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The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus

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At the start of this century, Britons were polled about which century was the worst century of the last millennium. They alighted on the 14th century as the century when the four horsemen of the apocalypse rode most freely. The 14th century was the worst because the bubonic plague devastated the population of Eurasia. Given that nearly 100 million people died from the Black Death, mostly in China, the century was indeed especially grim. But the 16th century, especially the early years of that century, was even more demographically disastrous for one important sector of the world population. Diseases introduced by European invaders destroyed the native population of the Americas. Native Americans numbered perhaps 54 million in 1492. By 1600, that population had shrunk to 10 million. Overall, the population of Native America shrunk by about 80 percent between 1492 and the second half of the 17th century. In the regions settled first and hardest by the Iberians ? Hispaniola, Brazil and Mexico, in particular ? population decline was precipitous. The Mexican population shrank from around 17 million in 1492 to about 70,000 in 1650. Still, there were sufficient Native Americans in Mexico for Indian peoples and cultures to survive. In the Caribbean, however, where the initial population was smaller and where the impact of Columbus and his followers was most pronounced, Spanish conquest and the diseases they unwittingly introduced led to the disappearance of a whole civilization. When the English conquered Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, as a consolation prize after failing to conquer Hispaniola, no Native Americans remained to welcome or mourn

the new arrivals.

It is still hard to grasp the dimensions of the Spanish assault upon the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean in the early 16th century. Indeed, we continue to see the loss of so many people and the destruction in a very short period of time of a variety of diverse cultures soon after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors ? hardhearted entrepreneurs and religious bigots, drawn from the middling sectors of Spanish society, venturing to the Indies in search of wealth, power and fun ? as something that while lamentable was also unavoidable. Sooner or later, we are told, the Americas were going to be colonized, by the English or French if not by the Spanish. The loss of life that in fact occurred was always likely to happen, whether in 1492 or 50 years later. Given, to echo the phrase Margaret Thatcher used to parrot about governmental policies in the 1980s, there was no alternative to European invasion of the Americas (it was always going to happen, one way or another), the destruction of the Indies was inevitable and not really the fault of anyone. True, the Spanish were cruel and avaricious. True, also, as David Abulafia notes in his lively account of the earliest encounters between Iberians and Atlantic peoples, the Spanish made a dire situation worse by ?putting in place a way of managing the native population that made all this inevitable damage far worse? (p. 210). But, as signified by the use of the term
?inevitable?, the end result was predictable. The Indians had to die; the Europeans were bound to replace them. Liberal bleeding hearts in the form of ?post-modernist? and ?postcolonialist? literary scholars who cannot write proper English sentences might think that ?we are to blame? but ?we? cannot be accounted responsible for something we did not intend to cause and which if we had known we were going to cause, we would not have done. Indeed, the destruction of the Indies showed the failure of Spanish policy in the Caribbean. The Spanish, Abulafia asserts, wanted Caribbean peoples to live because only if they lived could they be exploited properly.

It is worth pondering the moral implications behind the above statement. What does it say about a people that they would be disappointed by the disappearance of another people and its culture only because that would mean that they could not make the lives of those people while alive much more miserable than they had been before? What does it say about a people that when they meet a new category of humans they had never met before they demonize them as savages who can be mistreated, misused and reduced to the category of non-humans? Abulafia cites a famous and revealing passage by a boastful Italian gentleman and friend of Christopher Columbus, Michele da Cuneo, in which the Italian was ?granted? by Columbus a gorgeous naked Cannibal woman. Da Cuneo ?felt a craving to sport with her? and proceeded to thrash then rape the woman while remaining convinced that the woman was so degraded by nature and so innately lascivious that soon ?we were of such accord that, in the act, I can tell you, she seemed to have been trained in an act of harlotry?. The discovery of a ?new? kind of mankind brought out the very worst in representatives of an older kind of mankind. Da Cuneo was typical. One imagine that he and Columbus had a good joke about his ?sport? and about how he tamed a shrew and brought out her inner whoredom.

Certainly, Native Americans did not like the new type of mankind that they encountered disembarking from the ships of Columbus. Bartolme Las Casas, who despaired about what the Conquest of America revealed about the true character of his compatriots, retailed in his great work on the destruction of the Indies comments made by Hatuey, a *cacique* from Hispaniola who fled to Cuba, after being captured. Told when tied to the stake that if he did not convert, he would go to Hell and eternal torment, Hatuey asked where the Spanish went after death. When learning that Christians went to heaven, Hatuey replied he would prefer to go to Hell. And so he was burnt, unbaptised and unrepentant. Hatuey had a point, as Las Casas realized. Las Casas may have been a polemicist. He certainly ?exaggerated the peacefulness of pre-Columbian Hispaniola? (p. 211) to give greater effect to his tales of Spanish cruelty. But he wanted to use Hatuey?s words to alert his countrymen to the true nature of the Spanish rogues and villains who ruled Indians in the West Indies. Las Casas? powerful denunciation of the Conquistadors resounded around Spain and Western Europe. It was the foundation of the Black Legend of Spanish cruelty. It led Spanish writers to think that the Americas were the special province of the Devil, as European men did such bad things when there that it could only be because the Devil was working upon their souls. It inspired Abbe Raynal and his team of writers in the mid 18th century to argue that it would have been best for humanity if the Indies had never

been discovered by Europeans. Raynal thought European discovery of the Americas was terrible not just because Spanish rule was disastrous for native populations. He also believed that one consequence of Spanish conquest was that it revealed a heartlessness at the centre of European culture. It showed the Spanish, in particular, to be naturally cruel and avaricious, with personalities at odds with the Christian image they tried to project to others.

Abulafia did not write the book under review, however, with Las Casas? admonitions to the fore. The ?new? mankind discovered in the Atlantic encounter he describes are Indians, not Europeans; the ?we? who read this book and who are not to blame for the 95 percent loss of population that occurred in the parts of the Caribbean and Central America where Spaniards were most exploitative are Europeans or people of European descent. He urges us to look just one way, outwards across the Atlantic to the Americas, rather than across the Americas to Europe. It is a curiously one-sided book.(1) We learn a great deal about the encounter period. We get to understand how early European views of Native Americans were almost fully formed in the European imagination before Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. Abulafia has instructive things to say about the relevance to our knowledge of first contact in America of the important pre-history of Columbian encounters that Spaniards and Portuguese made with the ?wild men? of the Canary Islands, a process of engagement that started just before the Black Death devastated Western Europe and which intensified in the first half of the 15th century. Abulafia deftly compares the positive views that Giovanni Boccaccio had about the Canary Islands ? he saw Canary Islanders as children of Eden living peacefully in a pastoral idyll ? with the negative views of Canary Islanders put forward by Petrarch. Petrarch saw them as beasts, naked out of stupidity and solitary because they lacked the capacity for sociability. Unfortunately, it was Petrarch?s view that won out over the more benign image of primitive peoples offered by Boccaccio. Later commentaries on Native Americans, notably that of the embryonic tabloid journalist, Amerigo Vespucci, after whom two continents were named, followed Petrarch in seeing Indians as savages.

But for all the great information on the Canary Islands, the careful and nuanced treatment of anthropological findings on the Tainos and Caribs, and the interesting recounting of Columbus? voyages (albeit with Columbus firmly at the centre of events), the Eurocentric bias of Abulafia?s account makes this story of the meeting of two sets of peoples across the Atlantic incomplete. One never learns from this book that European ideas of themselves (as Burckhardt told us long ago) were rapidly changing. They were changing to such an extent that a few years after Columbus reached the Bahamas, the late medieval assumptions that guided Columbus were under attack from Martin Luther. We would like to know, but don?t get to know, how the European encounter with Americans in the late 15th century changed how Europeans saw themselves. Did their cruelty towards Indians make them question their own nature? The problem in this book, however, is that we never get to see how Indians saw Europeans. A paucity of sources makes finding Indian opinions about European character difficult but there is enough scattered evidence to suggest that Indians speculated hard about why strangers to their lands were addicted to violence and to a seemingly pacifist Christian religion. Even if we cannot get to Indian views on Europeans, we have enough contemporary evidence, besides that of the polemicist Las Casas, to know that 16th-century Europeans were curious about how the experience of America caused degeneration (a long-standing trope in writings on America by Europeans) in Europeans venturing abroad. Michel de Montaigne?s famous essay on cannibalism was sensitive enough to cultural difference as to believe that ?each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice?. One implication of such a statement is that Indians could just as easily see the Spanish as barbarians as the Spanish could see them as sub-humans.

Abulafia does not concentrate on such things. He seldom questions the motivation behind the writings about America, being content to merely describe what Europeans wrote about Americans rather than to try and fit those writings into a discourse Europeans were having among themselves about their own nature. Europeans had by no means a fixed idea of what constituted human kind. They knew, as Christians, that they were fallen people, with multiple deficiencies and sinful characteristics. They knew, also, that in geohumoral theory ? a common way of understanding human nature was through analyzing how European bodies altered as a result of being in one climate rather than another ? some Europeans, notably those in cold northern climes, such as the English and Scots, and those in southern climes, such as those close to the shores of

tropical Africa, had their bodies altered sufficiently by environmental factors so as to be morally defective and physically decrepit. It is by no means clear, as Joyce Chaplin tells us in an important book on English encounters with Indians that Abulafia does not cite, that Europeans felt all that superior to Native Americans on first meeting. It is true that the Spanish were more certain, as people living in a temperate country, that geohumoralism worked in their favour than were the English, who were residents of a cold country. But if Spain had an agreeable and equitable climate, allowing Spaniard bodies to become strong and hardy, Native Americans also lived in an appealing and temperate environment. If these people were savages, then this cast doubt on the whole understanding of the relationship between climate and character that undergirded much of early modern thinking. Moreover, it was not just Indians who died when they encountered other humans. Spaniards, too, found the Americas unhealthy. They died unnaturally frequently once across the Atlantic. What did it say about the character of a people that they could not live long lives in a beautiful climate? More importantly, what did it say about them when their behavior in such a climate was by any standards below the norms expected of civilized and Christian people?

I suspect that Abulafia does not engage in such questions because he feels that to treat the European as ?the other? smacks of postmodernism and postcolonialism. He rails against postmodernism as politicized and full of jargon. That is probably true but surely it should have come even to the attention of dons in Cambridge that the days of postmodernist and post-colonialist readings of the encounter period are long past. Abulafia is flogging a dead horse, as is clear from the fact that he never names the terrible postmodernist texts that he so dislikes. I, too, wouldn?t be able to cite a single postmodernist book of importance written this century on the age of discovery or the encounter period. But the tone of Abulafia?s book is such as to suggest that maybe his postmodernist straw man or woman might have a point. He engages in much special pleading on behalf of Columbus and his compatriots, moving seamlessly, for example, from a denial that Europeans destroyed a paradise where mankind lived in harmony with nature (even though no serious historian of the encounter period ever makes a claim about the Americas in 1491 being paradisical: no evidence supports such an outlandish and sweeping statement) to one of his particular obsessions, that cannibalism was in fact real in the Caribbean, not just a colonialist construct (p. xvi). It is true that a few literary scholars, unacquainted with a large body of anthropology that documents the existence of cannibalism in various parts of the world, from the South Atlantic to the South Pacific, made silly statements in the 1980s and 1990s suggesting cannibalism was a figment of the colonial imagination. But the subject does not deserve the extensive treatment that Abulafia gives it in this book. He proves again and again that cannibalism was likely to have existed in the Americas while not citing the post-modernist, post-colonialist writers who make ?patronizingly colonialist? assumptions that cannibalism was imaginary (p. 191). It is noticeable, by contrast, that in Sir John Elliott? s justly praised comparison of British and Spanish Atlantic empire, cannibalism among Native Americans is not considered important enough to warrant discussion.(2)

By contrast with his fixation with cannibalism, Abulafia mentions disease and the demographic decline of the Native Americans usually only in passing, even though this must have been the most significant consequence of the Columbian encounter. He cites, without contradicting the statement, Vespucci?s ridiculous claim that sickness and early death was uncommon among Indians before discussing in much more detail Vespucci?s accounts of cannibalism. Moreover, on the one occasion when depopulation is explicitly mentioned, in the context of what Abulafia calls ?Las Casa? blood-curdling tales of cruelty?, it is accompanied by an anachronistic disquisition on how the depopulation of the Americas was not a genocide, as defined by the U.N. Convention on Genocide (p. 211). It is not clear to me, first, why one would want to use a definition created in the 20th century for 20th-century purposes to analyze a quite different situation 400 years earlier and, second, why the fact that depopulation was accidental rather than intended makes what happened in the 16th century to Indian population levels somewhat more morally palatable. That the Nazis were worse than the Spanish because they were deliberate about exterminating Jews while the Spanish killed Indians by accident seems to me to be spurious historical reasoning. If we want to go down the road of assigning moral responsibility for catastrophic population loss in the past, a pathway which doesn?t seem especially fruitful, then the Spanish are not innocents. They may not have known what caused Indian deaths but they were perfectly well aware that Indians died as a consequence of their arrival. Moreover, they knew that Indian population decline was aggravated through Spanish mistreatment. Las Casas told the Spaniards

what they should have done, as good Christians: they should have abandoned the Americas and gone home. That, ?to their credit?, some Spaniards agonized over what they had done (p. 210) would have been small comfort to the Indians that died as a result of their being there.

We can see how disastrous the Spanish encounter with Native Americans was in the 16th century by extemporizing on a conceit that Abulafia raises early in his book. Drawing on an interview with an Australian cosmologist published in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2005 in which it was stated that discovering advanced life in the Universe would be the greatest discovery ever made, Abulafia makes an analogy between such a putative discovery and the encounters initiated in the 15th century in the Canaries and the Caribbean. What we know, however, is that we humans are not advanced enough as a species to have the capacity to find other forms of advanced life. A more advanced life-form elsewhere in the universe would find us, rather than us them. And ?we? (meaning humankind) would be the primitives. Of course, science fiction writers have thought of this conceit before. H. G. Wells did so most famously in *The War of the Worlds*. London was only saved from destruction by the superior Martians succumbing to our only weapon, influenza. If the analogy stands, however, it would not be the advanced life forms from elsewhere dying before they could destroy our culture. It would be us who would perish quickly and in massive numbers, just like the Tainos, Caribs and Canary Islanders did in the wake of Iberian invasion. I wonder then if we would be sympathetic to explanations from our conquerors that at least our depopulation was accidental, and not deliberate genocide, as they took our land, made us slaves and made derogatory comments about our debased natures. I suspect our reaction might be similar to that made by Hatuey before he was thrown in the flames. The Spanish did indeed discover a new form of mankind. Then they destroyed it and profited greatly from that destruction. Abulafia recognizes that the major consequence of the Columbian encounter was destruction, citing at his conclusion the words of the prophet Malachi, asking ?why we deal treacherously, every man against his brother, profaning the covenant of our forefathers? (p.313). It is a pity, however, that in his determination to avoid postmodernist excess, he soft-pedals away from the implications of Malachi?s condemnation of man?s inhumanity to man. It is not just postmodernists but the ancients who thought about what it meant to be the ?other?.

Notes

1. For how the encounter experience can be conceived differently, see Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: a Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).Back to (1)
2. Another contrast with Elliott?s book (a book not cited by Abulafia) is in documentation. Elliott?s endnotes are crisp and helpful. The endnotes in Abulafia?s book are mystifyingly short to the point of being cryptic. I can understand that this book is meant for the general reader but what is meant by ?cf. Montaigne? in an endnote is unclear. Does ?cf? refer to a point of view he disagrees with, a point of view that is different but worthy of consideration or to something else entirely? I have no idea. Nor will the general reader.Back to (2)

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