma and Víctor Andrés Belaunde in Peru; and Ernesto Restrepo Tirado, Carlos Cuervo Márquez, Jose María Henao and Gerardo Arrubla in Colombia were central to the writing of national history as well as instrumental in founding and maintaining historical academies in their respective countries. Through these institutions, they legitimized the symbolic permanence of the colonial civilizing order within official memory. Many maintained close ties with the Catholic Church and conservative sectors, holding political positions, founding conservative parties, or aligning with social Christian movements. They also cultivated strong connections with Francoist Spain, reinforcing Pan-Hispanist discourse and the continuity of Hispanic values in the Andean region. A key aspect of their self-legitimization was an obsession with genealogy, using their surnames to assert personal ties to Spain and adopting noble terminologies as markers of distinction and historical authority.

A key aspect of Hispanist influence was the institutionalization of historical knowledge. In Colombia, the founding of the *Academia de Historia y Antigüedades Colombianas* (later the *Academia Colombiana de Historia*) in 1902 marked a milestone. From its first publication, the *Boletín de Historia y Antigüedades*, a distinction was made between the scholarly study of American antiquities and national history as a moral and civic tool.[12] Under Ernesto Restrepo Tirado (1910–1920), the *Museo Nacional de Colombia* expanded its collections, shaping its discourse around national identity within a Hispanist framework. In Peru, the *Instituto Histórico del Perú* (now the *Academia Nacional de Historia*), founded in 1905, responded to similar concerns. Its president, Eugenio Larrabure, promoted the nationalization of historical heritage in response to increasing looting, coinciding with the research of German archaeologist Max Uhle at the recently reestablished *Museo de Historia Nacional* (now *Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú*). In Ecuador, the *Sociedad de Estudios Histórico-Americanos*, created in 1909 and consolidated as the *Academia Nacional de Historia* in 1920, reflected a conservative vision of the past. Led by priest Federico González Suárez, this society – composed of Quito's white elite – spearheaded the reorganization of museums and archives from this perspective.[13]

The construction of Hispanic time was shaped by a racial hierarchy that determined who could be included in the national narrative and under what terms. As Peter Wade argues,[14] the ideology of *mestizaje* played a key role in this process, functioning as a mechanism of whitening – both physically and culturally – while reinforcing a structure of male dominance. Similarly, Steve Garner points out, whiteness can be understood as a set of values, norms, and cultural capital that structures social hierarchies, produces claims to moral authority, and defines standards of respectability through which racialized others are delegitimized. These values – such as self-reliance, rationality, emotional control, productivity, and discipline – are presented as universal, yet function as racialized criteria that allow white subjects to position themselves as the rightful bearers of knowledge, civilization, and progress.[15] Within this framework, Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations were relegated to a peripheral or 'folklorized' temporality, confined to a distant or timeless past that

11 I approach *mestizaje* through Peter Wade's conceptual framework, which moves beyond its conventional definition as a "mixing of races" to understand it as an ideological formation that has shaped racial and national hierarchies in Latin America. In this sense, I consider *mestizaje* not merely as a biological or cultural process, but as a political discourse that produces symbolic inclusion while sustaining practices of exclusion and social whitening. See Peter Wade, *Raza y etnicidad en Latinoamérica* (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2000), 101–103.

12 Amada Carolina Pérez, *Nosotros y los otros. Las representaciones de la nación y sus habitantes. Colombia, 1880–1910* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2015), 156.

13 María Elena Bedoya, "Naming the past: The collecting and musealization of Pre-Columbian artifacts in the Andean Region, 1892–1920," in *Before América. Original Sources in Modern Culture*, eds. Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, Manuel Fontán del Junco, and María Toledo Gutiérrez (Madrid: Museo Kaluz/Fundación Juan March/Ediciones La Bahía, 2023), 28–31, 29.

14 Peter Wade, "Repensando el mestizaje." *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* (Bogotá, 2003), 277.

15 Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007), 49.

excluded them from the historical present of the nation. Hispanic temporality reinforced the notion of a "dead time" associated with Indigenous peoples, encapsulated in categories prefixed with "pre" – such as pre-Columbian or prehistory – which contributed to an allochronism[16] that subordinated alternative temporalities to the logic of linear time. This framework not only reinforced the continuity between the colonial past and modernity, but also presented *mestizaje* as a point of racial mixing and reconciliation, devoid of conflict. Within this narrative, colonizing heroes, historical figures, Hispanic traditions, and colonial architecture emerged as the central elements leading this fusion, while indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants were relegated to a secondary position, represented within a triumphalist narrative of overcoming.

3 Facing New Hispanisms in a Global, Digital, and Transnational 21st Century

This Hispanic past remains effective precisely because it is not open to dispute; its authority rests on a universalist prism and on the self-serving diplomacy of whiteness – a racialized form of diplomacy that naturalizes colonial hierarchies and frames history as a benevolent civilizing narrative within the concert of nations. In today's global, digital, and transnational context, a new Hispanism has resurfaced, seeking to restore past glories through a renewed civilizational discourse – an attempt to reassert dominance in response to the growing visibility of voices long marginalized within official history. Closely tied to the dynamics of mass media and digital platforms, this new Hispanism also aligns with the powerful resurgence of the new right, which finds in the imperial past a key resource to reinforce nationalist, authoritarian, and exclusionary projects. Since the 1990s, however, Indigenous and Afro-descendant movements in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador have gained significant political influence, challenging these hegemonic narratives. In Ecuador, CONAIE's[17] 1990 uprising led to the creation of Pachakutik[18] (1995) and the constitutional recognition of plurinationality (1998). In Colombia, the 1991 Constitution, shaped by mobilizations from PCN[19] and CRIC,[20] declared the nation multiethnic and multicultural, followed by Law 70 (1993), which granted Afro-Colombian territorial rights. In Peru, despite limited constitutional recognition, AIDESEP[21] has led struggles for land titling and environmental protection. By asserting their historical agency and rights, these movements fracture nationalist frameworks that have long erased Indigenous and Afro-descendant histories, contesting the very foundations of the Hispanist discourse.

In this new social and political context, a conservative wave has gained momentum, led by historians who revive and disseminate ideologies associated with Hispanism through social media. One representative case is Francisco Núñez del Arco in Ecuador, who maintains ties with far-right groups. During feminist and Indigenous-led social mobilizations in 2019 and 2022, Núñez del Arco publicly glorified the statue of Queen Isabella the Catholic – patron of Columbus' voyage – which was challenged by these movements as a symbol of colonial violence. Simultaneously, ultraconservative sectors used platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter to circulate texts and images glorifying Hispanic civilization. Far-right leaders positioned themselves as defenders of tradition and Hispanic celebrations, relying on racist and misogynistic discourses that perpetuate stereotypes and inequalities. Núñez del Arco is part of Ecuadorian far-right groups that exalt historical figures linked to Catholic conservatism, such as President Gabriel García Moreno.

In Peru, Rafael Aita, known as Capitán Perú, stands out as a key figure in this movement. Closely linked to right-wing circles in Spain and conservative associations of Spanish Hispanists, he employs manga, cosplay, short videos, and documentaries to support his historical outreach through comics, books, and public lectures. With nearly 100,000 followers on Facebook and a significant YouTube audience, he has become one of the country's most influential figures in historical dissemination. Aita argues that Peru's history has been misrepresented, focusing his work on rehabilitating the image of conquistadors and emphasizing familial ties between Indigenous peoples and Spanish settlers as examples of integration – denying colonial oppression and violence. He presents history as a narrative of pride in both the Inca and Spanish legacies, promoting the idea of mestizaje. Aligned with conservative historiographical traditions

16 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 80.

17 Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), *Quiénes Somos*, https://conaie.org/.

18 *Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement – New Country* (MUPP-NP), the political arm of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). See https://pachakutik.org.ec/.

19 *Black Communities' Process* (PCN). See https://www.renacientes.net/.

20 *Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca* (CRIC). See https://www.cric-colombia.org/.

21 *Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest* (AIDESEP). See https://aidesep.org.pe/.

and Fujimorista candidates, Aita consistently claims that he and his movement possess the definitive truth about history. Through direct engagement with young audiences, Capitán Perú seeks to "reveal the true history," turning historical discourse into a tool for nationalist revisionism. His success illustrates how digital media amplifies exclusionary narratives under the guise of historical education.

In Colombia, groups such as *Colombia Hispánica* have emerged, active on Facebook and Instagram, with a modest but steady audience dedicated to vindicating the Spanish legacy, Hispanic brotherhood, and the fight against the so-called "Black Legend."[22] Their posts include images of monuments to conquistadors accompanied by offerings as acts of homage. Another reference was Pablo Eduardo Victoria Wilches, a historian and economist who passed away in July 2024, known for his work against the Black Legend and for demystifying the figure of Simón Bolívar. Although no longer active, his legacy continues to circulate in certain intellectual Hispanicist circles. Victoria had served as CEO and advisor to several companies, was a senior reservist in the Colombian Army, a columnist in conservative newspapers such as the Spanish *ABC*, and an active member of the Conservative Party.

Perhaps the most evident form of ideological ambiguity – which I would describe as neoliberal – appears in a series of historical essays published by transnational publishers. These texts present themselves as detached from political conflict but, in reality, deploy a narrative that neutralizes critique. Written in a carefully crafted literary style, books such as Enrique Serrano's *¿Por qué fracasa Colombia?* revive nineteenth-century Hispanist postulates and skillfully reconfigure them in light of contemporary dilemmas.[23] This panorama also connects with Spain, where nineteenth-century diplomacy shaped understandings of history through Hispanist narratives across the Atlantic. Today, however, the dissemination of knowledge relies on transnational mechanisms tied to digital platforms, mass media, and publishing. Many contemporary works – with audiences rivaling historical novels – focus on dismantling the so-called Black Legend, such as María Elvira Roca Barea's *Imperiofobia y leyenda Negra* or José Luis López Linares's documentary *España, la primera globalización*. These share a strong neoconservative bias and resonate with right-wing and far-right parties as part of a global project of conservative authoritarianism that justifies existing hierarchies through anti-migrant and racist narratives.

This new conservatism still lacks sufficient contemporary critical readings. In essence, what this history – better described as neoliberal – produces is a particular mechanism: it recognizes the existence and strength of anticolonial memories but frames them within disciplinary categories (presentism, anachronism, regime of memory, trauma) that, instead of engaging with the problem and with the rights implied in listening to other voices, end up stripping those memories of their political force under the seal of disciplinary authority. Thus, the emphasis shifts toward defending a supposed "professional history" that positions itself as the legitimate arbiter against collective memories often dismissed as overly political or emotional, even though, paradoxically, neoconservative productions of both past and present emerge from those very sites of dispute.

In short, this new neoconservative and neoliberal public history differs from the classical conservative kind: it no longer needs to openly champion old colonial narratives but instead reproduces hierarchies of knowledge and preserves academic authority by depoliticizing conflict and neutralizing the transformative potential of critical memories. In the global context of the rise of far-right ideologies, this discursive operation seeks to project a seemingly neutral public history that in fact denies and dilutes conflict. It is no coincidence that the success of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hispanism lay precisely in this ability to neutralize confrontation and shield the hegemonic narrative, thereby accompanying the relentless advance of the capitalist ethos of whiteness.

4 Final Reflections

Contemporary Hispanism is not simply a revival of conservative authoritarian narratives. It is articulated through a refined temporal logic: history is conceived as a neutral and depoliticized space, where conflict is erased and the neoliberal subject positions itself as alien to that past. Any contemporary politicization is thus dismissed as a distortion of historical analysis, disqualified as presentism, or reduced to an anachronistic resurgence of identity essentialisms. In this framework, *mestizaje* and whiteness are reaffirmed as the final stages of a naturalized civilizing trajectory, elevated as unquestionable symbols of national progress, while any claim to territorial, racial, or gender

22 The Black Legend refers to a propaganda narrative developed by Spain's European rivals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that depicted the Spanish Empire as exceptionally cruel and fanatical. It drew heavily on Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), whose denunciations of colonial violence were later amplified to discredit Spain.

23 Felipe Martínez Pinzón, "El hispanismo sigue vivo en el siglo XXI," *Razón Pública*, May 9, 2016, https://razonpublica.com/el-hispanismo-sigue-vivo-en-el-siglo-xxi/.

rights is presented as a threat that distorts the legitimate historical narrative.

These new Hispanisms reveal a structural problem within public history itself: far from being a field dedicated exclusively to the democratization of historical knowledge, it also functions as a vehicle for deeply conservative currents that reaffirm racial hierarchies, patriarchal models, and colonial temporalities. By appropriating digital tools and claiming objectivity, these narratives update the colonial, racial, and gendered apparatus, denying alternative temporalities and subaltern histories, while reinforcing whiteness and masculinity as epistemic authorities and national ideals. Recognizing this tension is essential to questioning the racialized and masculinized foundations of public historical discourse and to imagining more plural, critical, and inclusive ways of relating to the past.

In conclusion, this article is a preliminary attempt to outline lines of research on the role of whiteness in the field of public history. While much has been written about the ideological foundations of Hispanism and the legacy of colonial temporalities, the racializing logic of whiteness – and its functioning through diplomatic, historiographical, and museological frameworks – remains insufficiently explored. In particular, whiteness has often been rendered invisible in narratives of national *mestizaje* and progress, thus eluding critical scrutiny. Approaching whiteness as a historical and structural formation, rather than as an individual identity, is crucial to understanding how public history continues to reproduce hierarchies of power, authority, and legitimacy. Far from offering definitive answers, this article aims to open a space for reflection and debate, encouraging new research on how whiteness operates within public history in Latin America and beyond.

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