Oriental despotism in the Americas: Robertson, Clavigero, Mill

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Abstract

This paper will explore James Mill's use of the works of William Robertson (‘The History of America’, 1777) and Francesco Javier Clavigero (‘The History of Mexico’, 1787) in Book II of ‘The History of British India’ (1818). Clavigero's account of Mexico was written in response to that of Robertson, challenging Robertson's claims regarding the 'barbarity' of the Aztecs on many counts, and challenging Buffon's thesis of the 'degeneracy' of the Americas (which Buffon and Robertson extended to its plants and animals, as much as its peoples). It pays special attention to how Robertson modified Montesquieu's concept of 'Oriental despotism' to fit the Mexican and Peruvian contexts, and how Mill used Clavigero's account of Mexico to challenge Robertson's contention that ancient India was much more civilized than pre-conquest Mexico and Peru, but only to demonstrate that all three societies were in the same 'semi-barbarous' condition. It will be suggested that Mill's procedure here was both dictated by the theoretical-political (philosophical) purposes of his intervention and violated the methodological criteria with which he elsewhere employed (drawing on Robertson's then authoritative statement in ‘The History of America’) to criticise many of the Spanish sources on which Robertson and Clavigero relied.