

Sören ASMUS

The Conquest of Latin America: Europe and the External Other

It has taken a long time to realise how the respective peoples perceived the encounter between people from Europe and people from Latin America. Enrique DUSSEL describes the process of encounter between the European conquistadores and the indigenous people of the Americas from a European point of view in six forms: Invention, Discovery, Conquest, Colonisation, Spiritual Conquest, and Extermination. For the indigenous people of Central and South America, this process is seen in five forms: Parusia of Gods, Invasion, Resistance, End of Time, and the Age of the Sixth Sun.

CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

DUSSEL gives an impressive account of the historical process from the first arrival of Cristóbal COLÓN (COLUMBUS) on the American continent to the near-complete destruction of the indigenous culture there. The uncovering of this part of history is made more difficult by the fact that Spain and Portugal, the leading European countries at this time, were themselves later pushed to the periphery of European history.

This was mainly because their economy did not manage to progress from the mercantile to the capitalist stage early enough. It is exactly the Eurocentrism of the whole of European philosophy and the humanities that is responsible for the ignorance in regard to other continents and the distorted perception of the Other in history up to the present time.

This Eurocentrism is all the more surprising since up to the conquest of the 'New World,' Europe had an undeniably peripheral position in the world's history, and it is from the Enlightenment that Western Europe projects back its role into history and thereby describes everything from a position of European dominance. In the 1490's, Western Europe expanded towards the Atlantic West after being continuously blocked by the Islamic empires in the East.

It was only at the peripheries that Europe could expand: Christian Orthodox Moscow to the East, reaching the Pacific in the XVIIth century; and the Hispanic Christendom of Portugal and Spain to the West, across the Atlantic. The people of the Western European margins managed to adjust to this hegemonic power in their process of expansion, the starting point of which is the conquest of America.

I. The European View on the Discovery

1. INVENTION

COLÓN did not find something new in his view, but just what he knew he would find: the Western approach to India. In analysing COLÓN's diaries, one finds again and again his interpretation that the area of his *Invention* is either India or China, as was to be expected by his view.

It took the voyages of Amerigo VESPUCCI to realise that the continent found by the Europeans was not a part of Asia, but an independent, 'new' continent, or rather two. To the day he died, COLÓN was of the opinion that he had reached Asia.

The supposedly Asian character of the continent persisted in

the imagination of the Renaissance European people. COLÓN opened the way officially and politically to 'Asia.' The characteristic European approach to the Other is a result of this.

COLÓN, and accordingly the people of Western Europe, did not recognise those people they met as independent and unknown to them. The indigenous American people were seen as objects of European evangelisation and dependent upon Europeans to gain a history and an identity — in this case, that of a Hindu from India — who could not and were not expected to make contributions of any kind.

2. DISCOVERY

After the "Invention" of America, the "*Discovery*" was begun by VESPUCCI. Returning from his voyages to Brazil, he slowly realised that he in fact did not reach a fourth Asian continent, but rather a 'New World.' These areas are seen as a new part of the world — the old world being Europe. The known world is defined as the centre, from which the rest is defined. To 'discover' implies that the Europeans accept that they are confronted with something previously unknown.

3. CONQUEST

Whereas these two forms of encounter were primarily theoretical and aesthetic, indicating a change in reflection on the experience, it soon became a physical encounter that was both a political and military one. Hernán CORTÉS exemplifies this next form of encounter, which was the *Conquest*.

After the lands were geographically acknowledged, the Europeans went on to control them physically — that is, to control the bodies and persons. After previously encountering only villages and simple agrarian cultures, the encounter with the Maya and Aztec were with a developed city-culture.

The conquest is the most violent form of encounter and results in the complete destruction of the indigenous culture. The soldiers who followed CORTÉS were free from the conventional constraints of their culture, whereas the Aztecs were tied to a traditional determined way of life that does not allow for such easy integration of the unknown as did the Spanish.

The first encounter was a violent and destructive one: CORTÉS came to conquer and to rule, there was no other option for him. The military encounter was that of a more developed killing-technology on the side of the Europeans. The violent-military *I* encounters the inferior *Other*. The conquest is the factual and cruel denial of the *Other*.

4. COLONISATION

The conquest was followed by *Colonisation*, the fourth form. After the military subordination, there followed the cultural, pedagogical, erotic, economic and political practice of controlling the other. Out of this the syncretistic cultural mixture, Latin America developed.

This was the economically exploited and depended backside of the European modernity. This culture developed in the double standard of morality regarding the European, and amorality and humiliation regarding the indigenous peoples. Its most obvious expression was found in the sexual exploitation of women by the *conquistadores*.

Out of the killing of the 'India' (indigenous woman) and the rape of the 'India' comes the 'Mestize.' The *machismo* gave a

double standard: the sexual domination of the 'India' and the (only outward) respect of the European woman.

The secular religion of the capitalist economy began and the embodiment of the indigenous subject was subjugated to the totality of the newly developing economic system. It was the beginning of the long-lasting and destructive colonisation of today's Latin America.

What follows as the last two forms of encounter is the establishment of ideological dominance after political and economic dominance was already achieved. Although the aim of evangelisation has always been one of the motives of all the efforts towards the conquest of the Americas, seen in the given perspective, the repressive character of Christian theology in Latin America becomes apparent now.

5. SPIRITUAL CONQUEST

The fifth form can be described as *Spiritual Conquest*. In 1493 Pope Alexander VI acknowledged control over the discovered Islands by Ferdinand of Aragon. Henceforth the conquest was based on a divine command; the *conquistadores* believed that their success over the indigenous people was a sign from God to affirm this command.

Based on the Eurocentric belief that the Christian God is the ultimate Lord of the world, the Western European peoples derived from that the power and authority for the human representative of this God (be it the Pope or the King) to rule and divide the world according to God's will.

In the same way, it was this God that gave the right religion, and therefore all other forms of religion had to be seen as inferior, primitive, idolatrous or satanic — in any case they were seen as something not worthy of survival, but rather due for complete destruction.

The indigenous peoples had to be forced into the kingdom of heaven like they were forced into the kingdom of the world; in both cases the Holy Church provided the ideology for dominance and violence over and against the Other.

After geographically discovering and geopolitically conquering the Americas, it was finally necessary to control the imagination of its peoples in order to include the *Indios* completely into the newly established system. Towards this end, priests such as SAHAGUN and DURAN collected knowledge from the indigenous culture. Thus, their knowledge was perceived as something to be known in order to be overcome and done away with.

6. EXTERMINATION

This leads finally to the sixth form of the encounter of two worlds, which basically was the *Extermination* of the indigenous culture. A new syncretistic culture came into being, but it was far away from being a fair and complementary mixture of the two previous ones.

It was rather the repulsive, destructive and genocidal shock for the indigenous world that led to the dominance of the Western European Christian elements in the culture of the Mestizo. The survival and integration of some of the American elements into this new culture was due to popular creativity and came in spite of the Western culture.

All in all, there was little change in the way the European *I* approached the *Other*, as it was always the already-held point of view that remained the pattern of thinking. There was no space for the idea that the difference experienced could provide something new or valuable in itself, but only some means to the predetermined end of exploitation.

II. The Indigenous Experience of the Invasion

1. PARUSIA OF GODS

In the beginning, the only way for MONTEZUMA and his people to understand the appearance of the people from beyond the sea within their framework of thinking was to define it as a *Parusia of Gods*. On one hand, the sea was for them something that could not be travelled, so there had to be something special about these creatures.

On the other hand, one main feature of the religion of those indigenous peoples was that time was perceived in circles, so that everything that happens has happened before and will happen again in the future. The only way to integrate the Europeans into this scheme was to relate them to a mythical story of a king or god who left towards the East and promised to return.

The ambiguity of this story was that there was a slight possibility of them being humans, but this was the option with the least probability according to the framework available to MONTEZUMA. So in the beginning he approached CORTÉS and his soldiers like gods and offered them the throne in order to prevent evil from his people.

2. INVASION

If the *conquistadores* were really gods, then they could try to end the 'Age of the Fifth Sun,' the age of the Aztecs. After that age there would be *Invasion*, destruction and humiliation, the end of the world as they knew it, and this had to be prevented under all circumstances. So MONTEZUMA tried to 'appease' the invaders whom he saw as gods.

As with the sacrifice of human hearts to their gods, all the Aztecs did was directed towards the preservation of the 'fifth sun' and whatever MONTEZUMA could do for this, he would. But by now CORTÉS was in a strategic and military position to conquer them.

3. RESISTANCE

As they realised — after MONTEZUMA was murdered — that the Spaniards were no gods, the indigenous peoples started fighting them. All over Central and South America the resistance continued during the XVIth century for quite some time until the invaders established their military hegemony.

4. END OF TIME

So the Age of the Fifth Sun, of the Aztec Empire, ended shortly and what came was the *End of Time*. This point in time was generally perceived within the different worldviews as the end of the world.

5. THE AGE OF THE SIXTH SUN

The Age of the Sixth Sun — which is, according to Enrique DUSSEL, the rising age of capitalism — began with its human sacrifice for the higher exploitation of resources and human lives.



UNFINISHED DIALOGUE

One has to realise the advanced state of philosophical, religious and cultural development that was already achieved in these countries to understand the extent of ignorance and the extension of the tragedy of not entering into true and open dialogue.

DUSSEL makes a considerable effort to explain the state of thought the indigenous cultures had in the Americas, and he rightly describes the change in perspective for Western scholarship from a Eurocentric to a non-Eurocentric view on world history as a *Copernican Revolution*.

It is thanks to him and others that today we can depart from our limited view on the development of culture and understand better different developments independently of our own history.

Whatever the works of SAHAGUN and DURAN kept as historical memories, it was structured through the view of Western European Christians and is only a recollection of a culture already mortally wounded.

At the beginning, the last philosophers of the indigenous people tried to communicate their knowledge and wisdom to the invading priests of the different orders, but those did not understand at all and tried to 'convince' the Indios finally by sending soldiers again to kill whoever might object to their logic.

It was the beginning and at the same time the end of an *unfinished dialogue* in which the gods and thereby the

knowledge and culture of the Native Americans in Central and South America were destroyed. However dominance did not manage to wipe out the differences, as the uprising of the Zapatista Movement and the Messages of Subcomandante Insurgente MARCOS have shown to the world. There is a resistance memory left, from which new cultural developments have risen again.

Suggested Reading

BOFF Leonardo – ELIZONDO Virgil (eds.), *1492–1992: The Voice of the Victims*. Concilium 1990/5.

DUSSEL Enrique, *The Real Motives for the Conquest*. In BOFF Leonardo – ELIZONDO Virgil (eds.), *1492–1992: The Voice of the Victims*. Concilium 1990/5. 30–46.

DUSSEL Enrique, *Von der Erfindung Amerikas zur Entdeckung des Anderen – Ein Projekt der Transmoderne*. Düsseldorf, 1995.

ESQUIVEL Julia, *Conquered and Violated Women*. In BOFF Leonardo – ELIZONDO Virgil (eds.), *1492–1992: The Voice of the Victims*. Concilium 1990/5. 68–77.

Shades of Tender Fury – The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante MARCOS and the Zapatista Army of Liberation; Translated by Frank Bardacke et al., New York 1995.

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Europe, Central America and Development Aid Cooperation

Central America's contacts with Europe began 500 years ago, when the Spanish conquistadors came over the Atlantic to plunder and conquer. For 500 years the relationship between the two regions has gone through many changes, but always remained unequal. The most visible sign of this inequality today is the European "development cooperation" with Central America.

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: AN INTERPRETATION

The positive interpretation of the term "development cooperation" is to see it as an ambition to move away from the 500 years of inequality. A more pessimistic interpreter would say that the term makes invisible the basic power inequality in the whole development cooperation industry, which still means that one powerful donor gives something, in this case aid, to a much less powerful receiver.

Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, seven small countries, are since long major receivers of European aid or "development cooperation". Though the region is often called the backyard of the United States, the combined European money transfers to the region by far surpass the money donated by the region's wealthy neighbour in the North.

This article tries to understand development cooperation between the two regions in relation to the political development in Central America, the geopolitical priorities and development of European commercial and foreign policy, and recent development aid trends, theory and practices.

Relations between Central America and Europe must obviously not be reduced to development aid transfers from benevolent European donors to thankful Central American beneficiaries. To understand the cooperation between the two regions, we must see it as one component in a wider historical and political context.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For 300 years Central America was a Spanish colony administered from Madrid and the colonial capital in Guatemala. The Spanish managed to exterminate most of the indigenous people living in the region, with Guatemala as the main exception, and constructed a colonial economy based on agriculture export.

The land was confiscated from the indigenous people and large landholdings were created to produce for the world market, exploiting the remaining indigenous populations as cheap plantation labour.

Political power has been shifted over the years from Spain to the region's national elites in the independence struggles of XIXth century and economic domination has been passed on to Great Britain first and later to the United States.

The colonial structure of the economy, however, still remains. The region is the most unequal in the world; small elites and foreign multinational corporations are making money exporting agriculture and clothes, produced in *maquiladora* factories or "sweat shops".