The curse of Columbus

Columbus and the war on indigenous peoples

Michael Stevenson
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In 1992 it will be 500 years since Columbus journeyed west across the Atlantic Ocean in search of personal fortune, spiritual destiny and the fabulous riches of the East. Cecil Jane observes that Columbus hoped ‘he might acquire riches, fame and honour becoming a viceroy and governor-general, taking rank among the mightiest princes of the earth’. Pauline Watts notes that there was a powerful millenarian strain in Columbus’s aspirations. She quotes from a letter he wrote in 1500: ‘God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the spot where to find it.’

Today, we can see that to one set of human beings this opening up of new worlds brought opportunities offered by spices, sugar, tobacco, coffee, cacao, gold, silver, forests and fertile lands. For the other set of humans, living rich and viable lives, the Columbian journey spelt disease, humiliation, destruction of culture and living conditions, and mass death.

It was with this ‘encounter’ – a neutral word, chosen by the victors – that a process of destruction, so all-encompassing and systematic that it can only be described as ‘total war’, was inaugurated by Europeans against indigenous peoples. The central endeavour was, and still is, to lay waste a people and destroy their culture in order to undermine the integrity of their existence and appropriate their riches. Powered by

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predatory appetite, fuelled by culture and belief, total war (which, in this sense, entails not only the physical destruction of children, women, men, but the devastation of their material and spiritual economy) continually recreates its mechanisms of justification. In the process, it builds up a structure of collective feeling, a way of thought and a language that facilitates its continuity from generation to generation. What characterises total war is the comprehensiveness and viciousness of its assault which, to be sustained, demands that 'the enemy' be deemed not simply an opponent to be defeated, but as a thing to be eradicated.

As situations, technologies, methods change, so 'total war' has to be understood in its historical contexts. It emerged in the Old World and, by way of the colonising process, was carried to the New World, where it took root and expanded. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, total war combined with racism, nationalisms and imperialism to become globalised. But it is instructive of later developments to look back at the inception of the processes that were to wreak such havoc.

When Europeans moved out of their home territories, encountering new peoples and social worlds, they began to forge a complex of words and conduct which enabled them to define their own humanness, even as they appropriated the wealth and lives of indigenous peoples. And it is such phrases and concepts which became decisive components in the methodology of total war. To put it differently, in the making of the modern world a special language was developed, refined and, as time passed, consolidated by diverse groups which, in this process of discovery and exploration, formed a sense of themselves as the Spanish, the French, the English, the Portuguese, and as the Europeans. The use of this language and the inevitability of hierarchy that it conveyed underpinned an array of brutal techniques by which whole cultures were uprooted or destroyed in the drive for the expansion of production and exchange. Such language functioned to provide those groups using it with not only a rationale for action, but also a heroic and noble sense of identity as they went into the battle. The development of this special language also gave particular groups of Europeans an anchorage in an era in which they suffered from severe ontological anxieties unleashed by the upheavals associated with the transitions from feudalism to capitalism, and the sudden expansion of their universe. Thus, in a situation of complicated and traumatic power struggles at home, the language of total war fashioned in and for Europe provided the colonisers with the psychological momentum and confidence to determine the fates and the identities of masses of human beings. The words and phrases manifested an alchemic faith that much, if not all, was transmutable.
Legal issues and modes of perception

The meeting between the peoples of the Old and New Worlds, symbolised by Columbus’s journey, was but the beginning of a dynamic movement out of Europe that eventually became global. It raised legal questions that could not be disentangled from ethical and political issues. Indeed, the matters arising from these relationships remain unresolved to this day and everywhere continue to be a source of labyrinthine and deadly conflicts. The colonising process entailed entering and destroying people’s domains, and developing methods of disciplinary control over their lives, while devising various techniques for taking their lands. Those directing such processes required rules, embedded in an all-purpose language in order to give direction to their decisions while seeking legitimacy for their actions in the midst of turmoil. I am not concerned here with providing a history of international laws or national legal systems as they emerged out of the disintegration of western feudalism, but with illustrating the connection between the words and the legal issues, and noting some of the patterns.

David Bears Quinn, the doyen of transatlantic history, observes that, under Elizabeth I, an ‘American’ party emerged, led by men such as Sir Humphrey Gilbert, his half-brother Sir Walter Raleigh and diverse others, and that when James I ascended the throne in 1603, the pent-up colonising energies of the English were co-ordinated and unleashed upon north-east America. These energies were focused and expressed in the formation of the Virginia Company. In the beginning, the English wanted to sell English cloth and metal objects to the Native Americans, believed that they could grow Mediterranean-type agricultural products in Virginia and hoped to find precious metals. Ordinary English men and women were willing to leave home, but they wanted land so that families could exploit small or moderate-sized holdings, and that meant trouble with the Amerindian peoples. ‘What is clear’, says Quinn, is that the Europeans ‘believed they had a right to enter and occupy lands in any part of North America they fancied, without any regard for the rights and the safety, even the survival, of those whose rights had been ensured for millennia.’ Olive Patricia Dickason points out that Christians could take Amerindian territories and force the inhabitants to accept baptism, as long as they were acting for their monarchs. By classifying the Amerindian peoples as heathens (i.e., as ‘savages’), she argues, Europeans further reinforced the accepted view that Christians had the right to take control of the non-Christian New World. Leading international jurists of the day made the case. In 1532, Francisco de Vitoria (1486-1546), primary professor of sacred theology at the University of Salamanca and a Dominican, argued that although the
Aztecs and the Incas wore clothes and were politically organised in ways Europeans understood, their conquest was justified ‘on the grounds of violations of natural law: human sacrifice and cannibalism in the case of the Mexicans, tyranny and the deification of the Inca in the case of the Peruvians’. Albert Gentili (1552-1608), regius professor of civil law at the University of Oxford and Protestant by religion, argued that war was justifiable against Native Americans because they ‘practiced abominable lewdness’ and engaged in sins contrary to human nature. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), jurist and diplomat, and also Protestant, moralised that the ‘most just war is against savage beasts, the next against men who are like beasts’. Gentili defended the European seizure of unoccupied lands ‘even though such lands belong to the sovereign of that territory’, on the grounds ‘of the law of nature which abhors a vacuum’, and then remarked, ‘is not almost all of the New World unoccupied?’

By 1514, the Spanish had invented a legal convention that would fend off criticism of their behaviour by other Europeans. A special proclamation (requerimento) would be read in Spanish to any concentrations of native people the invaders encountered, commanding them to become the subjects of Spain and accept Christianity. If they did not acquiesce (and how could they, asks Quinn), then they could be treated as enemies and enslaved. Finally, Dr Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, in his famous debate in 1550 with Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, argued that the beings of the New World were only fit for conquest and enslavement. They ‘lack culture’, do not ‘know how to write’, ‘keep no records of their history’ and ‘do not have written laws’; further, before the arrival of the Christian Spanish, they ‘were involved in every kind of intemperance and wicked lust’, made ‘war continuously and ferociously against each other’, and were addicted to satisfying ‘their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies’, yet they were ‘so cowardly and timid’ that thousands of them flee ‘like women before a very few Spaniards’.

In these statements, all uttered within the first sixty years of Columbus’s landfall, a new doctrine was being fashioned, albeit from the old notions about the ‘other’. In them, there is a striving to invest the conception of the ‘savage’ with flesh-and-blood realism, and to bring to bear economic, political, legal, ethical and religious ideas on this representation. The lands of the ‘savages’ are deemed empty of civilisation and thus open to occupation and economic, political, legal, ethical and religious development; such beings cannot establish rational or viable political organisation and, therefore, are prone to inchoate and murderous strife; their religious impulses are heinous and corrupt. The term ‘civilisation’ begins to be vested with enlightenment meanings. The humanness of those who dwell in the New World is a deceit of the senses, is not real. Their erotic life is without order or
moral discipline and so the evil animality of these beings is expressed in their insatiable appetite for each other's flesh. Amerigo Vespucci assured his readers that 'human flesh is a common article of diet with them... the father has already been seen to eat children and wife, and I knew a man... who was reputed to have eaten more than three hundred human bodies... I saw salted human flesh suspended from beams between the houses, just as with us it is the custom to hang bacon and pork' and, in the same breath, 'The women... are very libidinous... When they had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves.' Here is a gender line of attack, coming as it does from persons infatuated with power. Fathers eat wives and children, men are effeminate – they run away like women – and women lack restraint or decorum, are dominated by lust and are incapable of loyalty. The lascivious, illiterate, cowardly yet ferocious cannibal, who is incapable of a genuine economic and legal life, begins to haunt European life. At its heart, the cannibal metaphor emphasises violent, unpredictable, demonic consumption.

The invention and application of such language, replete with its vivid imagery of the grotesque, provides its composers with advantages. The use of these words suppresses their human capacity to identify with the 'other'. The litanic repetition ensures an in-built, structured inhibition of the dangerous growth of feelings of empathy, compassion and the sense of a shared humanity. There are distinct economic and political gains in such enduring inhibition because the new class relations that develop among the Europeans themselves through the colonising process do, at times, take on a savage bitterness. Through a common adherence to a common mode of thought, expressed in a common language, the path to continued colonial expansion is not only eased, but also the fragmentation arising from mutually destructive strife is held in check. For the new ruling elite, such a process helps maintain its economic and political power, and puts it in the position of being able to offer prizes to the strata below. Only the peoples who are savages or barbarians need not be conceded the religious, political, legal and economic graces.

There are other gains in developing these phrases. Adopting such a psycho-linguistic position is advantageous to the group that covets the lands, the gold and the bodies of the others. An express characterisation masks predatory action and intention. Hence, the statements invariably combine passion with a tough-minded economic action. The intrepid Captain John Smith, a founding father of Virginia, in his Map of Virginia (1612) gives a meticulous description of a rich and bountiful land carefully cultivated by its original inhabitants and then declares that the English have found a place, 'a nurse for soldiers, a practise for mariners, a trade for marchants... and... a businesse
(most acceptable to God) to bring such poore infidels to the true knowledge of God and his holy Gospell'.\(^\text{10}\) He goes on to observe that the chief ‘God they worship is the Divell’, and ‘They say they have conference with him, and fashion themselves as neare to his shape as they can imagine’. It was a common belief that Satan was active in the New World. Protestant minister Alexander Whitaker, in his *Good Newes from Virginia* (1613), records that although the Indians acknowledge a ‘great good God’, it is the devil who they truly fear and worship, and that the people are slaves to their priests who are the same as ‘our English Witches’.\(^\text{11}\) Whitaker also informed his countrymen that the Indians ‘esteem it a virtue to lie, deceive and steale as their master the divell teacheth to them.’\(^\text{12}\) Wildness was a frequent theme in this economic and religious reasoning; the land ‘is inhabited with wild and savage people, that live and lie up and downe in troupes like heards of Deere in a Forrest’, wrote another early Virginian.\(^\text{13}\) The combination of economic aspiration joined with the religious impulse is nicely expressed in a statement issued by the Virginia Company in 1610 that spelt out the English offer to the Powhatans: we, ‘by way of merchandizing and trade, doe buy of them the pearles of the earth and sell to them the pearles of heaven’.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1622, the Powhatans rose against the English, rejecting both trade and the Christian God and His holy gospel. They chose to protect their lives and their lands as the English settled in and planted tobacco wherever they could. Captain John Smith expressed his fury, describing the Powhatans as a ‘perfidious and inhumane people’, ‘cruel beasts’ with ‘a more natural brutishness than beasts’.\(^\text{15}\) It was the one hundred and thirtieth year of the Columbian era, and the shift in human circumstance begun by his voyage had taken root in the Virginian soil. In the history of total war, this was the first decisive moment for the Europeans to harvest the fruit of the language planted in American soil. It spelt annihilation for the Native American peoples constituting the Powhatan confederacy.\(^\text{16}\)

In the language, a link is forged between the devil and economic backwardness. To kill such beings, constituted as they are of inconsistent negativities, is an expression of economic rationality, moral purpose and religious commitment. Yet the constant reiteration of these ideas points to a collective anxiety about intentions, a troubling about predatory conquest, about agonistic behaviour,\(^\text{17}\) about giving uninhibited vent to the acquisitive passions. (We remember the turmoil of the Reformation and the grim struggles of the English Civil War.) Perhaps a battle is being fought out in the European imagination and conscience and yet, at the same moment, there is an intense searching around for the appropriate transformative formulae so that potential energies can be unleashed without hindrance. Given this emphasis upon words and conception, it is no accident that, by 1596,
only 100 years after Columbus’s first voyage, an Elizabethan poet, gentleman and colonist was striving to articulate the correct method to transform the Irish and Ireland so that, in his eyes, a flourishing and progressive civilisation might be established. I refer to Edmund Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland*.18

As time passed, and after considerable strife, the colonial settlers began to see themselves as a nation and the language to assume an august, elegiac quality, yet the economic element remained. On 28 May 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act which gave the president authority to remove all those west of the Mississippi river. On 6 December 1830, he declared in his second annual message, ‘Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country . . . one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth. To follow to the tomb the last of his race and to tread on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections . . . [but] what good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic’.19 Although 200 years have passed since the founding of Virginia, the words still draw on the images of wildness, and reiterate the concept of terra nullis. Once again, the themes of death and development are linked in the European imagination (‘just war against men who are like beasts’, ‘the law of nature which abhors a vacuum’). But, in 1830, North America was on the eve of a new capitalism, an industrial kind, and so the language becomes the basis for the forming of national identity and for providing the state with an organising ideology. The president’s people have an inherent right and capacity to expand, to transform nature. The impotence of extinction is the alternative. The legal domain is no longer that of theological jurists of Christendom; it has become institutionalised as the democratic nation-state which develops laws in its assemblies, laws upheld by an international, that is, imperialist morality.

The same language that was fashioned by the dictates of the colonists was also what informed and shaped their laws. On 8 February 1887, the General Allotment Act became federal law in the United States. It authorised the president to divide an ‘Indian’ reservation into individual holdings, assign a parcel of land to each man, woman and child, and to declare all remaining land surplus to the needs of the ‘Indians’. The ‘surplus’ lands were opened up for homesteading, with each acre costing the settlers $2.50. Between 1887 and 1930, Native Americans lost two-thirds of their severely diminished land base, that is, 90 million acres.20 Senator Pendleton of Ohio supported the legislation in congress with these words:
They must either change their mode of life or they must die . . .
these Indians must either change . . . or they will be exterminated . . .
We must stimulate within them . . . the idea of home, of family, and of property. These are the very anchorages of civilisation; the commencement of the dawning of these ideas in the mind is the commencement of the civilisation of any race and these Indians are no exception.\(^{21}\)

The feudal era has passed and it is 400 years since Columbus’s first journey, yet the words still speak of the extermination of Indian culture; now, however, the language also bespeaks settled bourgeois values. Private property, order and life lie on one side, ‘Indianness’, disorder and death on the other. The structured inhibition of identification with the Indian remains, and so the language continues to do its work. The vituperative vision expressed by Captain John Smith after the Powhatan attack devastated the first colony is echoed in Senator Pendleton’s words, but the hostility is now structured into the developed legal codes of the nation state. The hatred is bureaucratised.

The ‘savage’ and underdevelopment

But there is a paradox embedded in the language. There is constant repetition of the image of empty landscapes dotted with a few ‘herds’ of ‘savages’. The savage is incapable of regeneration, is few in numbers, is weak, lacks vigour, and is incapable of cultivating the soil. Yet these same savages treacherously mass in numbers, manifest demonic ferocity, and overwhelm the civilised European. The Reverend Samuel Purchase, writing in the 1620s, describes the Powhatans of Virginia. At first he is generous. In so far as the Indians live according to the law of nature, the European cannot expect them to work the ‘land according to God’s revealed will. Still, the English, as Christians knowing God’s will, have an obligation to work that land; for it is almost bare of inhabitants’ and is rich in those things ‘which make for merchandise’.\(^{22}\) But once the Indians rise against the English, legal restraints arising from the laws of nature can be put aside and, directed by their God, the English have the right to do as they please, ‘God is to be glorified as this rich and abundant Virginia is properly used’. The deracinating functions of the language emerge. The savage inhabitants have ‘little of Humanitie but shape, ignorant of Civilitie, of Arts, of Religion; more brutish than the beasts they hunt, more wild and unmanly than that unmanned wild Countrey, which they range rather than inhabite’. Purchase goes on to observe that the Powhatans are in the grip of Satan and, being devoted to his cause, indulge in ‘mad impieties’ and ‘wicked idleness’. No doubt the
literate ideologists of colonialism, such as Purchase, drew on the phrases of the ancients in developing the appropriate language. Odysseus narrates: 'And we came to the land of the Cyclopes, a fierce, uncivilised people who never lift a hand to plant or plough . . . All the crops they require spring up unsown and untilled . . . The Cyclopes have no assemblies for the making of laws . . . live in hollow caverns in the mountain heights, where each man is lawgiver to his children and his wives.'

In English Virginia, the savages are few in numbers and are in the grip of degenerative lusts and satanic idleness, whereas the proper Christian behaviour is economic. The insurmountable drawback of the Indians is that they cannot produce wealth in its appropriate form. The Virginian savages are incapable of forming laws, and so have no legal relation to the land. They merely range as wild beasts do. It follows that those Englishmen who leave the colonial settlement choosing to live with them are retrieved, tortured and even put to death. 23 It also follows that, given the savages' inherent tendencies, it becomes a religious duty to put them to the sword if they hinder God's spiritual and economic aspirations being realised; total war becomes an act of religious purification that rids the landscape of satanic forces. Reverend Purchase is thus a tribal priest who draws boundaries, and the effect of his language is to tribalise the situation, thereby overcoming Christianity's ecumenical tendency. The words, by focusing feelings of difference, facilitate the building of a powerful sense of identity enabling personal and collective energies to be unleashed.

Colonising situations are dangerous because the internal rivalries and animosities of the colonists, added to the stresses of the pioneering situation, may lead them to turn on each other. Thus, projecting malevolent forces outside the colonial tribe contributes to solidarity and assists cooperation, particularly once power struggles break out amongst the settlers. 24 The point is that early settlers have meagre material resources such as seeds, few instruments and limited life supporting goods (food, fuel, clothing and so on). Therefore, they must rely on cultural goods, such as skills, and ideas that provide conceptions of moral order and the good life. Such ideas enable the settlers to convert the strange and new nature they have found into familiar culture. They strive to control and dominate nature. As the colonists appropriate land, they exclude the indigenous people, unless they can be subordinated and put to use in creating the good life. The economics of scarcity is a concept which excludes at an ideological level all the Indians, although, practically, only those who the settlers come across are exterminated. Finally, the colonists suspend ecumenical values to the point that prevents the passive participants in genocide from passing judgement upon the active ones.

Much is made of the lack of numbers of the indigenous people.
Whereas earlier it stood for terra nullis, later on it stands for weakness, failure, political, military and economic impotence. The juxtaposition with reality is intriguing. Henry Dobyns argues that Native American peoples living north of Mesoamerica numbered about eighteen million, and that they practised an economic life that made such numbers possible and viable. But, from 1520, the presence of the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and English spread wave upon wave of catastrophic epidemics of diseases (chickenpox, influenza, typhus, whooping cough, malaria, dengue (breakbone fever), yellow fever, and syphilis – the evidence that European sailors contracted syphilis from women in the Caribbean islands is no longer persuasive. These realities gave epistemological veracity to the European’s savage. Frances Jennings points out that because scholars regarded New World cultures as being savage, they believed that large populations were inconceivable. She criticises and refutes the arguments of two American anthropologists, James M. Mooney and Louis Kroeber, observing that both men contended that, before Columbus, North America, excluding Mexico, supported only one million humans. Kroeber’s ratio of man to land for the total area of Canada and the United States amounts to one person per seven square miles. Kroeber rejected the idea that Native Americans were capable of ‘ordering their societies and technologies so as to increase their populations beyond a static and sparsely distributed token representation’. Further, he reasoned that Indian societies were characterised by ‘insane, unending, continuously attritional warfare and by the absence of all effective political organisation, and of the idea of the state’. Finally, although he knew that many agriculturally-based societies existed in north-east America, he discounted their capacity to produce surpluses, arguing that they were ‘agricultural hunters’ who refused to develop their land, much of which remained ‘virgin’, being regarded as ‘hunting ground’, and as ‘waste’. In all this, holds Jennings, Kroeber was faithfully reproducing an enduring ideological tradition. Jennings then turns to research which reveals that, within a century of the Spanish invasion, the Native American population of Mexico shrank from about twenty-five million to under two million, that is, a decline of 90 per cent. About the mode of demise she writes: ‘Not even the most brutally depraved of the conquistadors was able purposely to slaughter Indians on the scale that the gentle priest unwittingly accomplished by going from his sickbed ministrations to lay his hands in blessing on his Indian converts.’

The Caribs, the Irish, the Powhatans and the Pequots

European diseases were not the only exterminators of the millions of humans living in the Caribbean, Mexico and northern America. In his
journey into the New World, Columbus claimed he discovered two kinds of beings. One lot, he wrote, were not ‘fitted’ to use weapons, were ‘marvellously timorous’, ‘guileless’, ‘content with whatever trifle of whatever kind that may be given them’, yet ‘they should be good servants’ because ‘they would easily be made Christians’ and were of ‘quick intelligence’, and ‘very soon say all that is said to them’. Thus, ‘when your Highnesses so command, they can all be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself’ to be ‘kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished’. These were labelled the Arawaks. The other beings were ‘fierce’, ‘eat human flesh’ and ‘have many canoes with which they range through all the islands . . . and pillage and take . . . and are ferocious among these other people who are cowardly to an excessive degree’. Columbus labelled this second group Caribs, and recommended to the Spanish monarchs that they be sold into slavery. At the time that Columbus formed these categories, neither he, nor any of his entourage, could speak the indigenous languages.

Richard Moore asserts that the use of the word ‘cannibal’, with its ‘false and vicious notions’ begins with Columbus and that this accusation of ‘common and widespread cannibalism’ on the part of the Carib people debases them and, even to this day, ‘defiles their name and defames their memory’. Moore suggests the manner in which Columbus fabricated the image of the Caribs as ferocious man-eaters, and delineates his role in branding them as fierce anthropophagi. Columbus was well acquainted with the slave trade because, before he journeyed to the New World, he had travelled ‘to Guinea on the West Coast of Africa and knew of the slave marts of Portugal and Spain’. And he sought crafty justifications by declaring that the indigenous people he met used Carib and kindred names to refer to the terrifying enemies they feared. ‘Under the influence of the medieval mythology and travel accounts he had read in The Book of Marco Polo and Mandeville’s Travels Columbus’ rendered ‘such indigenous terms as caritaba, cariba and caribal as canima, caniba and canibal’. Thus, Columbus designed the notion that the Carib were compulsive anthropophagi by connecting Carib, the name of the people, to cannibal, meaning monstrous man-eater. He made up this representation, Moore contends, so that he could recommend to the Spanish monarchs a trade in slaves. He urged the King and Queen repeatedly to sanction Carib slavery and, in 1503, overcoming their religious qualms, they authorised the settlers to enslave the Caribbean peoples because, as they wrote in their proclamation, such beings ‘are hardened in their bad habits of idolatry and cannibalism’, thus sounding the death-knell for millions in the Caribbean area.

Nancie Gonzalez adds further precision to Richard Moore’s account. She notes that it was the Taíno whom Columbus first met,
because at that time they ‘inhabited the Greater Antilles, the Bahamas, and other northernmost islands of the Caribbean’. They belonged to the Arawakan language and culture group, and were decimated by disease, colonial warfare, and enslavement. In the Lesser Antilles there lived another socio-cultural group, also Arawakan, but now known as Caribs. They had called themselves Kalipuna or Callinago, depending on whether the speaker was male or female. Europeans portrayed them as being extremely warlike because they defended themselves against the colonial settlers effectively, and so were depicted as ‘aggressive, vicious, ruthless, well-organised and suitable only for extermination or enslavement’. The royal decree of 1503 invested the term ‘Carib’ with a special meaning: it became the ‘official designation for hostile Indians subject to capture and sale’. The Spanish conquistador, Juan de Castellos, in fact admitted this distorted meaning: ‘they were called Caribs not because they would eat human flesh but because they defended their homes well’. Ironically, in the indigenous language, Carib means ‘brave, daring’, or ‘extraordinary man, valiant man’.

The word cannibal was thus invested with a number of meanings. It referred to any group of indigenous people who mounted effective resistance to the European coloniser, who were to be exterminated and whose riches the coloniser wished to appropriate. Yet, essentially, the world cannibal expresses the colonisers’ desire to consume human bodily power in the form of forced labour. The labourer is the beast to be worked unto death.

There is an irony here. Edmund Morgan records that, in the early years of Virginia, the English found it difficult to organise an effective agrarian economy. This resulted from their internal social difficulties. On the other hand, the Powhatans not only grew corn but occasionally traded it with the settlers. For the Powhatans, the country was also rich in game, geese and ducks. For the English, who lacked the skills of hunting and knowledge of ways of the animals, and who also held an aversion to hunting for food, the country was bare, untamed.* So, by the winter of 1609-10, after three planting seasons had passed, the 500 settlers were starving and, in fact, presented ‘the only authentic examples of cannibalism in Virginia’. One provident man chopped up his wife and salted down the pieces. Others dug up graves to eat the corpses. By spring, only sixty were left alive.

Two historians, Nicholas Patrick Canny and Frances Jennings, demonstrate the connections between colonisation and the methods of total war. Canny’s thesis is that Englishmen transferred to Virginia and New England a method of war which they had developed and

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* In English culture hunting was practised by the upper classes for pleasure. Poaching was done by the poor and the destitute; it was thieving.
refined in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Canny asserts that no historian ‘has dealt with the legal and ethical considerations raised by colonisation in Ireland or with the means by which these were resolved to the satisfaction of the aggressors’ consciences’. He shows ‘how the justifications for colonisation influenced or reflected English attitudes towards the Gaelic Irish, and, by extension, towards the imported slave and the indigenous populations in North America’. Canny goes on to argue that ‘sixteenth century Englishmen who pondered the Irish problem did so in secular terms, and ... through their thinking on the social condition of the Irish, they approached a concept of cultural evolution’.

In 1559, the year after Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne, she changed England’s official religion to Church of England, and, six years later in 1565, it became the avowed policy of her government to bring all of Ireland under English control. The key Elizabethan colonial adventurers in Ireland were members of the English gentry and the cadets of aristocracy. Each coloniser was privately sponsored and thus each had to justify aggression anew for himself.

The first step, writes Canny, was to be ‘absolved from all normal ethical restraints’, in other words, to feel free to assert that ‘the natives were outside the law of moral obligation’. The English colonisers in Ireland were able to do so by developing a particular language. The Irish, that is the Gaelic Irish, were defined as being ‘unreliable’, not open to persuasion, and so could only ‘be subdued by force’; they ‘breach their faiths’ and had shown a tendency to revolt. So, being a ‘wicked race’ they constituted a legitimate ‘sacrifice to God’. They were ‘pagan’. Thus, they ‘have neither feare nor love of God in their harts’ and they ‘blaspheme, they murder, commit whoredome’ and all kinds of ‘abomination without scruple of conscience’. Being pagan also meant that the Irish were culturally backward barbarians. They were likened, therefore, to Huns, Vandals, Goths and Turks and described as ‘little better than Cannibals who do hunt one another’. They roamed about and did not make proper use of their land, were exceedingly licentious and prone to incest. In short, the colonising English defined the Irish as a lower order of humanity who ‘live like beasts, voide of law and all good order’ and who are most ‘brutish in their customs’. This generation of colonisers replaced the old view of the Irish as socially inferior to the English with the novel idea ‘that they were culturally inferior and far behind the English on the ladder of development’. Such assertions gave licence to the systematic devastation of the Irish, which, besides other things, included the routine burning of crops and villages, the regular killing of women and children and the cutting off of heads, as well as the willingness to pay bounties for them – it brought ‘great terroure to the people when thei sawe the hieddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kinsfolke,
and friends’. The theory and practice of total war involved premedi-
tated terrorism.

Canny explores this issue with precision. He tells us that the
colonising Elizabethan Englishmen justified their premeditation in
these ways. It was strategically desirable to drive the Irish from the
plains into the woods where they would freeze or famish with the onset
of winter. This was justifiable because they were ‘so wicked a race’.
One master of terrorism was Sir Humphrey Gilbert who killed
‘manne, woman and childe’ so that ‘the name of an Inglysh man was
made more terryble’. For him, the slaughter of non-combatants was
done to deprive the rebels of their support: ‘so that the killyng of
them [women and children] by the sworde was the waie to kill the
menne of warre by famine’. Sir Humphrey ordered that the heads of
those killed in battle be cut off and laid in a laneway which led to his
tent. The rationale was that ‘through the terrour which the people
conceived thereby it made short warres’. The Norman lords had not
committed such atrocities in Ireland, nor was systematic execution of
non-combatants by martial law practised in any of the Tudor rebel-
ions in England. In short, the English officers – most of whom were
gentry – ‘believed that in dealing with the native Irish population they
were absolved from all normal ethical constraints’. Jennings observ-
es that the practice of burning villages and crops was transferred to
America, especially when Native American guerrilla tactics prevented
English victory. However, since ‘according to Indian logic such
destruction doomed non-combatants as well as warriors to die of
famine during a winter without provisions’, such extreme devastation
was in their eyes irrational and broke their codes of war.

In sum the English transferred to America four key usages
discovered in Ireland:

(1) a deliberate policy of inciting competition between natives in
order, by division, to maintain control; (2) a disregard for pledges
and promises to natives, no matter how solemnly made; (3) the
introduction of total exterminatory war against some communities
of natives in order to terrorise others; and (4) a highly developed
propaganda of falsification to justify all acts and policies of the
conquerors whatsoever. The net effect of all these policies in
America has been the myth of the Indian Menace – the depiction of
the Indian as a ferocious wild creature, possessed of an alternately
demonic and bestial nature, that had to be exterminated to make
humanity safe.

On 26 May 1637, in a power struggle, a Puritan force massacred over
300 Pequot men, women and children at Mystic River, New England.
Jennings comments: ‘No Indian people has suffered more from this
myth, either in its own time or in the historical records, than the
Pequots'.

The Pequots have remained the subject of debate. Alfred Cave records that the Puritan historian William Hubbard, writing in 1677, asserted that the Pequots were not indigenous to southern New England and that they were 'a more fierce, cruel and warlike people than the rest of the Indians'. Indeed, Hubbard went so far as to claim that shortly before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Pequots had invaded coastal Connecticut from 'the interior of the continent' and, driving away the original inhabitants, 'by Force seized upon one of the goodliest places near the sea, and became a Terrou to all their Neighbours'. This representation of the Pequots as vicious, cruel and treacherous invaders to New England has been uncritically perpetuated throughout the historical record. After examining the various forms of evidence Cave concludes that:

the Pequot invasion story was a belated embellishment to the Puritan propaganda of the Pequot War. The absence of corroborating testimony in contemporary documents written by Europeans raises doubts; archaeological and linguistic data suggest those doubts are well founded; and the depositions of seventeenth century Pequots and Narragansetts settle the issue.

There was no Pequot invasion of New England. At best, William Hubbard misunderstood his informants, at the worst he spun a tale 'to give added force to his demonic characterisation of the Pequots'. Remarkably, Cave is puzzled by the persistence of this tall story.

From 1622, under the leadership of Opechancanough, the Powhatans fought the English colonists in a struggle to ensure their survival. But, in 1646, the 80-year-old Powhatan leader was captured, 'placed on public exhibition like a caged animal', and then 'treacherously shot in the back by an English guard'.

Conclusion

When Europeans made the Columbian journey, they reinforced a sense of themselves. By contraposition, they found the savage in order to reify their own diverse nationalisms, such as Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French and English. The archetypal event of colonisation, which is called discovery, continues to shape current realities in that the complex of words and conduct developed centuries ago still structures European modes of perceiving and organising. Even today, Australian Koories who lived in nineteenth-century 'Victoria' are described as ferocious cannibals. So are Mohawks in their fight for their land in Canada.

As the Old and the New Worlds joined, the various peoples of Europe generated a common rhetoric of conquest that gave them the
momentum and the confidence to transform the identities, energies and living conditions of other human beings. The turning point occurred in an era in which Europeans of all classes suffered from severe anxieties aroused by the upheavals associated with the disintegration of the feudal world. Out of the traumatic experiences of this era, the persona of the ‘savage’ filled with contradictions was born. For the Europeans, the language of total war created a positive identity which fused humanness with trade, private property, capital accumulation through trade and investment, and progressive development. The counter identity created the other who was wild, inchoate and malevolent, able only to produce degenerative backwardness. An additional gain is that the words assisted the colonisers to forsake mutuailty and to feel honourable as they subdued, disinherited and even exterminated the other.

Class systems build up hostile feelings in the groups which are compelled to order their lives and shape their needs according to such structures. When the forms of class systems undergo decisive and radical change, such feelings become volcanic. In the construction of the new class order, it assists the subject classes striving to establish themselves if the hatreds can be projected outwards. This was the case in Europe when the feudal world crumbled and the bourgeois world emerged. Therefore, the colonisers did not discover the degenerate barbarian and the cannibalistic savage; rather, they constructed such beings out of their own religious belief system. As Christians, the Europeans had from the very outset believed in dualisms of God and Satan, angels and devils, goblins and witches, wild men and wild women, but, most of all, absolute good and unmitigated evil. Before Columbus, there were no savage cannibals dwelling in the New World, but only hosts of peoples with their own identities, leading their own diverse modes of existence in their domains. The Europeans decided to call the place by a single name, America, and, once there, driven by material desire for wealth and power, blinded by self-justifying, religious belief, transformed the peoples into savages, some of them evil cannibals, others cowardly sub-humans; through their use of the methods of total war, the colonisers generated and sustained a new system of unequal relations which is still flourishing.

The European became an alchemist believing that he possessed special capacities and rights to transmute all that he touched. The Virginia Company, which represented a coalition of merchants and gentry devoted to the expansion of wealth and Christianity, in 1609 instructed the governor of the colony, Sir Thomas Gates, that his missionaries should work with Indian children, and that he organise for them to be taken from their parents, since they were ‘so wrapped up in the fogge and miserie of their iniquity and so tirrified with their continuall turrany chayned under the bond of Deathe unto the Divell’,
that they would have to be forced into the Christian life. The integrity of the indigenous identity and domain stood in the path of the European’s ambition to transform the world after his own heart and so, driven on by unbridled arrogance, he compulsively sought to obliterate the identity of the indigene as a culturally rich and distinctive human being. The Virginia Company was a rapacious organisation and we can only conclude that its Christianity was not a sincere intention to bring enlightenment, but in fact was just one more weapon in the armoury aimed to transform those the European conquered into servants and slaves, chained to his alchemic enterprise.

References


5 The term ‘savage’ now carries serious complications for us. This is nicely argued by Claude Levi-Strauss in ‘The future of anthropology’ in his Anthropology and Myth: lectures 1951-1982 (Oxford, 1987). He asks, ‘Is anthropology condemned to become a science without an object?’, and then observes, ‘That object has traditionally been provided by the so-called ‘primitive’ peoples’. amongst other difficulties, he draws attention to the conflict behind the formerly colonised peoples’ opposition to anthropology. ‘Their fear is that, beneath the semblance of a global ethnography, we seek to portray as a desirable diversity what appears to them as an intolerable inequality. With the best will in the world, we are not going to be accepted as their “savages”. For, from the moment that we made them play this role, they ceased to exist for us; whereas, responsible in their eyes for their fate, we do exist for them’.

6 For the ritual and symbolic meanings of anthropophagy among the Amerindians and others, see inter alia, Claude Levi-Strauss, ‘Cannibalism and ritual transvestism’ op. cit., pp. 111-117. The main contention here is not whether there was cannibalism or not among the Indians, although it seems that the Caribs did not practise it. My concern is with the political meaning with which the settlers invested the practice and the practical uses to which they put the meaning. Further, it should be clear that the Europeans had fashioned the concept of cannibalism as a political one well before they left their native shores.

7 Quinn, op. cit.

8 In Robert F. Berkhofer, The White Man’s Indian (New York, 1979), pp. 11-12, quoted from Lewis Hanke, All Mankind is One (De Kalb, Northern Illinois, 1974), p. 85. In an earlier work, Hanke illustrates the crafty manner in which de


12 Berkofer, op. cit., p. 19.

13 Pearce, op. cit., p. 12.


17 I use the phrase in the ethological sense.


19 Pearce, op. cit., p. 57.


21 Ibid.

22 Pearce, op. cit., pp. 7-8.


24 Carl Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown 1544-1699* (New York, 1980). He notes that, between December 1606 and February 1624, out of 7,289 colonists, 6,040 died. The dead were interred without ceremony or coffins lest the natives discover the truth. In 1616, 2,500 pounds of tobacco were shipped to England; and in 1628, 552,871. See also Barbour, op. cit., Jennings, op cit., p. 79 n66, and Morgan, op. cit.


26 Jennings, op. cit., pp.16-21

27 Ibid.


29 Moore, op. cit.


31 Ibid.

32 Moore, op. cit.
Morgan, op. cit., pp. 72-73ff. See also Jennings, op. cit., p. 79.
Nicholas P. Canny, 'The Ideology of English Colonisation: from Ireland to America', The William & Mary Quarterly (Vol. XXX, no. 4, 1973). Canny makes the following observation: 'David B. Quinn has stressed the connection between English colonisation in Ireland and the New World, and he has established the guidelines for a full investigation'.
Ibid. See also Jennings, op. cit., p. 212.
Canny, op. cit.
Ibid.
Ibid. See also Jennings, op. cit.
Canny, op. cit. In 1945, the same rationale was invoked to drop the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a suitable preamble, the Japanese too had been portrayed as less than human in the war and pre-war propaganda.
Ibid.
Jennings, op. cit.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Cave, op. cit.
Ibid.
J.F. Fausz, op. cit., pp. 31-35
See Pearce, op. cit., and Morgan, op. cit.