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Judgement or Understanding? Reflections on 1492

The true significance of 1492 is in danger of being overlooked as the current polemic focuses on Columbus and Spanish conquest, popularizing new myths and old stereotypes. Perhaps 50 million indigenous people died from Old World disease, hundreds of cultural groups disappeared, and wealth was generated through the toil of 11 million African slaves. This suffering and loss must be weighed against the birth of new nations in the Americas, many derived from mixed roots. Karl Butzer agrees that there is plenty of blame to go around, but argues that finger-pointing will only see us repeat the mistakes of the past 500 years.

BETWEEN the anniversary years of 1892 and 1992, the persona of Columbus will have kept several generations of analysts gainfully employed. Columbus appropriately remains a symbol of the encounter between two worlds, but we need to search beyond the ongoing preoccupation with symbols. Like many a useful explanatory model, a symbol can distract from empirical research and interpretative analysis. Good revisionist history comes not from rewriting but from rethinking history. As an interdependent world is launched into

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the next half-millennium, amid festering strife and growing environmental crisis, there indeed is much to rethink.

Images of European hegemony and the world-system are illuminating, but geopolitical models downplay the internal contradictions of individuals, of peoples, and of historical process. The strength of Carlos Fuentes' *Broken Mirror* is its very lack of theory, as he unabashedly explores the collage of human experience and emotion underlying the currents of history that engulfed the Americas after 1492. It is a refreshing antidote to the ethnic stereotyping that shades the almost exultant heaping of blame on Columbus, the Spaniards, and even Europeans in general. Blind to our own faults, it is simple but simplistic to highlight the chain of events in black and white. This is exactly what can obscure the most important lessons that should be drawn from the Encounter.

Human actions reflect historical precedents and experience – imperfectly grasped for what they are – in a particular *Zeitgeist* and coloured by individualistic emotions. Understanding rather than judgement should be the goal, since the human species and its innate values are much the same on all continents and in all corners. The flaws and errors that we observe in others should call instead for self-reflection.

This essay will examine the Encounter and its possible meanings from several points of view: visions, myths, tragedy, and birth. Collectively, these perspectives have meaning for the future.

Visions include higher goals, dreams, ideals, and illusions. They are the flights of the spirit that can make intelligible the European motives during the Encounter. For one, visions have always been instrumental in drawing people away from their homes, toward distant places. They drew a million Irish to Boston and Ontario during the Potato Famine. The millions of Europeans who crowded Ellis Island a century ago came to the United States with a vision, to find a new and better life in a new world. That first generation went through countless humiliations – from routine delousings to menial jobs and tenement living in single rooms – so that their children or grandchildren might aspire to a better education and greater personal freedom. The Puritans who preceded them braved frightening seas and an equally frightening new environment with a similar vision, to find spiritual refuge in communities created according to what they believed was God's design. Poor farmers from Normandy and Poitou

tamed the tidal valleys of Nova Scotia and cleared the harsh forests of the Gaspésie to fashion new egalitarian communities. German liberals, disillusioned by the failed democratic revolution of 1848, volunteered to combat slavery in the ranks of the Union army. For centuries such diverse people have sought new opportunities, for greater personal or religious liberties or to escape the hardships and degradation of industrialization, urban proletarianization, and exploding populations in Europe. The descendants of these same people today form the fabric of North America.

Were the Spanish emigrants any different? A collection of published sixteenth century letters written to relatives back on the Iberian peninsula is replete with the poignant testimony of everyday human concerns, apprehensions, and tenderness (Lockhart and Otte). These too were very average human beings, with emotions, hopes, sensitivities, and biases no different from those typical of familiar domestic situations today. There are hints of the same fading expectations, the same uncertainties, or the same desire to rationalize family events within deeper, cultural values. Notably absent is evidence of personal obsessions such as greed or ambition.

Yet the stereotype of gold, glory, and the gospel is difficult to shake. Historical writing tends to single out individual actors and anonymous groups, subtly or not so subtly adding positive or negative colours. It is particularly difficult to comprehend the seemingly contradictory personalities or policies of the Renaissance. Columbus and Martin Luther were prototypes of a bold and self-conscious new age, but equally so their obsessions and visions were anchored in medieval roots.

The Christian reconquest of Islamic Spain provides precedents and role models to help understand the Spanish conquest of the Americas, despite significant differences between the two processes. Of particular interest is the Spanish epic hero, El Cid (1043-99) (see Hamilton and Perry). He was a professional warrior, gallant but effective in sack-and-burn raiding, charismatic but vindictive. Entering Islamic service as a mercenary, he eventually became ruler of bicultural Valencia, where he exhibited great tolerance, only to become a Christian folk hero after his death. Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, had much in common with El Cid. He admired the industry and sophistication of the Aztecs as much as he abhorred some of their customs; he negotiated with eloquent persuasion as much as he waged war with ruthlessness; he vainly aspired to become the greatest feudal lord of Mexico but remained wildly popular among the Indians even after he was

humbled by his own sovereign (Díaz). Drake and some of the Italian condottieri – cultured leaders of feared mercenaries – were men of the same mould.

The conquistadors of the Inca empire have been studied as a group; they were primarily literate and upper-middle class, rather than deviant adventurers, and they readily reassumed traditional roles back home (Lockhart). One young soldier, Cieza de León, engaged in long campaigns in Colombia and Peru, gave posterity a superb environmental and cultural description of these lands, and then used Inca informants to write the first history of their prehispanic dynasties (Butzer 1992a). Some conquistadors were creative, others were plunderers with no visions of the spirit. Fernández de Oviedo, the great natural historian who knew most of the conquistadors personally, had nothing but contempt for Pedrarias, Pizarro, Ponce de León, and De Soto, seeing them as brutal and arbitrary men. Their contemporaries evidently distinguished between the good, the bad, and the ugly. Our own evaluation of these diverse and complex characters should also be drawn with appropriate care.

In 1492 there were no precedents for European colonial administration overseas. The unwieldy system of communications provided a very imperfect picture of what transpired in the Indies, and there was no effective institutional oversight of what was a largely spontaneous colonial enterprise. Isabella (died 1506) naively wished that "her" new subjects be treated humanely, but Ferdinand (died 1516) had little interest in the New World and even less patience for idealism. Only after 1522 did Charles V, in conjunction with his Portuguese wife and empress (during 1526-39), begin to hold the reins of government. Poorly informed but suspicious about the near-chaos in the colonies, he conceded authority to the conquistadors with caution and passed a cumulative body of legislative principles designed to safeguard Indian rights. But it was 1542 before rule of law began to be implemented in Mexico (and 1570 in Peru), reflecting government inexperience, resistance in the colonies, and the immense distances that diluted both information and intervention. As with the American Constitution, in regard to slavery or voting rights, it was difficult to enforce the spirit of the laws. Even so, no uncompliant district governor ever had the insensitivity of John Winthrop, of the Plymouth Colony, who wrote that the stench of 600 Pequods, burned alive with their women and children, was a "sweet sacrifice" (Josephy 172).

Spanish government was paternalistic, in the mould of Alfonso el Sabio, the Wise (1221-84). He was a ruthless warrior-king of the reconquest who commissioned Jewish and Muslim scholars to codify Roman-Spanish law, formalized the democratic structures and privileges of Castilian towns, and sponsored the haunting paintings that illuminate the peaceful side of ethnic co-existence. The laws of Charles v modulated the Spanish zeal for conversion, set strict conditions on conquest, and guaranteed basic freedoms for Indians; assembled within the 1573 Ordinances for Settlement, they were further expanded in the Laws of the Indies. That legal code stands in splendid isolation within the annals of colonial history, and Spain remains the only colonial power with the vision to attempt to protect indigenous peoples.

From economic considerations, Spanish policy was to govern and to populate, not to expel and displace. The reconquest of the Iberian peninsula had demonstrated that new settlers were hard to attract and hold, so that a premium was placed on keeping Muslim – or Indian – farmers on the land, to ensure continuing economic productivity. In the Americas, abuse initially centred on excessive compulsory work service, involving either work periods that went beyond those of traditional Old or New World *corvée* or hard labour in mineral extraction, neither of which were compatible with either precedent. But Indian property was not confiscated (Prem).

By 1573 Spanish colonial administration was evidently being modelled on Roman provincial policy: imposition of an hierarchical government, implantation of settlers as a tool of assimilation, and systematic exploitation of resources for the benefit of Spain. Given multi-ethnic tolerance well beyond Spanish precedents, a stratified society based on ethno-racial lines emerged in the towns, while a degree of local autonomy was centred on Indian homelands (Butzer 1992c).

The *mission civilisatrice* articulated by Rudyard Kipling during the era of Victorian colonialism was already plainly formulated in the royal directives of the sixteenth century. Whereas Alfonso el Sabio had recognized the intellectual superiority of the Islamic world 300 years earlier, the Spain of the *Siglo de Oro* had gained sufficient self-confidence to advocate the cultural superiority of Mediterranean society as the hallmark of a universal civilization. Its vision was to educate its provincial "barbarians" in the virtues of Roman *civitas*. Instead of the

agora or *forum*, the central plaza now represented the ideal space where people might congregate and experience the same "enlargement of their lives, through participation in the symbols and realities of a greater world" (Tuan 179). In 1538 the Viceroy Mendoza rebuilt Mexico City according to the classicistic notions of León Battista Alberti, and immediately thereafter Indians began to be forcibly resettled in *congregaciones*, planned settlements that would impose a new harmonious order in which the Indian would reap the fruits of Mediterranean civilization.

Very much a vision, Spain's self-appointed role first formalized the re-creation of Europe in the Americas. As an inclusive policy, aimed at assimilation, it was significantly more noble than indigenous ejection or annihilation, but nonetheless insensitive and often brutal in its implementation. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now appreciate the full implications of the cultural loss and substitution implied by resettlement and assimilation. Yet Kipling, less than a century ago, would not have understood that argument.

The visions of the early missionaries are perhaps even more perplexing today. Society has become so secularized that it is difficult to accept the very premises of evangelization that motivated so many good people over the centuries to devote their lives to instruct, baptize, and nurture Native Americans in one variant or other of the Christian faith. The Spanish monarchs were almost obsessed with what they saw as their responsibility to sponsor missionization, and thousands of friars and priests, imbued with faith, worked in the Americas to Christianize and, indirectly, to civilize.

The early mass conversions of Indians in Mexico, preceded by minimal instruction, have long been criticized as naively superficial, but they fit within a missionary policy of "conversion without assimilation" that dominated in Mexico until about 1580. This era also produced the most sensitive ethnographic works, describing the world view of the Native American, as well as translations of the religious writings into Indian languages. The works of Las Casas and Sahagún stand out as landmarks to this day (Butzer 1992a). Even after 1580 there always was an alternative missionary position, strongest among the Jesuits, in favour of preserving cultural integrity; this was widely implemented in the tropical lowlands of South America. Many writers and activists today see the missionaries as insincere bigots, overzealous fanatics, or simply frivolous meddlers. But like a secular constitution, religious institutions are represented and implemented for the most part by

average people, who diverge from the ideal regardless of their convictions. It remains incumbent upon us to try to understand the role of faith in transforming the Americas in the context of the era.

Myths are distortions or serious misrepresentations that grow out of the popular consciousness or are cultivated by an élite. Five centuries have nurtured abundant myths of both kinds about the New World.

The biggest challenge for early Europeans in the Americas was the encounter with new peoples whose languages, lifeways, beliefs, and values were totally unfamiliar and deeply puzzling. In 1492 Europeans had great difficulty in finding a model with which to view and understand the diversity of Native American cultures. Columbus's accounts presented the Taino people of Hispaniola as generous, guileless, and naked innocents, living amid an exuberant tropical vegetation, nourished by an eternally spring-like climate. Unwittingly, he helped create the myth of the American Noble Savage in a primitive Eden. This became a powerful theme in European humanistic thought, from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Rousseau's *Du contrat social*, with a revival among writers in the nineteenth century ecological movement.

Las Casas, who with good reason castigated Spanish treatment of the Indian, subscribed to this same myth, even though he cannot be excused for writing without first-hand experience. Las Casas deserves credit for demonstrating the rational capacity of the Indians, but he also knew, yet ignored, that the neighbouring Caribs preyed savagely on the Taino, enslaving, killing, and even eating them, as a matter of course. In refusing to recognize differences in cultural complexity and customs, he sanitized his ethnographic materials, coming to the disturbing but dogmatic conclusion that human sacrifice and cannibalism once were universal traits, demonstrating a higher concept of God among the most religious peoples (Butzer 1992a 551).

Elements of the same myth persist in the Chicano literature that attempts to expurgate the positive Spanish components in Mexican culture, seeking artificial self-identification in a glorified Aztec past – while downplaying that past's social inequalities and poverty, constant wars, and oppressive domination of other indigenous peoples.

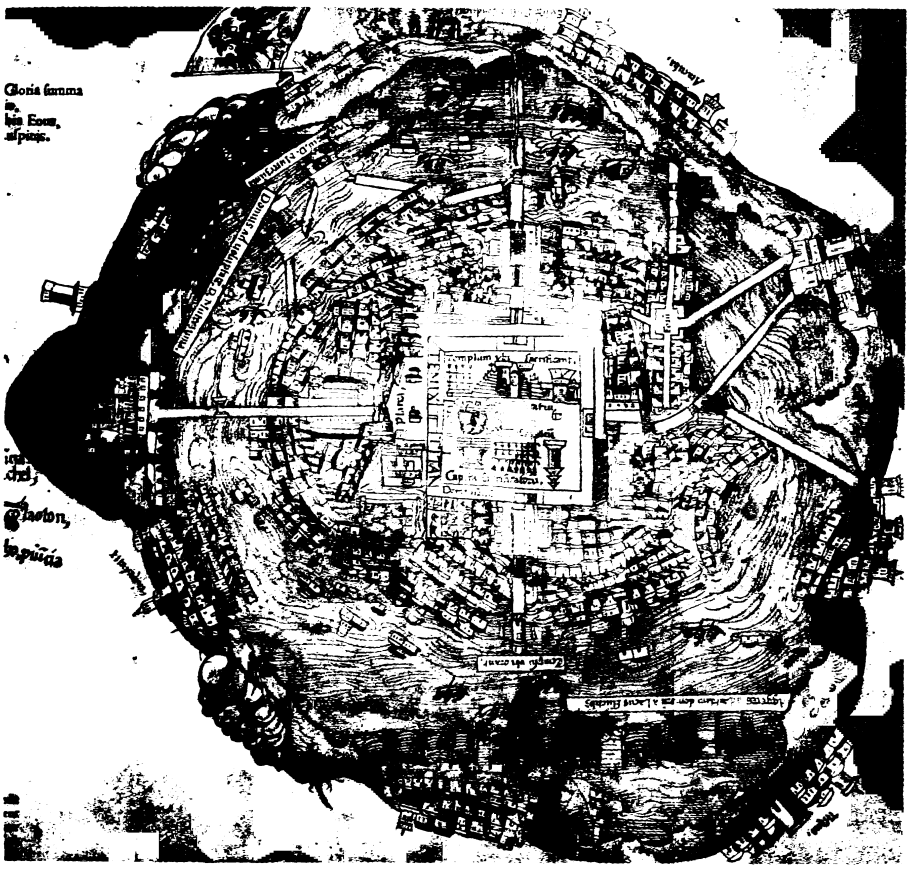
Far more widespread and pernicious was the myth of the Subhuman Indian. That incomprehension was fostered by one current of Spanish writings, but it was in the British colonies that such views were pervasive among the élite. The English vicar Samuel Purchas described the Indians as "bad people, having little of human-

ity but shape, ignorant of civility or arts or religion; more brutish than the beasts they hunt," while the Bostonian preacher, Cotton Mather, likened them to the "beavers upon our streams" (Zuckerman 144). Afraid of succumbing to the "spiritual thralls of the wilderness," the British authorities outlawed interracial marriage to prevent "abominable mixture and spurious issue," ordering that mixed couples "be banished forever" (Zuckerman 146). It is commendable that the first Spanish colonists did not find it unreasonable to marry Indian women, or at least to legitimize formally the children of such interracial unions. Perhaps half of the second generation in many Spanish colonies or towns carried Indian blood in its veins, while still qualifying as *españoles* – Spaniards.

The New England settlers could not even persuade themselves to engage in missionizing the Indian, and the Reverend Eleazer Wheelock passed his collection plate to sponsor such preaching only to find it empty except for a bullet and a gun-flint (Zuckerman 147). Such attitudes to peoples of non-European origin have unfortunately remained alive in the segregation of American church communities until very recently. To the credit of Spain, both the conquered and the conquerors could worship together under one roof.

Another important myth is that of the Pristine American Wilderness, an idea that goes back at least as far as romantic primitivists such as Thoreau (see Denevan). The publication of the recent Smithsonian exhibit "Seeds of Change" claims that "The native people were transparent in the landscape, living as natural elements of the ecosphere. Their world [was one] of barely perceptible human disturbance" (Shetler 226). In the hands of contemporary professionals, such misrepresentation is a disservice not only to the public, but also to Native Americans and to conservationists. It reinforces the myth of technologically primitive aborigines, blending into the forest like the beavers of Cotton Mather.

The so-called New World was the scene of ancient and populous civilizations, not an empty land. Denevan estimates the population of the Americas in 1492 at 54 million, with a margin of error of 20 per cent. Those people lived primarily by agriculture, much of it technologically sophisticated. Their built environments remain conspicuous in the landscape today, ranging from the ruins of monumental cities and cult centres, to conspicuous field patterns in the eastern United States or Amazonia, to road systems in New Mexico or Peru.



A woodcut accompanied publication of Hernán Cortés' second letter in Nuremberg, 1524.

Just as the pioneers in the eastern woodlands found countless Indian clearances, so did the early Spaniards encounter deforested landscapes in Mexico and Panama. Pollen evidence from several parts of Mexico shows that periods of high population density led not only to deforestation but also to vegetation degradation, with "weed" explosions. The same is true in Central America, where topsoil and nutrients were washed rapidly into lakes near Classic Maya sites, to the degree that one may wonder whether post-Classic population collapse was facilitated by unsustainable kinds of land use.

A companion of the Pristine myth is that of the Devastated Colonial Landscape. It has long been popular to ascribe landscape destruction to the cattle and sheep introduced by Spain to the New World. But a detailed study of the archival documentation in sixteenth century central Mexico fails to find support for such an intuitively appealing hypothesis (Butzer and Butzer). The colonists practised such a mobile form of pastoralism that animals were rarely confined to particular plots; cattle enjoyed great freedom of movement, while sheep were regularly driven hundreds of miles from summer to winter pastures and back. The Spaniards, it appears, had successfully introduced their age-old experience in animal management to avoid overstocking, especially during the dry season.

This is not to say that there was no colonial devastation of the landscape, but this would be a much later development, beginning during the late 1700s and reflecting new economic demands by new societies on the threshold of independence. In central Mexico, accelerated run-off and severe flooding after 1750 was a consequence of expanding mining activity and the increasing shortage of land. In the American South, soil devastation accompanied the expansion of cotton from the 1780s to 1860, in response to demand for raw materials by the textile industries of New England and Britain. In the upper Midwest, the clear-cuttings of the 1830s served to supply timber to the iron-making furnaces of Pennsylvania. But these trends are symptomatic of a new industrializing world, with a different technology, different economic incentives, and above all, different goals and human priorities than those of the colonists who first went ashore on Hispaniola or Plymouth Rock.

To extend the chain of blame to the present, attributing the deforestation of the Amazon rain forest to cultural habits bequeathed by Iberian settlers is much like holding Julius Caesar responsible for the contemporary state of French politics. Attributing supposed Latin American traits – such as acceptance of centralized authority and established procedures, fatalism in the face of obstacles, or conformism – to Spanish or Portuguese cultural values (Robinson) seems to mock the exploits of the conquistadors or the Spanish municipalities' feisty defence of their local autonomies in the 1500s (Nader). Aztec and Inca society were more hierarchical, with greater class differentiation, than any precedents that can be cited from the Iberian peninsula.

There should also be a statute of limitations for blaming everything on "Europeans." After all, the New Americans saw themselves as

"indigenous" long before 1776. For that matter, can we really assume that they adhered to the same values as their sixteenth or seventeenth century ancestors? And can we afford to ignore the fact that Latin American Creole societies incorporated indigenous cultural and genetic heritages to some degree or other?

Much ado is made of the different land ethics incorporated into the values of different culture systems. Since the influential writings of Lynn White, it has been fashionable to attribute an exploitative ethic to the Judeo-Christian tradition that underlies European civilization, a view that has been challenged as grossly oversimplified (Kay). Similarly, it has become *de rigueur* to interpret Native American attitudes to resources and nature as highly conservationist, imbued with a reverence for the earth and all living things. The most explicit testimony for conservation and landscape, the proverbial "working with nature," is Chinese. Yet Yi-Fu Tuan (1968), as a sympathetic investigator, could find no evidence that Chinese land use over the centuries was effectively controlled by reverence for the natural world.

We should therefore be wary of making simplistic assumptions about what people will do when confronted with subsistence stress. The land ethics of different cultures are indeed important, particularly when they happen to be explicitly incorporated into the philosophical or cosmological realm. But such precepts may also be transmitted implicitly, in more mundane contexts, such as the concept of "good husbandry" that pervaded Graeco-Roman and early medieval agronomic writings in Europe (Butzer 1992b). Judgements must therefore be based on a careful assessment of performance.

The empirical evidence, as opposed to the undocumented claims of Kirkpatrick Sale, shows that European land use has overwhelmingly been conservationist since prehistoric times, despite periodic local or regional crises in environmental stability. And, if anywhere, we must be impressed that the agricultural productivity of the Mediterranean Basin has been sustained through more than 6,000 years of farming and pastoral activities. The soil destruction of Oklahoma was accomplished in two generations. Surely Mediterranean farmers must be credited with a great deal more ecological sophistication than writers such as Sale have allowed them. Perhaps a different question should be asked: when, where, and why was conservationist European agriculture abandoned in the New World?

The myth of a primitive Eden has important implications for contemporary ecological management (Turner and Butzer): is the Amazon rain forest primeval or virgin, or has it been culturally modified

for many thousands of years by the millions of people living there before 1492? Was a Tennessee forest in 1750 a closed forest in 1492, with the same dominants and diversity, at a time when the indigenous population was eight or ten times greater? Why, at the present time, do we find that closing a forest to human use, while inhibiting forest fires, leads to a different species composition than that verified by pollen evidence for the preceding 1,500 years? Simplistic myths, however appealing, can only cloud our understanding of ecological dynamics at a time when we must make decisions critical for the future.

We have examined the visions of the conquerors and settlers of the Americas, in order to gain understanding of their world-view, motives, and actions. We have also attempted to dispel some tenacious myths, cherished by the colonizers or their descendants. It is now time to turn to the perspective of the "other."

The tragedy of the New World was inaugurated even before it was discovered, when slave-worked sugar plantations were established on the Madeira Islands. Slavery had never quite disappeared in Europe during the Middle Ages, although it was small-scale and generally linked to embattled frontiers. The Madeiras were different in that essentially all the manual labour for a major commercial enterprise was supplied by slaves (Verlinden). The islands were uninhabited when discovered c.1330, and the first Portuguese settlers, a century later, attempted wheat farming. But sugar seemed more promising, given the warm environment. The problem was that large-scale sugar planting is labour intensive, and small farmers were unwilling to do the requisite work. When the Portuguese reached Cape Verde in 1445 and then the Guinea Coast in 1461, the slave enterprise began. Columbus himself participated in establishing the slave-trading entrepot at Elmina in 1482, and helped manage the sugar estates owned by his wife's family on the Madeiras.

The Madeira slave plantations interested the Spaniards, then in the process of subjugating the Canary Islands, where they enslaved the indigenous Guanches. These islands were a little too dry for large-scale sugar planting, but the idea of owning land worked by other, dependent, people caught on. The misuse of Indian labour in the West Indies was not based on precedents from the Reconquest but on the Madeira model. Indian slaves were obtained from raids in Puerto Rico and the Bahamas. When the Indians died off, African slaves became the staple labour force of the West Indies. They also cultivated the irrigated gardens of Lima and worked in the mines of Colombia

and Mexico. The Spanish government was concerned that the Spanish settlers of the New World did not farm, leaving menial work to African slaves in the tropical lowlands and to Indian forced labour (gradually replaced by wage labour) in the highlands. With the stranglehold of aspiring aristocrats on land grants, there never was much opportunity for small farmers to recreate a rural New Spain modeled on their own social roots.

In North America, regions such as Nouvelle France, New England, and Pennsylvania emerged as genuine rural-based societies, but around Chesapeake Bay and in the Carolinas, menial work was also relegated to indentured immigrants and, increasingly, to Indian, and eventually African, slaves. Little appreciated is that the major British and French colonial efforts were concentrated in the West Indies, where slave plantations were established during the 1620s and '30s. Before 1700 more English and French emigrants went there than settled in North America. Preoccupied as we are with the origins of Canada and the United States, we readily overlook that Britain and France made far more money in the transatlantic slave trade and slave-produced sugar from the West Indies than they ever did from the mainland colonies.

African slavery was actuated, implemented, and turned to profit by a relatively small group of people, but nonetheless it represents an integral and fundamental part of the New World tragedy unleashed by the Encounter. For the 11 million African slaves who survived the sea voyage to the West Indies, Brazil, or South Carolina, the New World was a vision of hell on earth. Robbed of their personal dignity, these victims were literally worked to death. Later, when the slave trade was interdicted, plantation owners switched to breeding new slave generations in the Americas, much like raising livestock. It bears reflection that by 1810 only 1.8 million European settlers had come to the New World, compared with almost nine million African slaves. The Spanish role in slavery pales to insignificance in comparison with that of Britain, Portugal, France, the United States, and the Netherlands, in that order (Rawley). The initial wealth of Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia was based on the profits of slave merchants, and much of the capital that made possible the British Industrial Revolution came from slaving and Caribbean sugar, won by the hands of involuntary African immigrants.

But the centrepieces of the tragedy are the indigenous peoples, the Native Americans who were "discovered," as the euphemism would have it. They saw strangers take their lands, destroy their gods, and

Cutting cane in a West Indies plantation in the 1900's, with child labour ostensibly replacing slavery.

impose an alien order. Somehow too, the arrival of strangers almost always brought mysterious diseases, with great bouts of dying, until many villages stood empty. As the centuries wore on, some of those who survived sought a way out by marrying "up," embracing another culture, while others found themselves relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (Butzer 1992c).

The human dimensions of this great dying have been effectively described by Lovell elsewhere (1992). Tens of millions of people perished from new vectors of disease to which they had no immunity because of previous geographic isolation. Hundreds of cultural groups disappeared in the aftermath, and dozens of others were significantly changed. New societies, transplanted from Europe, or derived from mixed indigenous and European or African roots took their place. An almost entirely new cultural map was imposed upon the Americas. Lovell poignantly introduces first-hand testimony by the conquered peoples, a vision of the Encounter that cannot be ignored whatever our ideologies.[2]

1492 marked the beginning of the greatest social transformation the planet has experienced in the course of human history. We have only begun to appreciate, however, that the biotic transformation also was momentous. Old World crops, weeds, livestock, and animal pests now dominate many rural landscapes of the Americas (Turner and Butzer). New World bullion and sugar helped finance the Industrial Revolution, which not only created global interdependence, with its hostage markets, but also the technologies that made it possible to devastate whole regions. We cannot yet foresee the continuing feedbacks and hidden costs of environmental modification in the future.

The tragedy is that this interlocked chain of change, like the opening of Pandora's box, unleashed forces that could not be controlled. Change always is a two-edged sword, and those changes begun in 1492 have brought inestimable levels of human suffering and have ultimately degraded the quality of the world we live in. Against the 55 million European refugees from hardship or oppression who found a new life in the New World between 1800 and 1950, we must measure the lives of perhaps 50 million Native Americans who perished from Old World disease. Against the vital new nations that have emerged in the New World, we must lament the vast loss of cultural diversity, involving cultures that incorporated millennia of distinctive human experience. Against the interchange of economic crops and animals, which improved diet and health or helped sustain agricultural productivity on both hemispheres, we must consider the negative impact, direct or indirect, on native biota. Against the stimulus of the New World for the scientific awakening of the Old, we must weigh the termination of artistic traditions in the New.

It is true that this transformation, especially in its long-term impacts, was undeliberate and unforeseeable. Could it even have been avoided? "What if" scenarios generally serve little purpose other than, possibly, to gain perspective. Given the steady improvement of European nautical technology, the discovery of the New World was inevitable. In the bigger view of things, that Columbus "discovered" America when he did was an accident. If he had not, some other European would have done so within a generation. If that discoverer had not represented Spain, which at the time had unrivalled energy and self-confidence, the short-term consequences might have been different. But the biotic exchange and the mass dying of Native

Americans would have been similar, as would the long-term consequences. The transformation, in other words, was inevitable. That may be the true nature of the tragedy, and perhaps a Greek chorus should have tempered Dvorak's *Symphony from the New World.*

Phoenix rises from the ashes. In any reflection on the course of human life, the pain we feel about death is mitigated by our joy in *birth.*

It was on North American soil that Greek ideals of civic participation, English procedures for parliamentary representation, and French notions of equality took root in such a fruitful manner, to create a new social order. However imperfect, that nascent democratic society inspired new legislative freedoms in Canada and western Europe, and stands as a role model for the rest of the world. For most of two centuries, immigrant nations of the Americas have welcomed newcomers, offering employment and new opportunities to mitigate the trauma of demographic transition in Europe. That probably was Dvorak's vision, and if so, I believe he was correct. The aftermath of 1492 cannot be ignored in all its disturbing implications, but it should also not degenerate into a reckless spree of iconoclasm.

I am reminded of an undirected term paper once written for me by an Hispanic undergraduate. She spontaneously chose the theme "Spain and Mexico: The Collision that Bore a Race." Despite the ambivalence of some Mexican academic or political circles, and of Chicanos in the United States, the majority of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans acknowledge their dual Spanish and Indian roots, both cultural and biological. These roots are a source of pride and of identity. New peoples, sharing a common history and ethnicity, have emerged from the colonial transformation of Latin America. These nations, despite shared Iberian roots, differ as much among themselves as any of the nationalities of Europe, in part because of the differences or intensities of their indigenous or African roots, in part because of their historical trajectories. Whatever their economic or socio-political problems at the moment, such nations embody rich cultural heritages, and to deny that would be blind. As much as we may lament the passing of the old, we must also rejoice in the birth of the new.

All this should not really surprise us, because the contemporary peoples of western Europe, from whom the majority of North Americans claim ancestry, derive from an amalgamation of Roman, Celtic, and Germanic roots, going back to the early Middle Ages. At

the time of the Columbus landfall, the process and the configurations of ethnic crystallization in western Europe were little more advanced than those of the new nations of Latin America today. If most Mexicans are willing to accept their complex roots in two civilizations as something positive, why cannot North American or Marxist writers see it that way also? Will we continue to let lingering prejudices against "miscegenation," or rote interpretations of class origins, blind our vision?

The Mexican philosopher Octavio Paz, I think, can be of some assistance. He explains the essence of Mexico by what he calls two slopes of reality, which can also be seen as a polar graph describing two fields of tension or dialectic.[3] He considers the Spaniard from the East and the Indian from the West as representing a dialectic between two worlds and two civilizations, an apposition mediated by the Virgin of Guadalupe. His second polarity is between North and South, between the Angloamericans and the Mexicans, a dialectic he attributes to the philosophical differences between dominantly Protestant and dominantly Catholic societies.

Octavio Paz seems to regard popular religion as the core of Mexican culture and identity. That brand of popular religion is a syncretic blend of fine, indigenous detail, incorporated into the larger structure of universal Catholicism. The Indian element has served to personalize religion in the intimate realm of the close-knit family, while the Christian component has expurgated the terror of the old gods and the morbidity of the old outlook on life, giving expression to joy and optimism in a broader social context.

If I read Octavio Paz correctly, conversion was ultimately for the best, because it was the Indian version of Christianity that sustained a subjugated people and gave them hope. In the end, that same phenomenon helped to create a new nation, for which the Virgin of Guadalupe is the real symbol, not some mythologized Aztec king. That is another vision of the Encounter.

The future, we are told, is upon us as a new world order. But "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and racial riots in south-central Los Angeles have led to rapid disillusionment as, once again, we rediscover that prejudice, insensitivity, and intolerance toward the other lurk just beneath the surface.

The themes discussed above have both academic and didactic motives. They show that both professional and popular interpretations

of history alike are prone to oversimplification or distortion. So, for example, the Spanish antecedents to the Encounter are by no means always derived from the experience of the Reconquest; in part they draw from the images of the ancient Mediterranean world, in part from contemporary expediencies such as commercial slavery. Many visions of the spirit are noble and edifying, but they may also be blind to their cost for the other. The line between vision and myth is tenuous, as the publication of *Utopia* as early as 1516 makes clear. And the polemic surrounding the Columbian quincentenary has revived the myths of the Indian as Ecologist and of the Devastated Colonial Landscape, showing that even serious professionals can uncritically subscribe to illusion.

My interpretation is that what happened after 1492 was not the consequence of one man's vision, or of one government's geopolitical goals, or of one nation's faults of character. Rather, these momentous events were the cumulative outcome of hundreds and thousands of actions by complex human beings, in the particular context of the inevitable encounter between two long-isolated hemispheres. Those people – innocent, flawed, or villainous – were not Spanish or English or French. They were the Everyman of the Medieval morality plays. The lessons to be learned from the Encounter, I believe, should speak to each of us. The Quincentenary is not an occasion for blame, because there is more than enough shame for all the active participants in the drama. What it does allow is an opportunity for self-reflection.

The culture realm that calls itself Western Civilization has, even after five centuries, not yet learned to accept and to build upon cultural diversity. The challenge is how, in the next hundred years, we can learn to do otherwise.

Notes

1 For background materials and multilingual references to some of the themes discussed here, see Karl W. Butzer (ed.), *The Americas before and after 1492*, Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1992. A wide selection of translated Spanish documents is available in John H. Parry and Robert G. Keith (eds.), *New Iberian World: A Documentary History of the Discovery and Settlement of Latin America to the Early Seventeenth Century*, New York: Times Books, 1984, 5 vol. For a parallel collection of primary documents on North America, see David B. Quinn (ed.), *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612*, New York: Times Books, 1979, 5 vol. Comparative French and British attitudes to, and interactions with, the indigenous peoples are impressively treated by James Axtell in *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Two works by Carl O. Sauer

remain of great interest: *The Early Spanish Main*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966; and *Sixteenth Century North America: The Land and the People as Seen by the Europeans*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. Anthropological and archaeological insights are offered by David H. Thomas (ed.), *Columbian Consequences 3: The Spanish Borderlands in Pan-American Perspective*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. See also "Columbus, My Enemy," *Natural History*, Vol. 12, 1990, 44-9.

2 The search for views and contributions "from the other side" has only just begun. See J. Brian Harley, "Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter," with an interpretation of three indigenous maps from Mexico by Karl W. Butzer and Barbara J. Williams, in K.W. Butzer (ed.), *The Americas before and after 1492*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992, 522-42.

3 See in particular, Octavio Paz, "Will for Form," in *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990, and also his *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, New York: Grove Press, original 1972, with reflections from 1985, 65-108, 334-5, 345-9; *Sor Juana, or the Traps of Faith*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, 11-23, 35-42; see Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, with an introduction by Paz.I am grateful to Patricia Rodríguez, manager of *La Vuelta* (Mexico City), for sharing her ideas on Mexican identity. and to Elizabeth John (Austin) for her insights into evangelization in colonial times.

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