

Half a Milenium Afterwards.

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Columbus
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There is much said and done these days, about the Quincentennial of Christopher Columbus' trip to America. Three reproductions of his "caravelles" or ships, have been built in Spain and are already sailing the seas. A huge international fair will take place next year in Seville, longtime the main port between Spain and its American empire. NPR has spent millions to produce a seven-hour series on the topic, comparable to its recent series on the American Civil War. And many indian groups, all over the American continent, are protesting for the celebration of an event that represented much disruption and suffering in their lives.

The relevance of Columbus' voyage is unquestionable: it changed, for good or evil, the course of the world in at least two continents. What is under scrutiny these days is, first, whether Columbus' trip was really a "discovery", as it has been characterized. And, second, whether its overall effect can be assessed as positive, negative or mixed, given that the extermination of large portions of indigenous population and the slavery system were two of its most visible consequences.

It is unquestionable that America was inhabited by humans when Columbus arrived. And many of the cultures, e.g. Mayan, Inca, Aztec, were quite advanced. Hence, Columbus could not have discovered something that was already known to millions. Also, there is some evidence that other Europeans, e.g. the Vikings, had already reached North America, hopping from Iceland to Greenland, to other smaller north Atlantic islands. So what was it that the Italian sailor discovered, if anything at all?

Columbus was, essentially, a seaman, in a time when few dared far away from the seacoast. No one, before Columbus, had crossed an open ocean like the Mid Atlantic, using the simple technology available at the time. In a way, Columbus' trip in 1492 represents the same as the flight to the Moon in 1969: both opened new horizons to the human adventure. His discovery was not one of a foreign land, but one of a totally new way of travelling. He opened the Oceans as a communications route. Shortly after Columbus, Magellian crossed the Pacific and Vasco Da Gama, the Indian Oceans and only then, the world became round in a practical sense.

The American Conquest came later, when Columbus had already finished his job and was preparing to die, poor and forgotten, somewhere in Spain. With the Conquest the Spaniards proved (as many other Europeans did, later) that ruthlessness was a trait of the times not of a race. For, if human sacrifices were held in the Aztec and Inca religions, the torments inflicted to chiefs Hatuey, in Cuba, Tupac Amaru in Peru and Caupolican, in Chile, to establish the Spanish domination, were no less barbarian. American Indians finally were conquered by the European who then brought the African slaves, then Asian and East Indians, imported as cheap labor. These human elements, jointly with all possible admixtures, populate America today.

But, what did this process of conquest, settlement, displacement, suffering and force bring about? How different would the world, as we know it today, had been, had Columbus not sailed to America in 1492?

Since the beginning America has had as much influence in Europe as Europe has had in America. It is questionable whether Europe, without having exploited the American riches, would have achieved the economic and intellectual level that allowed the great discoveries of mathematics and physics as well as the writings of the encyclopedists, in the XVIII Century. All these events had a great effect in triggering the American Revolution of 1776. It is also possible that Lafayette and other Frenchmen who came to fight for the American Revolution, would have perhaps hesitated in supporting their 1789 revolution, had they not seen first hand the American one. Had the French Revolution and Napoleon not occurred, the Spanish nations would probably have not obtained their independence in the early 1800's. And the Europeans would have perhaps found it more attractive to strip the decaying Spanish Empire of its productive colonies than to go and develop their own in Africa and Asia, as they actually did.

What Europe would have been without America can be assessed, to a given extent, by looking at the Eastern European countries. These had few contacts with the American Colonization experience and developed tardily. What Latin America would have been without the European colonization is more difficult to imagine. It is very possible that another sailor, from another country and at a later date, would have finally conquered the Ocean. At least with Spain, Latin America achieved a level of intermixture that largely diminishes the hatred between former masters and servants and peoples of different races.

When you visit the Aztec archeological site of "Templo Mayor", in Mexico City, you find an enormous inscription on the wall. It says of how modern mexicans are not pure indians, not pure Spaniards, but a racial and cultural admixture of peoples which has created something different: the Mexican. Such a positive feeling, that makes room for all whatever their ethnic extraction, is not uncommon in modern Latin America.

The history of humanity is the history of successive conquests. Columbus' voyage opened an historical epoch that inflicted much pain to peoples in America and Africa. But it also opened a Pandora Box of new possibilities that we can all share today as partners. We can either try to turn back the clock of history or try to make the best of it by looking to the future and working together in good faith.

We can, then and in a positive way, look to the past to avoid committing the same mistakes and to heal any open wound.