ARISTOTLE AND THE AMERICAN INDIANS

A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World

by

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Chapter I

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D. FR. BARTHOLOME DE LAS CASAS
Del Orden de Predicadores, Obispo de Chiapas, Vison apostolico, y el mas zeloso de la felicidad de los Indios.
Nací en Sevila el año de 1474, y muro en Alta el de 1566

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, 1474–1566
SPANISH DOMINICAN AND APOSTLE TO THE AMERICAN INDIANS
I

America as Fantasy

At first sight the conjunction of Aristotle and the American Indians appears absurd and meaningless. One may ask why sixteenth-century Spaniards came to apply the ideas of a Greek, who lived four centuries before Christ, to the problems of their conquest of America. What did Aristotle say that had any relevance to the Indians? The explanation is simple. The opening up of a vast unknown world peopled by strange folk led the Spaniards as they advanced among them bearing the Cross to ask themselves who these people were. And in asking this, they found themselves involved in a larger question that Aristotle never had to face: How ought Christians to conduct themselves towards human beings who differ in colour, culture, and religion? Aristotle’s authority remained so strong among Christian thinkers that some eminent Spaniards did not hesitate to apply his doctrine of natural slavery to the Indians. Others discovered that the experience and dogmas of the past were only partially helpful in attempting to answer the moral questions posed by the discovery of America.

Europe had, of course, accumulated some experience of relations with non-Christians during the slow frontier expansion of medieval times, which foreshadowed some of the events of the New World conquest. ¹ Both the Spaniards and Portuguese passed through a long period of intimate contact with the more highly cultivated Arabs, who had a decisive influence on their way of life. The Jews also had played an
important role in that process of peaceful cultural osmosis which distinguished certain periods of later Iberian medieval history. During the fifteenth century Spaniards had been confronted, in the course of their conquest of the Canary Islands, with peoples of different customs and different religion from their own. Indeed in these Islands disputes had developed on the justice of the treatment of the natives which suggest the sixteenth-century discussions in America.2 And Portugal, as the great explorer of Africa, had brought to Europe a knowledge of far-off and strange peoples. But ordinarily the Portuguese enslaved without much compunction the natives they encountered, believing that any physical subjection suffered in the process was of minor importance compared with the great benefits derived from conversion.3 In addition the Portuguese faced in Africa long-time geopolitical and religious enemies and waged war as a national crusade with full papal support.4 It was the Spaniards who first realized the necessity to work out Christian laws to govern their relations with the Indians they encountered.

The peoples of Africa and Asia became known to Europe through the considerable body of travel literature popular at the end of the fifteenth century and in the early years of the sixteenth, when the printing press was becoming a power in the world and Spain’s expansion was getting under way.5 By contrast, America was at first of little interest to Europe, or so it would seem from the relative scarcity of publications on the newly-discovered lands. Throughout the sixteenth century Spanish literature and art reflected only faintly the stirring events occurring across the seas.6 But as the impressive feats of Spanish arms brought Mexico and then Peru under Spanish rule, and as Spaniards from many walks of life went to take part in the conquest, the true significance of their new possessions gradually became better understood and by the middle of the sixteenth century the historian Francisco
López de Gómara characterized the discovery of America as the greatest event since the coming of Christ.  

The Spaniards who actually saw America not only became tremendously excited and stimulated but they tended to look at the New World through medieval spectacles. The wealth of ideas and legends developed with such luxuriance during the Middle Ages was transferred at once to America; this medieval influence was especially marked during the early years of the discovery and conquest. Columbus firmly asserted that he had discovered the terrestrial paradise, while others sought for the Fountain of Youth or tried to locate—in the general region of Nebraska and the Dakotas—the Seven Enchanted Cities which were believed to have been established by the seven Portuguese bishops who had fled there when the Arabs invaded the Iberian peninsula. The Admiral's head was full of medieval legends and allusions, for we also find him naming the Virgin Islands after St Ursula and her companions, the eleven thousand seagoing virgins. Columbus also enquired after the monsters to be found on Hispaniola when he first landed there in 1493, and Ferdinand Cortez sent back to the Emperor Charles V in 1522 not only considerable booty and a letter recounting the great deeds wrought in Mexico but also some samples of giants' bones found there. 

Spanish captains went forth to their conquest expecting to encounter many kinds of mythical beings and monsters depicted in medieval literature: giants, pygmies, dragons, griffins, white-haired boys, bearded ladies, human beings adorned with tails, headless creatures with eyes in their stomachs or breasts, and other fabulous folk. For a thousand years a great reservoir of curious ideas on man and semi-men had been forming in Europe, and was now freely drawn upon in America. St Augustine in his City of God had a whole chapter on "Whether the descendants of Adam or of the sons
of Noah produced monstrous races of men”\textsuperscript{13}, and by the end of the fifteenth century a rich body of fantastic ideas was ready for use in America. Trumpet-blowing apes, for example, “formed part of a loosely defined pictorial cycle combining subjects from the world of fable with the exotic beasts of the Bestiaries and the Marvels of the East”\textsuperscript{13}. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the early historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo had heard of a Peruvian monkey that “was no less extraordinary than the griffins”, for it had a long tail, with the upper half of its body covered with many-hued feathers and the lower half with smooth, reddish fur. It could sing, “when it felt like it”, in the same dulcet tones as a nightingale or a lark.\textsuperscript{14}

Wild men also had captured popular imagination during the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{15} They were depicted on the façades of churches, as decorations for manuscripts, and in tapestries, as ferocious beings of wild mien rending lions barehanded or smashing their skulls with trees or mighty clubs. Wild men served as jamb figures on the façade of the fifteenth-century San Gregorio monastery in Valladolid in which Las Casas lived during the 1550 disputation with Sepúlveda.\textsuperscript{16} The wildman motif was much used in Spain, crossed the Atlantic with Spanish workmen, and is seen on the façade of the Casa del Montejo in Yucatan, built in 1549.\textsuperscript{17} Wild men also supported the arms of Charles V in Tlaxcala.\textsuperscript{18} Given this medieval mélange of man, beast, and mythical creature, we are not surprised to find that a 1498 edition of John of Hollywood’s \textit{Sphaera Mundi} describes the inhabitants of the New World as being “blue in colour and with square heads”.\textsuperscript{19} One of the earliest pictures of American natives, printed as a wood engraving about 1505, showed the same fantastic spirit.\textsuperscript{20} The caption read as follows:

“They go naked, both men and women; they have, well-shaped bodies, and in colour nearly red; they bore holes in
their cheeks, lips, noses and ears, and stuff these holes with blue stones, crystals, marble and alabaster, very fine and beautiful. This custom is followed alone by the men. They have no personal property, but all things are in common. They all live together without a king and without a government, and every one is his own master. They take for wives whom they first meet, and in all this they have no rule. They also war with each other, and without art or rule. And they eat one another, and those they slay are eaten, for human flesh is a common food. In the houses salted human flesh is hung up to dry. They live to be a hundred and fifty years old, and are seldom sick.”21

Even more imaginative conceptions of the natives were held by some Spanish captains. Governor Diego Velázquez, despite his years of experience in Cuba, instructed Cortez to look for strange beings with great flat ears and others with dog-like faces whom he might expect to see in Aztec lands. Francisco de Orellana was so positive that he had encountered warrior women on his famous voyage of 1540 that the mightiest river in South America was named the Amazon. The Devil himself was to be found, some believed, on a certain island in the Caribbean Sea, but to balance this we find reports that the Apostle St James, patron saint of Spain, fought side by side with Spaniards in many of their military engagements in America.22 Strange sea animals and assorted monsters of the deep sea were also to be expected on the trip across.23 And, a more cheerful note, certain large birds found near Panama were reputed to sing together in a pleasing choral harmony.24 The chronicler of Peru, Pedro Cieza de León, heard in 1550 that bones of giants had been found there and thought that giants might still exist in that vast territory which was still only partially conquered and imperfectly known.25 El Dorado, that myth of easy gold, lured many a conquistador to his doom in the jungles and deserts of
America.\textsuperscript{26} Gog and Magog were believed to be somewhere in the New World,\textsuperscript{27} and even in the latter part of the sixteenth century a unicorn was reported seen in Florida.\textsuperscript{28}

Fifteenth-century Europeans had assumed their knowledge of the world to be exact, and the appearance of a vast unknown continent across the seas shook their confidence in themselves. Ingenious attempts were made to demonstrate that the early Christian authorities foreshadowed that shattering event, the discovery of America.\textsuperscript{29} If the new lands could be related somehow to the world they knew, a bridge could be built between the known and the unknown. The natives of this marvellous new world were, of course, at the centre of speculation. Even before the first decade had passed, these plumed and painted peoples—so inevitably and so erroneously called Indians—had become the principal mystery which perplexed the Spanish nation, conquistadores, ecclesiastics, crown, and common citizens alike. Who were they? Whence came they? What was their nature, their capacity for Christianity and European civilization? Most important of all, what relationship would be the right one for the Spaniards to establish with them?\textsuperscript{30}

The popular image, in the first feverish months, of a terrestrial paradise was soon succeeded by that of a hostile continent peopled with armed warriors rushing out of the tropical forests or strange cities to resist the advance of the Spanish soldiers and the missionary efforts of their companion friars. The early suppositions that the lost Ten Tribes of Israel were the progenitors of the Indian—held by more than one serious writer of the day—or even the later idea that in some mysterious way the Welsh nation had sent out these strange shoots—failed to answer satisfactorily the urgent basic questions: Who and what are these creatures? How shall we treat them? Can they be Christianized and brought to a civilized way of life? How shall this be attempted, by war or by
JUAN GINES DE SEPULVEDA
Cordobés: Teólogo, crítico, filólogo, e Historiador: nació en 1490 y murió en 1573.

JUAN GINES DE SEPULVEDA, 1490-1573
SPANISH RENAISSANCE SCHOLAR AND ARISTOTELIAN
peaceful persuasion? The conquistadores tended to ask rather pointedly: When may just war be waged to compel the Indians to serve God and the king and us? And the ecclesiastics asked eagerly: How can the natives be made to change from what they are to what they ought to be?

Two circumstances were responsible for these questions, which were asked by no other European colonizing nation with such general and genuine concern. The first was the nature of the Spanish people themselves, a people legalistic, passionate, given to extremes, and fervently Catholic. Three events of the year 1492 reflect some of the most fundamental characteristics of Spaniards and their history. Granada, the last of the Moorish kingdoms, fell to the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella on January 2, the Jews were next expelled, and on August 3 Columbus set sail. The final conquest of Granada was the climax of a long national effort to establish Christian hegemony in Spain. This long travail had helped to prepare the nation for larger tasks. Isabella herself discovered this in that same year, 1492, when she bluntly asked the scholar Antonio de Nebrija, as he presented to her his Spanish Gramática, the first grammar of a European modern language ever written: "What is it for?", and the Bishop of Ávila, speaking on behalf of the scholar, replied: "Your Majesty, language is the perfect instrument of empire." 31

The second circumstance was the nature of the dominion exercised by the Spanish crown in America, by which the Spaniards felt themselves responsible for the conversion of the natives. The decrees of Pope Alexander VI, the famous bulls of donation of 1493, which were used at first to justify the exertion of Spanish power in the new lands, specifically entrusted to the crown of Castile the Christianization of these lands. Without becoming embroiled, as the Spaniards themselves became, in the legal and moral implications of these
papal pronouncements, we may be clear that the Spaniards had, logically, to determine Indian nature and capacity before they could legitimately pursue either conquest or Christianization.

Most Spaniards, no matter what attitude they developed towards the Indians, were usually profoundly stirred by them. Kings and the Council of the Indies instituted prolonged and formal enquiries in both Spain and America on their nature. Few significant figures of the conquest failed to deliver themselves of opinions on the Indian’s capacity for Christianity, ability to work, and general aptitude for European civilization. Among the documents which remain to us are not only opinions but also numerous and curious proposals for the protection and welfare of the Indians. Early in his career Las Casas proposed the introduction of Negro slaves to the islands, in order to spare Indians the heavy labour which was destroying them, but later repented and opposed Negro slavery as well as Indian slavery, “and for the same reasons”.

32 Spaniards never fought, however, as hard or as consistently against Negro slavery as they did on behalf of the Indians, not even Las Casas. Despite his final rejection of Negro slavery, as late as 1544 he owned several Negro slaves and no document has come to light which reveals any concerted opposition to Negro slavery during the sixteenth century. Why did the consciences of Spaniards twinge more easily for Indians than for Negroes? Perhaps Iberian peoples had become accustomed to having Moslem Negro slaves, and Indians were not only new to them but had never had an opportunity to hear the faith before. The Jesuits Alonso de Sandoval and Pedro Claver were to work on behalf of Negroes in the seventeenth century but the moral conscience of the modern world was first roused by the plight of the American Indian.

33 Many men and many methods were engaged in the attempt
to help the American Indians. In the same month (May, 1550) that saw the beginning of the famous discussion on the nature of the Indians, a Sevillan named Cristóbal Muñoz obtained a contract from the king to introduce 100 camels into Peru. Why? To spare the Indians the bearing of heavy burdens up and down the Andes. The archives of Spain and America are full of absorbing documentation on what the conquerors thought of the conquered people in this first widespread meeting of races in modern times. The amount and quality of the information available is unparalleled in the records of any other colonizing nation, and constitutes a wealth of material not yet fully exploited by anthropologists.

As the conquerors and clerics moved forward into America in the uneasy partnership which the crown's double purpose of political dominion and religious conversion enjoined upon them, stubborn facts and theological convictions clashed resoundingly. The voices of individuals and of different factions—ecclesiastics, soldiers, colonists, and royal officials in America as well as of men of action and thought in Spain—rose continually during the sixteenth century in a loud chorus of conflicting advice to the Spanish kings and the Council of the Indies. Each man, each faction, held a profound conviction about the nature of the Indians and all generalized about them as though they were a single race. Each made his own views on the Indians the basis of a recommendation for a government policy which he urged upon the powers in Spain as the one true solution which would once and for all set the enterprise of the Indies on a firm and unassailable foundation. The crown considered all these recommendations and ruled above all individuals and all factions, jealous of its prerogatives and determined to prevent the growth of a powerful and turbulent aristocracy such as had just been broken in Spain by the unremitting efforts of Ferdinand and Isabella. It was the Emperor Charles V and his counsellors, therefore,
who had to decide eventually what doctrine should be applied to the American Indians. In the feverish days of the early conquest, when even hard-bitten conquistadores suffered strange dreams and the New World was to some men a place of wonder and enchantment populated with mysterious and bewildering people, it is not surprising that even the ancient theory of Aristotle, that some men are born to be slaves, was borrowed from antiquity and found conveniently applicable to the Indians from the coasts of Florida to far-distant Chile.