

The New World, 1492–1992

An Endless Debate?

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On our planet only the American continent has had the privilege, or the unhappiness perhaps, of being subjected to a sort of accounting of “anniversaries” or, let us say, “centennials.” But this does not mean, for all that, that these anniversaries serve to commemorate its birth. Geologists tell us the continents were formed hundreds of millions of years ago, making the commemoration of the American continent relatively recent. Moreover, the origins of this custom are foreign to it and are imbued, it must be said, with perspectives that are by all evidence “Eurocentric.” Curiously, no one took any notice of the first or the second centennial of the American continent.

It was the third, in 1792, in the twilight of the age of Enlightenment, that began the custom. And the idea did not come from Spain, nor from Italy, as one might have supposed, but from France. France had not yet emerged from its celebrated Revolution when the *Académie française*, wishing to commemorate the Tricentennial, offered a prize to be paid to the essay best answering the question: “What has the influence of America been on the politics, the commerce, and the mores of Europe?”

The numerous manuscripts that were submitted – with the exception of some elegies to Columbus – can be divided into repeated condemnations of Spain’s presence in the New World, in the manner of the “Black Legend,” and rather somber descriptions of America’s influence on Europe. There was some discussion, for example, about the gold Spain received from its overseas possessions having thrown the country into ruin. We need only recall that the prize-winning work, whose author preferred to remain anonymous, stresses that America gave syphilis to Europe and the whole world. In this regard, it might be helpful to add that syphilis was not only considered to be a “shameful illness,” but was known for

a long time as the "Gallic disease" or the "French disease." Perhaps the French Academy's anonymous laureate wished, through his work, to defend his country's honor. By accumulating proofs, he believed he had settled a question that some people continue to debate today, that is, what is the origin of the "French disease"?¹

It must be said, in contrast, that the celebration of the Quadricentennial was resoundingly acknowledged. With Spain leading the way, a majority of the Spanish-American countries followed suit, along with Italy and the United States, as countless expositions, conferences, monuments, publications, and speeches commemorated what everyone considered to be the "discovery of America." But, as there is neither perfect happiness nor total convergence of opinion in this world here below, people began to hear from some malcontents who could not restrain themselves from criticizing the injustices the conquests had entailed. The Peruvian Ricardo Palma, for example, became so incensed by some of the orators during the festivities in Spain that he preferred to retire from one of the ceremonies.

There has been a wide range of contemporary reactions to the approach of the Quincentennial. Certain people cling to celebrating it with solemnity, while others consider this date to be the accursed point of departure for incalculable suffering on the part of millions of indigenous Americans. Thus it can be said, in this case, that the old saying "no hay quinto malo" (the fifth is never bad) strongly risks being revealed as untrue.

Rightly or wrongly, our continent and the many events that have occurred on it since 1492 have given rise to more debates and even violent confrontations than any other. The debates began very shortly after Columbus landed and have become more bitter today than ever. As for polemics, they too are going at a good clip, mixing up a great variety of viewpoints, facts, and problems, as if the "New World" were destined, by its very existence yesterday and today, to become the object of interminable quarrels.

As Cicero writes in his *Dialogue on Friendship*, "To debate is to agitate over something in order that the truth can make itself known." If we apply this remark to the American continent, we can wonder what truth or what true aspects of the New World people are trying to make known by way of such interminable discussions that, in one way or another, "agitate" the essential points

1. For a more complete analysis, see Bartolomé and Lucille Bennassar, *1492, Un monde nouveau?* (Paris: Perrin, 1991), pp. 50–55.

tied to the history and even to the existence of this hemisphere. In a remarkable book called *The Dispute of the New World*, Antonello Gerbi relates what he calls “the history of a polemic” that he situates between 1750 and 1900, that is to say, between the century of the Enlightenment and the end of the last century.²

It is my intention to show that these vehement polemics have gone even further in our own day and appear to be endless. I will consider first of all the debate over the place and significance of the American continent in universal history, as well as the dawning awareness of its geographic existence. I will then turn to the painful controversies surrounding themes essential to the sixteenth century that continue to have repercussions in our own. Finally, I will concentrate on the unfinished debate that is again in the course of being stirred up.

The New World in Universal History

Were a historical conception and a geographic image even possible before the voyages of Columbus and the transatlantic contacts that were accompanied by exchanges of all kinds?

Some scholars respond affirmatively, basing their answer on works such as Ptolemy’s *Geography*, or on historical texts ranging from the *Histories* of Herodotus about the Greeks and the “barbarians” to Saint Augustine’s *City of God*, not forgetting the several medieval chronicles that embrace then-known space and time. Others deny the existence of truly universal geographical and historical conceptions before Columbus because Europeans, Asiatics, Africans, and Amerindians were all unaware that the earth encompassed what is today called the two hemispheres.

In each hemisphere lived men who knew nothing about the other, who had their own cultures and, in their isolation, their own historical and cartographic productions. However, a good number of those who have recounted what has been written about history consider it to be the original property of a single region of the world. We have a good example of this in *The Idea of History* by R.

2. Antonello Gerbi, *La disputa del Nuevo Mundo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960). We owe to the same author another book, very well documented, describing and analyzing the diversity of opinions put forward at the end of the fifteenth and during the sixteenth centuries about nature and human beings in the New World: *La naturaleza de las Indias Nuevas: De Cristóbal Colón a Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978).

G. Collingwood, who writes: "Since I do not think that any of these stages [in the evolution of the modern European idea of history] occurred outside the Mediterranean region, that is, Europe, the Near East from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia, and on the northern African coastlands, I am precluded from saying anything about historical thought in China or in any other part of the world except the regions I have mentioned."³

In the face of such Eurocentrism, others have affirmed that not only in China, India, Korea, Japan, and the other countries of Asia, but also in America, there exist monuments and other evidence that, besides recalling particularly significant facts of the past, were erected or inscribed with a specific historical goal in mind. The object was clearly to reinforce the national identity of a people, or to reaffirm the legitimacy of a dominant social group, by recalling its ties to much older lineages or events. This is the case in a number of Mesoamerican instances: from the steles decorated with inscriptions discovered at Monte Albán and Oaxaca that date from the fifth century B.C., to those of the classical Mayan period (third to tenth centuries A.D.) whose inscriptions, largely deciphered today, are very complex texts treating questions both religious and political; finally, there are prehispanic Mixtec manuscripts of historical and genealogical content, not to mention subsequent productions based on codices elaborated before the Spanish conquest that have since been lost.

The conviction that historical consciousness has been, from the beginning, the exclusive attribute of the peoples of the Mediterranean basin and, to make a long story short, Europeans, has been taken even further, as when it has been definitively upheld that only Europe or its cultural transplants had played a role in universal history. As unbelievable as this might seem, it was not only in the seventeenth century that one found people who denied to natives full and complete rationality. We have only to go back to the century of the Enlightenment to see two great philosophers upholding beliefs that are, if not as radical, at least a strain on credulity. In 1778, Emmanuel Kant wrote that the indigenous Americans "do not recognize any culture like theirs, . . . lack feelings and passions . . . , do not feel any love and because of that are even sterile . . . , scarcely speak . . . , don't worry about anything,

3. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 14.

are lazy. . . .”⁴ Wilhelm-Friedrich Hegel affirms in turn that “America has been separated from the domain in which up until now universal history has developed. What has happened there up to the present is only the echo of the Old World. Leaving thus aside the New World and the fantasies that are tied to it, we carry our attention to the Old World, essentially Europe, true scene of universal history. . . .”⁵

In light of these statements, is it surprising that works embracing human history, that is, universal history, and even recent textbooks on the subject give no attention to the Amerindian peoples before 1492? It is only once they were discovered that they entered into history. One could finally talk about them, say that they were primitive, practiced human sacrifice, were cannibals, sodomites, and adored frightful idols. The natives who survived the Conquest were converted to the true religion, now able to take part in universal history, though the European actors, who were so to speak predestined, continued of course to be the only possible protagonists.

It is true that these historical commentaries applied not only to the natives of America but also to those of Africa, to Oceania, and to a large part of Asia. However, how can we conceive of a history truly embracing humanity in its entirety that does not interest itself in the cultural trajectories of the “others,” especially when these peoples have left diverse evidence of their past? In their millenarian isolation, the Amerindians, in particular those such as the Maya, Nahua, Quechua, and Zapotec, invented calendars and specific forms of writing that offer evidence of their way of life extending back more than two thousand years before the arrival of Columbus on a little island in the Bahamas.

These cultures following a different trajectory, with their own chronology, give to Mesoamerica its place in history, not despite but precisely because of its isolation from Europe. The pre-Columbian past, in which cities and metropolises grew, in which institutions and different forms of art and thought were created that coexisted with other Amerindian people living in forests, mountains, and deserts, is a human experience of great interest.

At this point in my reflections, I myself cannot help entering into the debate. Recalling and reaffirming the historical significance that is, in my opinion, invested in the pre-Columbian past of this conti-

4. Emmanuel Kant, *Menschenkunde oder philosophische Anthropologie nach handschriftlichen Vorlesungen*, ed. Friedrich Ch. Stark, (Leipzig, 1831), p. 353.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, “Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte,” *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. II (Stuttgart, 1961), p. 129.

ment, I find myself disagreeing with what others, following paths similar to Hegel's, have set forth.

To what should one attribute awareness of the geographic existence of America? How and when did it take place?

The long debate on the New World and universal history remained, it appears, unfinished, even though, in some sense, right up until today people have tried to find out when and how the world really became aware of its geographical reality. There are many who saw and continue to see Christopher Columbus as the discoverer of America, a visionary who merits canonization; others point out, however, that, because he was convinced that he had arrived in India, he did not know what he had discovered. The credit for making it known that these lands were part of a New World has gone to Amerigo Vespucci, whose name was given to the continent by Martin Waldseemüller in 1507, a year after Columbus's death.⁶ But Waldseemüller, like many others, was not completely satisfied with this decision. To rectify this, he suppressed the word *America* on his map of 1513 and noted, "*Terra haec cum adjacentibus insulis inventa est per Columbum*" (This land with its adjacent islands was discovered by Columbus).⁷ For his part, the cartographer Miguel Servet – in the magnificent edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* that he published in 1535 – also affirmed: "Those who give the name of America to the New World are in the greatest error because Amerigo [Vespucci] set foot there well after Columbus and he did not travel with the Spanish but with the Portuguese to do business with them. . . ."⁸

Some conclusions can be drawn about the different conceptions of the New World offered to us by the cartography that little by little drew it up. First of all, although the conquistadors and chroniclers such as Hernán Cortés and the Italian humanist Pietro Martire di Anghiera acknowledged that they had used native

6. Waldseemüller made this attribution in his *Cosmographiae Introductio cum quibusdam geometriae ac astronomiae . . . insuper Americi Vesputi navigationes . . .*, published in Saint-Dié in 1507. This work was followed that same year by the *Cosmographiae secundum Ptolomaei Traditionem . . .*, with which was published the famous world map on which the name "America" appeared for the first time.

7. Among the numerous reproductions of this map, see that included in the facsimile edition of *Claudius Ptolomeus Geographia*, Strasbourg 1513, with an introduction by R. A. Skelton (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1966).

8. Servet wrote this in his introduction to *Ptolomaei Alexandrini Geographicae Enarationis libri octo* (Lugduni: Ex officina Melchioris et Gasparis Trechsel Fratrum, MDXXVI).

maps, this was not mentioned in the productions of European cartographers, reflecting their two principal preoccupations: the first was to know whether the newly-discovered lands were part of Asia; the second, following from the first, concerned the nomenclature and toponymy of successively established maps. There were many who retained, sometimes well into the sixteenth century, representations showing geographical continuity between America and Asia, with the former's place names corresponding to the latter's, for example, Cipango, Cathay, and Land of Mangi.

However, on a growing number of other maps the word "America" was no longer applied only to the southern half of the continent, as on Waldseemüller's 1507 map, but to its entirety. In contrast, Spanish and Portuguese maps completely ignored the name of America, retaining until the eighteenth century names such as "Orbe Novo," "New World," "Indies," and "West Indies."

All of these discrepancies in the chronicles and maps have become, especially since the nineteenth century, raw material for the debate about the "discovery" of America. Christopher Columbus's apologists – as shown in the voluminous work of Paolo Emilio Taviani – uphold the version that sees the "Admiral" as the discoverer of the New World.⁹ With infinite zeal and innumerable variations, many people continue, five hundred years after the landing of Columbus, to refuse any alteration of the title, "the Discovery of America."

Obviously, there are now many views opposed to this traditional interpretation, some of them motivated by historico-philosophical considerations, but more inspired by the ideologies or protesting attitudes of those who loathe, condemn, and reject all the consequences of the process begun in 1492. I will return at the end of this study to these ideas, which have brought about a turbulent resurgence of the debate.

Feverish Debates: The Conquistadors and the American Natives, Their Cultures, and the Nature of the New World

One could say that it was the Tahino-Arahuacos and Caribs of the islands themselves, as well as Columbus in person, who created

9. Paolo Emilio Taviani, *Cristobal Colón, Génesis del gran descubrimiento*, 2 vols. (Novara-Barcelona: Instituto Geográfico de Agostini y Editorial Teide, 1988; French translation, *Christophe Colomb: Genèse de la grande Découverte* [Paris: Atlas, 1980]) and *Los viajes de Colón, el gran descubrimiento*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Planeta-Agostini, 1989).

the first feverish contradictions. European explorers very quickly began to recount things both noble and horrifying about the natives of the islands. Pietro Martire depicts the Tahinos as a people who live in a sort of pure natural state. He writes:

They all have the conviction that the earth, like the sun and the water, belongs to everyone, and that “yours” and “mine” should not exist because they are the root of all evil. Besides, they are content with so little, in this vast territory, that there is more land than necessary and nobody wants for anything. For them, this is the golden age. They encircle their domains with neither ditches nor walls nor hedges; they live in open gardens, without laws or books, without judges; they venerate one who is naturally right and they judge as evil and perverse someone who gets pleasure from hurting others.¹⁰

In total contrast with this image of a “golden age” that Pietro Martire offers us – an image in agreement with the stories he had heard from those returning from the New World, beginning with Columbus – are the descriptions he gives us of the appalling Caribs. At the outset, by a corruption of the word “caraïbe,” he calls them cannibals:

Not far from these islands there are others, inhabited by ferocious men who nourish themselves on human flesh. They castrate children whom they catch as we do the chickens and piglets that we want to fatten and render more tender for eating. When they have become large and fat, they eat them. But when adults fall into their hands, they kill them and cut them up. They begin by eating the intestines and extremities, but save the limbs for later, as we do with hams.¹¹

Given these wildly varying descriptions of native customs of the New World, it is hardly surprising that they inspired both the image of a golden age in Thomas More’s celebrated *Utopia* and, later, the malignant and savage Caliban in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*.*

Judgments about the conquistadors and about Spanish deeds in general in the New World correspond to the diversity of contradictory opinions and debates centering on the existence and culture of the Indians. From the outset, faced with seeing the natives robbed

10. Pietro Martire de Anghiera, *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo*, with an introduction by Ramón Alba (Madrid, 1989), p. 38.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

*Luciana Stegagno Picchio, “Brazilian Anthropology: Myth and Literature,” in *Diogenes* no. 144 (October–December 1988).

and treated like animals, there arose denunciations and the struggle began, as Antón de Montesinos in Santo Domingo, in his famous sermons of 1511, then Vasco de Quiroga and Bartolomé de Las Casas in Mexico, along with Domingo de Santo Tomás and Luis de Morales in Peru, all bear witness.

While some denounced what they called “the destruction of the Indies,” others passionately defended it, in particular Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, and even Francisco López de Gómara who, in his *General History of the Indies*, went so far as to aver that no people had ever made so many discoveries and conquests in so little time as the Spanish, who succeeded in a providential manner at converting millions of idolaters – an accomplishment that, in his opinion, was eminently praiseworthy.

One could cite many more accusations that poison the debate. Let’s content ourselves with one, relatively unknown, launched by Las Casas in one of his works, and directed in particular against Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, although it remained unpublished until 1988. Responding to Sepúlveda, who had characterized the Indians as barbarians and savages, Las Casas compares this to the way the Roman historian Trogue Pompey had typified the Spaniards. Las Casas writes:

Let Sepúlveda listen to Trogue Pompey: the Spanish could not accept the constraining status of conquered province until Julius Caesar, having conquered the world, turned his victorious arms against them and imposed the form of a province on this barbarian and savage people, after making them accept, through his laws, a more civilized kind of life.

As we have seen, the Spanish people are characterized as barbarian and savage. I would like to hear what, in his wisdom, Sepúlveda answers to this question: does he consider the war that the Romans waged against the Spaniards to liberate them from their barbarism to have been just? Or perhaps the Spaniards were waging an unjust war when they defended themselves so valiantly against the Romans?

I call today on the Spaniards, thieves and torturers of this unhappy people: do you think it is by chance that, having subjected the barbarian and savage population of Spain, the Romans could, by right, parcel out among themselves all its members, attributing to each so many “head” of men or women? Do you likewise think that the Romans could despoil the princes of their power and, as for you all, having deprived you of your liberty, obliged you to carry out their miserable work, using you to find seams of gold and silver, and then to extract and polish the metals? And if, as Diodorus clearly attests, the Romans did indulge in such practices, don’t you think you would have the right to defend your liberty

and, what is more, your life, by war? And you, Sepúlveda, would you have allowed Saint James to evangelize your dear Cordobans? In the name of God and in the name of the faith men have in Him! Is this the way to impose Christ's will on Christians? Is this the way to tear the fierce barbarism from the souls of barbarians? Isn't this rather to behave as thieves, assassins, and cruel brigands and to throw peaceful peoples into despair?¹²

As one can see, less than a century after the landing of Columbus on an island in the Bahamas (Guanahani or perhaps another one, this point too being the object of controversy), discussion was raging like wildfire. And this same fire is not yet out. Let us merely recall that men as eminent as Manuel Jiménez Fernández, Marcel Bataillon, Lewis Hanke, and Angel Losada published the works of Las Casas and praised their contents, seeing them as a precursor of the recognition of the rights of man, while others such as the celebrated philologist Ramón Menéndez Pidal, believed Las Casas to be an inspiration for the "Black Legend" and charged him with fanaticism and mental illness.

The debate also continues on other fronts, though I can only sketch them here: the thirst for gold – a word Columbus uses endlessly – was it the essential motive for his enterprise? Should we see Columbus as the initiator, on a grand scale, of European colonialism? How many natives were there upon his arrival in the New World and how many remained a century later? Did Bartolomé de Las Casas exaggerate the extent of the atrocities in his book, *The Brief Tale of the Destruction of the Indies*? Were Sherburn Cook and Woodrow Borah, historians of the demographic collapse of the Indians of America, right or wrong?

Did people really come to think that the Indians were not gifted with reason? Was this wickedness or blindness? Is it true that the Caribs of the islands were all cannibals? Are there good reasons for maintaining, as some North American anthropologists do, that the Mexicas or Aztecs sacrificed thousands of their people in order to compensate for a diet poor in protein? Is this consistent with the high degree of cultural development they attained, as must be supposed from the archaeological discoveries and the observations made by Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo: those large cities, with their libraries, their temples, their palaces, their schools,

12. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologia*, ed. Angel Losada; vol. 9 of the *Complete Works* of B. de Las Casas (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988), p. 107.

their markets, their botanical gardens, and their zoological parks which impressed them so much? And how could anyone dare say that all the natives were barbarians when people such as Pietro Martire de Anghiera, Gaspare Contarini, and Albert Dürer himself scattered praises about when speaking of the objects that Cortés had sent to Charles the Fifth, treasures they considered to be without equal?

And what of the conquistadors? Some continue to praise Cortés, Pizarro, Alvarado, and Valdivia, considering them to be the epic characters of modern times, while others abhor them and rank them among the worst boors in history. This is how Michel de Montaigne, towards the end of the sixteenth century, speaks about them in one of his *Essays*:

So many cities razed, so many nations exterminated, so many millions of people run through with the sword blade, the richest and most beautiful part of the globe turned upside down! Never did ambition, never did public enmity goad men into such horrible hostilities against one another and lead to such terrible calamities.¹³

If it was repeated by one author after another that such a sum of misfortunes befell the natives of the New World, why was the trade in Africans who worked, very early, as slaves in numerous regions of America denounced only secretly? Some accuse Las Casas of having suggested that black slaves be imported to lighten the situation of the Indians, but others affirm that he repented of this later on by making himself their chief defender. In such a controversy, have we obtained an unassailable resolution?

And what can be said about the polemics engaged in for centuries concerning the capacities of the aborigines and, in particular, the nature of the New World? Antonello Gerbi devotes more than 650 pages in the book I cited above to this problem. One can thus see a parade of numerous detractors, from Buffon who spoke with certainty about what he considered the inferiority of the animal species of America, to the Dutchman Cornelius de Pauw who, in his *Philosophical Researches on the Americans*, demonstrates what he believed was the intrinsic inferiority of the natives and even of people of European descent born in the New World. Gerbi's book also records the responses put forward about the essence of

13. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 6 (Paris: Club français du livre, 1962; following the edition of 1558).

America by such men as the Liménian José Manuel Dávalos, the Chilean Manuel de Salas, the Colombian Francisco Iturri, the Mexican Francisco Xavier Clavijero, the Spaniard Benito Maria de Moxo, Alexander von Humboldt, and Alexis de Tocqueville who, in his famous work, *Democracy in America*, celebrates the virtues of the Iroquois system of government, which he holds to be eminently democratic.

The Debate Over the Quincentennial

We have seen how the American continent has had the privilege, or the unhappiness, of seeing its age curiously numbered by way of the centennials since what has been called its "discovery." We have also shown that since then – that is, the landfall of Columbus on we don't know what islet in the Bahamas, and the innumerable consequences tied to that – the Americas have been the object of all sorts of disputes, polemics, quarrels, and controversies. Today, five centuries later, one might think it was time to put an end to the dissension. Some years ago, when people began to speak of the approach of the Quincentennial, some thought that we ought to prepare ourselves to celebrate it in diverse ways, while others honed their swords and arrows to defend tradition. One day it will be necessary to relate what was said or written that was most telling, especially after the national commemorative Commissions on the Quincentennial were organized in Spain, in Latin America, in Italy, and in the United States. That began around 1984. From that time on, other countries – Japan, France, Israel, Poland, Germany, and Russia (the U.S.S.R. at the time) – likewise organized, with some variations, their own new commemorative Commissions.

The new battles began on innumerable fronts as soon as the news about the commemorative projects was made public. An additional ingredient, real tinder, was the question of the title and point of view that should be assigned to the Quincentennial.

As an example, I will cite several of the viewpoints that have been adopted. First of all, and as if it were self-evident, Spain adopted, as did other countries, the designation "Quincentennial of the Discovery of America." For its part, the Catholic church, or most of its organs, decided to commemorate the beginning of the christianizing of the New World. In the eyes of the most traditional promoters of the Quincentennial such as these, detractors are practically seen as enemies of Spain and of Christendom.

For their part, the opposition groups are composed of vast and vastly different categories of people ranging from Latin-American and European intellectuals, among whom some are Spanish, to the public at large that, more than ever, is attracted to polemics. Notably, the opposition has assembled the leaders and members of indigenous movements and of groups descended from the forty million survivors of all the conquests on the continent. As an example of their reactions, I recall the violent terms of the accords concluded during the Sixth World Congress of Indigenous Peoples, held in Tromsø, Norway, in August 1990. Genocide and plundering were spoken of there, and 1992 was declared “the World Year of the Dignity and Rights of Native Peoples.” They asked the churches not to celebrate five centuries of evangelization. As for the Catholic church, it was accused of having played the role of “deconsecrator of native religions”; “the cessation of proselytism in all its forms” was demanded.

In emulation of the World Congress of Indigenous Peoples, more and more conferences organized more or less everywhere in America reiterated their refusal to accept any commemoration and insisted that justice be done and restitution made to the Indian communities for all they have lost, in particular their ancestral territories.

As in a chain reaction, new combatants have come to join the conflict who, for different motives, have traced the great disaster of their ancestors to the year 1492. At the head of this movement are those serving as spokesmen for the millions of descendants of Africans brought in slavery to the New World. Many of those who live today in Africa or in other third world countries feel solidarity with them.

There are also Jewish organizations that, in 1992, want to publicize their sadness at recalling that their ancestors were expelled from Spain after having received the order to leave or to convert to Christianity on a date nearly coinciding with the day Columbus left the port of Palos. It is also true that some Moslems are recalling that, on January 2, 1492, Boabdil surrendered the city of Grenada, last Spanish stronghold of the faithful of Mohammed who, for centuries, had dominated a large part of the Iberian peninsula, to the royalty who financed Columbus’s voyage.

Thus, a good number of intellectuals from every country, along with part of the public at large in Europe and in the Americas, descendants of the natives of the New World, men and women of

African origin, Jews, Moslems, and many others, have already entered into the debate and into the struggle. For them, the desire to commemorate 1492, which marked the beginning of a horrible tragedy for their respective peoples, is something highly questionable if not an infamy.

Adding to the debate has been the repeated formulation of certain theses that, under historico-philosophical guise, lead to interpreting in a different way what others prepare to celebrate or to cover with shame. I will cite by way of an example the thesis of Edmundo O’Gorman in *The Invention of America*, published in 1958 after a long polemic waged against Marcel Bataillon.

The occasion of the Quincentennial has been put to use by O’Gorman to start the debate again, as much against those who speak of the “discovery of America” as against those who, like me, have proposed another view of the events begun in 1492. According to O’Gorman, in order for someone to realize something, he must make manifest an intention: he thus concludes that, because Columbus’s project was to get to Asia, it is wrong to attribute to him the discovery of America, that is to say, something he never consciously planned. Here is what O’Gorman says:

The evil at the root of the whole historical process revolving around the idea of the America’s discovery comes from supposing that this piece of cosmic matter that we know today as the American continent always existed, whereas in reality it only existed from the moment when it was given that significance, and it will cease to exist on the day when, by whatever change in the actual conception of the world, one will no longer concede it.¹⁴

In other words, according to O’Gorman, the continent where Columbus landed – something he calls “this piece of cosmic matter” – only began to have a meaning or an ontological existence from the moment when, by way of a complex process some years later, another European, the cartographer Martin Waldseemüller, declared that this land represented the fourth part of the known world and that it merited being called America, in homage to Amerigo Vespucci.

However, in arriving at this conclusion, O’Gorman does not take into account an unavoidable reality. In fact, whether or not anyone

14. Edmundo O’Gorman, *La Invención de América* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984), p. 49.

had the idea that this “piece of cosmic matter” was a continent did not prevent it from being one. Whether or not the idea of calling this continent America sprouted in the minds of one or several Europeans, it already existed, and was far from being an empty physical entity. It enclosed a luxuriant nature and numerous inhabitants, some of whom had created extraordinary cultures such as those of central America and the Andes.

The attribution of the name America by Waldseemüller represents for O’Gorman “the invention of America,” that is to say, as the thing that gives those lands their significance. Contending for the same reason that the continent, before this “invention,” had no meaning, reveals O’Gorman’s thesis to be under the sway of a Eurocentrism as extreme as it is gratuitous. Despite his apparent logic, this supposed invention leaves Hegel, who refused to accord the New World a place in universal history, far behind it.

From being a simple reporter of the international debate, I too have become one of the participants: thus I do not resist presenting the conclusion, negative for Spain, positive for England, that O’Gorman arrives at when he describes “the key to historical American existence.” This, according to O’Gorman, implied receiving “life *ab alio*,” that is to say, from another, “as a possibility of realizing the new Europe.”¹⁵

He discovers and presents two of these realizations. The first is that of America conquered by Spain and Portugal, the other, that of America colonized by England. Let us see what he affirms about the first, that is, about what we today call Latin America: he affirms that, because “Spain had let the train of history go by,”

[Hispanic America] had not attained the originality that would earn it a qualified autonomy with respect to the model that gave it life. It did not transform its heritage or its traditions by adapting them to circumstances and thus did not succeed in planting a new tree on the American scene.¹⁶

But if Hispanic America failed as a “realization of the new Europe,” in return Anglo-Saxon America succeeded, and that is why it is today the country where individual liberty and work have been elevated to the rank of supreme social values. The United States, O’Gorman tells us, is “the new archetype. . . . This

15. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

other America then, where the European model transformed itself into a new social order whose protagonist was a new type of historical man recognized – in no way capriciously – as American by definition.¹⁷

O’Gorman concludes his argument with a show of respect and admiration for England, which permitted the forging of Americans *par excellence*: “Anglo-Saxon America,” he tells us, “has attained the highest summits of historical success.”¹⁸

If we are to believe O’Gorman, there is nothing else left for us Ibero-Americans, except to accept being the fruit of a Spain that missed the train of history, a failed invention that did not succeed in “planting a new tree on the American scene,” succeeding only, according to him, in “relying without reserve on metaphor and on ambiguity in all domains of life . . . which implies the recognition of an ontological crossroads without purpose.”

As far as the American natives are concerned, O’Gorman’s conclusions are so limited and so negative that they echo the old affirmations that the Amerindians lacked the faculty of reason. “The native,” affirms O’Gorman, “has remained at the periphery because of his lack of will or his incapacity, or both.”¹⁹

I am now going to leave aside the discussion of O’Gorman’s ideas in order to examine a perspective that does not so much put an end to controversies and to antagonisms – an impossible enterprise, from all appearances – but that does at least embrace the realities affecting to the highest degree those who have taken part in the historical process begun in 1492. It is not only about them, but also about their descendants, native Amerindian, African, European, Asiatic, and others. By this, I mean that the perspective I propose does not limit itself to the past and does not exclude any participant, but leaves itself open to reflection about the past and present and, furthermore, invites vigilant scrutiny of the future.

My perspective is to adopt the view that the discovery does have a meaning, if only from the European angle. Whether or not Columbus knew what soil he had arrived on, the fact is that this first voyage unveiled little by little to Europeans, and to all the people of the Old World, the presence of another continent whose existence they had not had the slightest knowledge about. This is

17. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 155–156.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

why, as soon as it could be confirmed that Columbus had made landfall in a region that later received the name of America, it was said that, even without knowing it, he had found it by chance and had thus discovered it.

But by speaking of the discovery of America from a European point of view, we deprive ourselves of perspectives that others could have had, those who were “discovered,” then conquered and subjected. We know that the Mayas and others – Nahuas, Mixtecs, Quechuas – not only saw these events in a very different manner but also left pictographic and glyphic evidence of them; a little later, they left writings in an alphabet adapted for their languages, evidence of what the arrival of the bearded ones with their flame-throwing tubes – who invaded and appropriated their lands, tried to erase their ancestral beliefs and, in sum, to overturn their ways of life – meant to them.

The visions of the conquered, of the Mexicans, of the Mayans, and later of the Quechua and others, present themselves in the form of great epic poems that are at the same time heart-rending elegies of peoples who, as one of their songs puts it, “saw themselves slaughtered by this lamentable and fatal fate.”²⁰

Nor can we ignore the accounts of others, such as the Africans led off to slavery in the New World. The coincidence of their presence with that of the European conquistadors, especially the Spanish, the Portuguese, the English, and the French, brought about a violent shock, a confrontation. But it is none the less true that over the course of time the presence of peoples of such different origins was propitious for the union of bodies and souls and for cultural fusions. It is consequently necessary to reflect on these events and their current influence, both on what is considered their execrable, bad side as well as the positive aspects inherent in the existence of America and its inhabitants.

There is a word in Spanish, as well as in French and English, that means “coincidence of objects or persons in a single place,” “generally clashing one against the other” with force and fracas, like troops confronting each other; this term can also have the meaning to approach, to meet, along with everything that might result, such as convergence and fusion. This word, whose accepted definitions I have gotten from the *Diccionario de la Academia* for Spanish, from

20. See the native testimony gathered in *L'Envers de la Conquête*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla, (Lyon: Editions Fédérop, 1977).

the *Robert* and the *Larousse* for French, and from *Oxford* and *Webster's* for English, is "encuentro," "rencontre," or "encounter."

It is necessary to make reference to this word in order to show that the encounter had enduring consequences, good and bad, for the people who lived not only on two different continents but in two different hemispheres of the planet. The New World represented for Europeans the hemisphere that they had been previously unaware of, and the Old World came to represent for the Amerindians a group of continents where human civilization went back to deepest antiquity.

On July 9, 1984, at a meeting of the Latin American and Spanish commissions held in Santo Domingo, I was part of a group who proposed to the Mexican government "Encounter Between Two Worlds" as the title for the Quincentennial. Needless to say, certain participants reacted with visible displeasure, interpreting our proposition as an attempt to deprive Spain and Columbus of the glory of discovery. Some were so indignant that they asked for a wreath to be laid the next day and for a guard to be placed before the monument to the memory of Christopher Columbus. Others opposed our proposition for completely different reasons, arguing that the idea of an "encounter" obscured the violence of the invasion and the deaths of millions of natives. These people saw or wanted to see only the positive connotation of the term, of "rapprochement," losing sight of the other connotations, even the most basic ones (in "encounter" there is "counter," and thus the notion of shock, confrontation, struggle).

In this regard, it can be said that, because the debate itself gives rise to so many violent "encounters," wouldn't it be better to give it up or, said another way, to make an abstraction of the Quincentennial, so perturbing for some people? An answer is provided by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was asked if it would not be better to abstain from commemorating the Quincentennial. Taking up the expression, "Encounter Between Two Worlds," he underlined that this should be a time for mutual reflection:

I do not think that the West should spend its time beating its breast over all the crimes it has committed in the world. The Quincentennial of the Encounter Between Two Worlds is the occasion not for exalting one of these worlds with respect to the other, but for a sort of mutual reflection, colored with a certain melancholy over what has happened, over what could perhaps have happened. What is more important to show is that

the indigenous peoples who still exist have a knowledge of their natural milieu that we are far from having exhausted.²¹

This is completely true. It is important to look back in order to reflect on the significance of the moment that marks the beginning of the globalization of humanity. It is therefore fitting that the 163 member states of UNESCO unanimously ratified Mexico's proposal to call the commemoration the "Quincentennial of the Encounter Between Two Worlds." The Commissions on the "Encounter Between Two Worlds" created in France and other countries such as Russia, Poland, and Japan, not to mention the Organization of American States, all share this viewpoint. There is also the satisfaction of seeing that, in Spain, King Juan Carlos, Prime Minister Felipe González, and other personalities and institutions often make allusions to the concept of the "Encounter Between Two Worlds," thus recognizing the necessity of taking others, Amerindians and Africans, into account.

It is from this perspective that the spokesmen for the forty million Amerindians who evoke the pain of the conquest even as they denounce the miserable conditions in which they live today seek to be heard. The same holds true for the Africans who, with their sense of rhythm, their dances, and their songs, along with the strength of their work and their joy in the midst of pain, have enriched the Americas. Their current living conditions are far from enviable. It is a question of the rights of man, as Antón de Montesinos, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and many others have said before us. Five hundred years after the globalization of human beings the situation still poses this problem.

It is equally interesting, during this time of commemoration, to recall the many utopias that sprang up in the New World, not so much those of the "Terre Fleurie," the Fountain of Youth, Eldorado, or the Amazons, but those characterized by a profound humanism, those islands where "everything belonged to everyone"; where Indians and Europeans, in the light of a Franciscan neomillennarianism, sought to recreate a primitive Christian community in which they all lived as brothers; or the confraternity-hospitals of Vasco de Quiroga; or the dream of Las Casas de la Verapaz (true peace) in Guatemala and its incessant struggle for justice and the rights of man.

21. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Characters," a program on Antenne 2, October 11, 1991.

From another angle, it is possible to consider an aspect that some people stubbornly minimize or even deny: that of the fusion of peoples and cultures in the heart of the New World. There are many today who would not exist if the encounter had not taken place. Latin America now counts nearly 300 million Spanish speakers and 160 million Portuguese speakers, living symbols of the convergence of peoples from very diverse origins. Their ways of life are rife with traits and elements inherited from Mediterranean Europe, to which have been added those of indigenous, African, and sometimes even Asiatic origin.

Hundreds of millions of people are the descendants of those who, born in the New World, developed extraordinary cultures, creating new artistic forms in painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, and literature. And this New World, for all its sometimes extreme and odious contrasts, is today the symbol for what could be the future of all humanity. A large number of the current inhabitants, the fruit of genetic interminglings as their faces show, is already both a part and an anticipation of what the great human family could some day become. With grandparents, great-grandparents, and ancestors born in the four corners of the globe, most contemporary Americans can justifiably feel themselves to be true citizens of the world.

But being a citizen of the world does not have to mean, for all that, that one has to lose one's own identity. One can be proud of one's Aztec, Mayan, Quechua, Aymara, Mapuche or other origins, and of one's Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, etc., roots, all the while recognizing oneself as Mexican, Costa Rican, Colombian, Chilean. Moreover, this does not have to hinder allegiance to a vaster identity, in this case that of Ibero-American, something recently demonstrated during the first Ibero-American summit at Guadajara, Mexico, which was composed of twenty-three chiefs of state, including those of Spain and Portugal.

Our current coexistence with the natives who, despite innumerable misfortunes, have managed to preserve their languages and their ways of life, poses to us one last fundamental question that some may find idealistic, but that must be answered if we wish to guarantee the survival of our species. Are we going to learn how to save our most intimate identities while finding our way toward an egalitarian participation with other, vaster identities to arrive at the point where we recognize we belong to the greater human family, engaged in an inevitable contact and commerce?

A good number of the arguments mentioned here are probably going to continue to feed the interminable debate over the New World. Nevertheless, I want to believe that there are realities that everyone cannot help but recognize. One is surely the survival of forty million Amerindians who have preserved their identities and their languages, and to whom we are indebted for their art, their wisdom, their respect for the earth, and also their resistance to cultural annihilation these past five hundred years. This recognition demands reparation for the wrongs done to these peoples and respect for their destiny. The other immutable reality is the legacy of men such as Montesinos, Las Casas, Quiroga, Sahagún, and the many others who represent Spanish humanism at its best. The presence today of hundreds of millions of men and women who, in a melting pot of peoples and cultures, form the New World, constitutes an unavoidable reality that, in spite of crises, confers on the countries of Latin America a sense of hope in its destiny.

The universalization of humanity and an awakening to the world's cultural wealth have been made possible, in the end, by the Encounter, although it has been a long and very often painful process. All these realities that I have just described, along with many others that might be added, invite us to open our eyes to the present and to the future. In this sense, one can say that it is important to commemorate the Quincentennial.