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0521427096 - The Old World and the New, 1492-1650

J. H. Elliott

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I

THE UNCERTAIN IMPACT

Nearly three hundred years after Columbus's first voyage of discovery, the Abbé Raynal, that eager inquirer after other men's truths, offered a prize for the essay which would best answer the following questions. Has the discovery of America been useful or harmful to mankind? If useful, how can its usefulness be enhanced? If harmful, how can the harm be diminished? Cornelius De Pauw had recently described the discovery of the New World as the most calamitous event in human history,¹ and Raynal was taking no chances. 'No event', he had cautiously begun his vast and laborious *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, 'has been so interesting to mankind in general, and to the inhabitants of Europe in particular, as the discovery of the new world, and the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope.'² It took the robust Scottish forthrightness of Adam Smith, whose view of the impact of the discoveries was generally favourable, to turn this non-committal passage into an *ex cathedra* historical pronouncement: 'the discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind'.³

But in what, precisely, did their importance lie? As the candidates for Raynal's essay prize soon found out for themselves, this was by no means easy to decide. Of the eight essays which have survived, four took an optimistic view of the consequences of America's discovery, and dwelt at length on the resulting commercial advantages. But optimists and pessimists alike tended to wander uncertainly through three centuries of European history, anxiously

¹ Cornelius De Pauw, *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Américains*, in *Œuvres Philosophiques* (Paris, 1794), vol. i, p. ii. First published 1768.

² English translation (Dublin, 1776), i, 1. Original French version published in 1770.

³ *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. Edwin Cannan (reprinted University Paperbacks, London, 1961), ii, 141.

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searching for pieces of stray ammunition with which to bombard their predetermined targets. In the end, it was perhaps not surprising that standards were considered insufficiently high, and no prize was awarded.¹

Raynal's formulation of his questions no doubt tended to prompt philosophical speculation and dogmatic assertion, rather than rigorous historical inquiry. But this was less easily evaded in 1792, when the Académie Française asked competitors to examine the influence of America on the 'politics, commerce and customs of Europe'. It is difficult not to sympathize with the sentiments of the anonymous prize-winner. 'What a vast and inexhaustible subject', he sighed. 'The more one studies it, the more it grows.' Nevertheless, he succeeded in covering a great deal of ground in his eighty-six pages. As might have been expected, he was happier with America's political and economic influence on Europe than with its moral influence, which he regarded as pernicious. But he showed himself aware of the concealed danger in this enterprise—the danger of attributing all the major changes in modern European history to the discovery of America. He also made a genuine attempt, in language which may not sound totally unfamiliar to our own generation, to weigh up the profits and the losses of discovery and settlement. 'If those Europeans who devoted their lives to developing the resources of America had instead been employed in Europe in clearing forests, and building roads, bridges and canals, would not Europe have found in its own bosom the most important objects which it derives from the other world, or their equivalent? And what innumerable products would the soil of Europe not have yielded, if it had been brought to the degree of cultivation of which it is capable?'²

In a field where there are so many variables, and where the qualitative and the quantitative are so inextricably interwoven, even the modern arts of econometric history cannot do much to help us

¹ For Raynal's essay prize see Durand Echeverría, *Mirage in the West* (1957, reprinted Princeton, 1968), p. 173, which lists the titles of the surviving essays. See also A. Feugère, *L'Abbé Raynal* (Angoulême, 1922), pp. 343–6.

² *Discours composé en 1788, qui a remporté le prix sur la question: quelle a été l'influence de l'Amérique sur la politique, le commerce, et les mœurs de l'Europe?* (Paris, 1792), pp. 8 and 77–8.

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assess the relative costs and benefits involved in the discovery and exploitation of America by Europe. Yet the impossibility of precise measurement should not be allowed to act as a deterrent to the study of a subject which has been regarded, at least since the late eighteenth century, as central to the history of Europe and the modern world.

For all the interest and importance of the theme, the historiography of the impact of America on Europe has enjoyed a distinctly chequered career. The eighteenth-century debate was conducted in terms which suggest that the participants were more concerned to confirm and defend their personal prejudices about the nature of man and society than to obtain a careful historical perspective on the contribution of the New World to Europe's economic and cultural development.¹ It was not until Humboldt published his *Cosmos* in 1845 that the reactions of the first Europeans, and especially of the Spaniards, to the alien environment of America assumed their proper place in a great geographical and historical synthesis, which made some attempt to consider what the revelation of the New World had meant to the Old.

Nineteenth-century historiography did not show any great interest in pursuing Humboldt's more original lines of inquiry. The discovery and settlement of the New World were incorporated into an essentially Europocentric conception of history, where they were depicted as part of that epic process by which the Renaissance European first became conscious of the world and of man, and then by degrees imposed his own dominion over the newly-discovered races of a newly-discovered world. In this particular story of European history—which was all too easily identified with universal history—there was a tendency to place the principal emphasis on the motives, methods and achievements of the explorers and conquerors. The impact of Europe on the world (which was regarded as a transforming, and ultimately beneficial, impact) seemed a subject of greater interest and concern than the impact of the world on Europe.

Twentieth-century European historiography has tended to pursue

¹ For the eighteenth-century debate see especially A. Gerbi, *La Disputa del Nuovo Mondo* (Milan, 1955; Spanish translation, *La Disputa del Nuevo Mundo*, Mexico, 1960).

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a similar theme, although from a very different standpoint. The retreat of European imperialism has led to a reassessment—often very harsh—of the European legacy. At the same time the development of anthropology and archaeology has led to a reassessment—sometimes very favourable—of the pre-European past of former colonial societies. Where European historians once wrote with the confidence born of an innate sense of European superiority, they now write burdened with the consciousness of European guilt.

It is no accident that some of the most important historical work of our own age—preoccupied as it is with the problem of European and non-European, of black and white—should have been devoted to the study of the social, demographic and psychological consequences for non-European societies of Europe's overseas expansion. Perhaps future generations will detect in our concern with these themes some affinity between the historians of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. For Raynal and his friends were similarly consumed by guilt and by doubt. Their hesitancy in evaluating the consequences of the discovery and conquest of America sprang precisely from the dilemma involved in attempting to reconcile the record of economic and technical progress since the end of the fifteenth century with the record of the sufferings endured by the defeated societies. The very extent of their preoccupation with the great moral issue of their own times, the issue of slavery, helped to create a situation not without its parallels today. For if their preoccupation stimulated them to ask historical questions, it also tempted them to reply with unhistorical answers.

The Académie Française competition of 1792 shows that one of those questions concerned the impact of overseas expansion on Europe itself; and it is not surprising to find a renewed interest in this same question today. As Europe again becomes acutely aware of the ambivalence of its relationship to the outer world, so it also becomes aware of the possibility of seeing itself in a different perspective—as part of a universal community of mankind whose existence has exercised its own subtle and transforming influences on the history of Europe. The awareness is salutary, although it contains an element of narcissism, to which the eighteenth century self-indulgently succumbed. Moreover, where the relationship with

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America is concerned, this element is likely to be particularly well represented. For this has always been a *special* relationship, in the sense that America was peculiarly the artefact of Europe, as Asia and Africa were not. America and Europe were for ever inseparable, their destinies interlocked.

The part played by the American myth in the spiritual and intellectual development of Europe has now become a commonplace of historical study. In the early years of this century, the impressive work of Gabriel Chinard on America and the exotic dream in French literature¹ revealed in brilliant detail the fluctuating process by which an idealized New World helped to sustain the hopes and aspirations of the Old until the moment when Europe was ready to accept and act upon America's message of renovation and revolution. Chinard's work was complemented and amplified by Geoffrey Atkinson's study of French geographical literature and ideas,² and, more recently, by Antonello Gerbi's massive survey of the eighteenth-century debate on America as a corrupt or an innocent world.³ One further book stands out amidst the rapidly growing literature on Europe and the American dream—*The Invention of America*, by the distinguished Mexican philosophical historian, Edmundo O'Gorman, who has ingeniously argued that America was not discovered but invented by sixteenth-century Europeans.⁴

Alongside these contributions to the study of the myth of America in European thought, an increasing amount of attention has been devoted, especially in the Hispanic world, to the writings of the Spanish chroniclers, missionaries and officials, as interpreters of the American scene. A vast amount of close textual study still remains to be undertaken, but enough has already been achieved to confirm the justice of Humboldt's slightly condescending verdict: 'If we carefully examine the original works of the earliest historians of the Conquista, we are astonished at finding in a Spanish author of the sixteenth century, the germs of so many important physical

¹ *L'Exotisme Américain dans la Littérature Française au XVIe Siècle* (Paris, 1911) and *L'Amérique et le Rêve Exotique dans la Littérature Française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris, 1913).

² *Les Nouveaux Horizons de la Renaissance Française* (Paris, 1935).

³ See above, p. 3, note 1.

⁴ (Bloomington, 1961).

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truths.¹ There are still great opportunities for research into the Spanish texts, as indeed into the general sixteenth-century literature of exploration and discovery. But the most rewarding results of this textual research are likely to come from intelligent attempts to set it into a wider context of information and ideas. The evidence of the texts can tell us much that we still need to know about non-European societies, by providing the essential material for 'ethnohistory', which sets the results of ethnographic study against European historical records. It can also tell us something of interest about European society—about the ideas, attitudes and preconceptions which made up the mental baggage of Early Modern Europeans on their travels through the world. What did they see or fail to see? Why did they react as they did? It is the attempt to suggest answers to some of these questions which makes Margaret Hodgen's recent history of *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*² such an important pioneering work.

This select company of books stands out, not only because of their intrinsic excellence, but also because of the particular line of approach adopted by their authors. All of them have sought, in some way, to relate the European response to the non-European world to the general history of European civilization and ideas. It is here that the most promising opportunities are to be found; and here, too, that there is most need for some kind of reassessment and synthesis. For the literature on the discovery and colonization of the New World is now enormous, but it is also in many respects fragmentary and disconnected, as if it formed a special field of historical study on its own.

'What is lacking in English is an attempt to tie in exploration with European history as a whole.'³ This lack provides some justification for an attempt to synthesize, in brief compass, the present state of thought about the impact made by the discovery and settlement of America on Early Modern Europe. Any such attempt must clearly lead into several different fields of inquiry, for America impinged on sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe at innumerable points. Its discovery had important *intellectual*

¹ *Cosmos* (vol. ii, London, 1848), p. 295.

² (Philadelphia, 1964).

³ J. R. Hale, *Renaissance Exploration* (BBC Publications, London, 1968), p. 104.

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consequences, in that it brought Europeans into contact with new lands and peoples, and in so doing challenged a number of traditional European assumptions about geography, theology, history and the nature of man. America also constituted an *economic* challenge for Europe, in that it proved to be at once a source of supply for produce and for objects for which there existed a European demand, and a promising field for the extension of European business enterprise. Finally, the acquisition by European states of lands and resources in America was bound to have important *political* repercussions, in that it affected their mutual relations by bringing about changes in the balance of power.

Any examination of European history in the light of an external influence upon it, carries with it the temptation to find traces of this influence everywhere. But the absence of influence is often at least as revealing as its presence; and if some fields of thought are still curiously untouched by the experience of America, a hundred years or more after its discovery, this too can tell us something about the character of European civilization. From 1492 the New World was always present in European history, although its presence made itself felt in different ways at different times. It is for this reason that America and Europe should not be subjected to a historiographical divorce, however shadowy their partnership may often appear before the later seventeenth century. Properly, their histories should constitute a continuous interplay of two distinctive themes.

One theme is represented by the attempt of Europe to impose its own image, its own aspirations, and its own values, on a newly-discovered world, together with the consequences for that world of its actions. The other treats of the way in which a growing awareness of the character, the opportunities and the challenges represented by the New World of America helped to shape and transform an Old World which was itself striving to shape and transform the New. The first of these themes has traditionally received more emphasis than the second, although, ultimately, the two are equally important and should remain inseparable. But at this moment the second is in need of more historical attention than the first. From around 1650 the histories of Europe and America have been reasonably well integrated. But for the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the

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significance of America for Europe still awaits a full assessment.

‘It is a striking fact’, wrote the Parisian lawyer, Etienne Pasquier, in the early 1560s, ‘that our classical authors had no knowledge of all this America, which we call New Lands.’¹ With these words he caught something of the importance of America for the Europe of his day. Here was a totally new phenomenon, quite outside the range of Europe’s accumulated experience and of its normal expectation. Europeans knew something, however vaguely and inaccurately, about Africa and Asia. But about America and its inhabitants they knew nothing. It was this which differentiated the response of sixteenth-century Europeans to America from that of the fifteenth-century Portuguese to Africa. The nature of the Africans was known, at least in a general way. That of the Americans was not. The very fact of America’s existence, and of its gradual revelation as an entity in its own right, rather than as an extension of Asia, constituted a challenge to a whole body of traditional assumptions, beliefs and attitudes. The sheer immensity of this challenge goes a long way towards explaining one of the most striking features of sixteenth-century intellectual history—the apparent slowness of Europe in making the mental adjustments required to incorporate America within its field of vision.

At first sight, the evidence for the existence of a time-lag between the discovery of America and Europe’s assimilation of that discovery does not seem entirely clear cut. There is, after all, ample evidence of the excitement provoked in Europe by the news of Columbus’s landfall. ‘Raise your spirits . . . Hear about the new discovery!’ wrote the Italian humanist Peter Martyr to the count of Tendilla and the archbishop of Granada on 13 September 1493. Christopher Columbus, he reported, ‘has returned safe and sound. He says that he has found marvellous things, and he has produced gold as proof of the existence of mines in those regions.’ And Martyr then went on to recount how Columbus had found men who went around naked, and lived content with what nature gave them. They had kings; they fought among each other with staves and bows and arrows; although they were naked, they competed for power, and they married. They

¹ *Les Œuvres d’Estienne Pasquier*, vol. ii (Amsterdam, 1723), bk. iii, letter iii, p. 55.

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worshipped the celestial bodies, but the exact nature of their religious beliefs was still unknown.¹

That Martyr's excitement was widely shared is indicated by the fact that Columbus's first letter was printed and published nine times in 1493 and had reached some twenty editions by 1500.² The frequent printing of this letter and of the reports of later explorers and *conquistadores*; the fifteen editions of Francanzano Montalboddo's collection of voyages, the *Paesi Novamente Retrovati*, first published at Venice in 1507; the great mid-century compilation of voyages by Ramusio—all this testifies to the great curiosity and interest aroused in sixteenth-century Europe by the news of the discoveries.³

Similarly, it is not difficult to find resounding affirmations by individual sixteenth-century writers of the magnitude and significance of the events which were unfolding before their eyes. Guicciardini lavished praise on the Spaniards and Portuguese, and especially on Columbus, for the skill and courage 'which has brought to our age the news of such great and unexpected things'.⁴ Juan Luis Vives, who was born in the year of America's discovery, wrote in 1531 in the dedication of his *De Disciplinis* to John III of Portugal: 'truly, the globe has been opened up to the human race'.⁵ Eight years later, in 1539, the Paduan philosopher Lazzaro Buonamico introduced a theme which would be elaborated upon in the 1570s by the French writer Louis Le Roy, and would become a commonplace of European historiography: 'Do not believe that there exists anything more

¹ *Epistolario de Pedro Mártir de Angleria*, ed. José López de Toro (Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España, vols. ix-xii, Madrid, 1953-7), vol. ix, letter 133, p. 242.

² For the diffusion of news about Columbus's first voyage, see S. E. Morison, *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* (London, 1956), p. 108; Charles Verlinden and Florentino Pérez-Embida, *Cristóbal Colón y el Descubrimiento de América* (Madrid, 1967), pp. 91-4; Howard Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World* (New York, 1964), pp. 1-2.

³ For Montalboddo and Ramusio, see D. B. Quinn, 'Exploration and the Expansion of Europe' in vol. i of the *Rapports* of the XIIth International Congress of Historical Sciences (Vienna, 1965), pp. 45-59, and G. B. Parks, *The Contents and Sources of Ramusio's Navigazioni* (New York, 1955). Interesting discussions of the diffusion of news about the discoveries are to be found in *Les Aspects Internationaux de la Découverte Océanique aux XVe et XVIe Siècles* (Actes du Cinquième Colloque International d'Histoire Maritime), ed. M. Mollat and P. Adam (Paris, 1966).

⁴ *Storia d'Italia*, ed. C. Panigada (Bari, 1929), ii, 131 (Bk. vi, c. ix).

⁵ I am indebted for this and other references to America in the works of Vives to Dr Abdón Salazar of the Department of Spanish, King's College, London.

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honourable to our or the preceeding age than the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality.¹ And in 1552 Gómara, in the dedication to Charles V of his *General History of the Indies*, wrote perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most succinct, of all assessments of the significance of 1492: 'The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies.'²

Yet against these signs of awareness must be set the no less striking signs of unawareness of the importance both of the discovery of America and of its discoverer. The historical reputation of Columbus is a subject which has not yet received all the attention it deserves;³ but the treatment of Columbus by sixteenth-century writers indicates something of the difficulty which they encountered in seeing his achievement in any sort of historical perspective. With one or two exceptions they showed little interest in his personality and career, and some of them could not even get his Christian name right. When he died in Valladolid, the city chronicle failed to record the fact.⁴ It seemed as though Columbus might be doomed to oblivion, partly perhaps because he failed to conform to the sixteenth-century canon of the hero-figure, and partly because the true significance of his achievement was itself so hard to grasp.

There were, however, always a few spirits, particularly in his native Italy, who were prepared to give Columbus his due. The determination of his son, Hernando, to perpetuate his memory, and the publication in Venice in 1571 of the famous biography,⁵ helped

¹ Cited by Elisabeth Feist Hirsch, *Damião de Gois* (The Hague, 1967), p. 103. See also Louis Le Roy, *De la Vicissitude ou Variété des Choses en l'Univers* (3rd ed. Paris, 1579), fs. 98-99 v.

² Francisco López de Gómara, *Primera Parte de la Historia General de las Indias* (Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, vol. 22, Madrid, 1852), p. 156.

³ But see the valuable pioneering essay by Leicester Bradner, 'Columbus in Sixteenth-Century Poetry', in *Essays Honoring Lawrence C. Wroth* (Portland, Maine, 1951), pp. 15-30.

⁴ Cesare de Lollis, *Cristoforo Colombo nella Leggenda e nella Storia* (3rd ed. Rome, 1923), p. 313.

⁵ *Vida del Almirante Don Cristóbal Colón*, ed. Ramon Iglesia (Mexico, 1947). The traditional attribution of the biography to Hernando Colón is rejected by Alexandre Cioranescu in 'Christophe Colomb: Les Sources de sa Biographie', in the volume of