

America – Europe: In the Mirror of Otherness

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Because it is not pointlessly, but with much cause and reason, that this land is called the New World. And it is the New World, not because it has been recently discovered, but because its peoples and almost everything about it is like the first and golden age.

— Vasco de Quiroga

It was precisely when printing became popular in Europe – which, for the first time in history, permitted the conservation and mass diffusion of ancient Greek, Arab, and Latin writings, a fact that signalled the beginning of the Renaissance – that the *Letters* of Amerigo Vespucci first appeared. These letters, like a revelation, speak of a *novus mundus*, a new world of unknown flora, fauna, and men, that contradicts the findings of Ptolemy's eminent *Cosmography* (published in 1478, in Rome), Theophrastus's *History of Plants* (published in 1498, in Venice), and the hallowed treatises of Aristotle, which were then in fashion.

The great novelty of this epoch was that so many of these ancient as well as new treatises – on geography, geometry, algebra, physics, cosmography, and natural history – were widely accessible and avidly read. As a result of the new knowledge reported from the New World, all the knowledge laboriously accumulated over millennia had to undergo total revision. Many ideas and concepts suddenly lost all relevance; the validity of others was confirmed, although almost all had to be clarified. Such a process occurred, for example, with Otto Brunfels's monumental work on herbs, which had been published in 1530 after many years of research; due to the immense number of new plants found in America, the work had to be completely redone. Similar processes took place in geography and cartography (all maps had to be redrawn); in economics (60

million square kilometers of fertile land created a new, world economy); and in theology and philosophy, which had been based on the *uniqueness* of man and the universe. As a result, a crisis and a powerful renovation of knowledge occurred simultaneously – an epistemological revolution, we would call it today – providing the basis for an open, exploratory epoch, an epoch that allowed for thinking about the existence of a world formed of various worlds.

Just as Europe had not known of the American continent, neither had it known that the Earth revolved around the sun (Galileo's thesis) or that blood circulated in the body (Michael Servetus). It is common knowledge that the Inquisition condemned these free-thinkers to death. Given the mentality of the era, it seemed inconceivable that the *oecumene*, or the inhabited world of Christianity, would not embrace all peoples and territories of Creation. At one point, some began to think that God had made a mistake, that He was fallible, because nothing had been written anywhere about these peoples or realms. The task of reinterpreting the world was an immense challenge for the imagination, reason and faith. The utopian bishop Vasco de Quiroga, upon arriving in Mexico in 1531, believed that a New World had been discovered because "its people and almost everything about it" corresponded to the Edenic "first and golden age." How, on this basis, could one formulate a new and truthful representation of the cosmos and of humanity? The humanists, more than ever, felt emboldened to speak authoritatively of universality, of humanity, and of the world as the home of the human race; in so doing they could introduce a new, definitive category to designate a world inhabited simultaneously by similar and different peoples. The *revelation* of America, on the one hand, and the objective incorporation of little Europe into this larger world, on the other hand, was the basis for a new idea of Humanity. Gradually a new *imago mundi* (world image) took shape, and it included Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

The acceptance of this idea was neither rapid nor unanimous. Even in Europe, the incorporation, into university-level science, of the discoveries and exploits of Portuguese and Spanish sailors come only with difficulty; indeed in some cases the findings were disdainfully relegated to a realm of uncertain knowledge, and in other cases it underwent suppression at the hands of the Inquisition. Even as late as 1512 the erudite Alessandro Achillini, at the Sorbonne, taught that the equator was a sterile, empty, and depopulated zone. In 1539, J. Boemus published his *Recueil de diverses histoires des trois*

parties du monde (Collection of Diverse Stories from the Three Parts of the World), whose very title denies the existence of America, because for Boemus the world consisted of Europe, Asia, and Africa; this work was frequently consulted and reprinted until the seventeenth century. During this time Mercator continued publishing his maps depicting an oversized Europe as the center of the universe. In its first glance into the mirror of otherness, Europe saw itself as large and at the center.

Strategies of Concealment

The *Letters* of Amerigo Vespucci (1505) fired the imagination and curiosity of Europe. As the reports of the discoverers and conquerors began to circulate rapidly among the courts of Europe and among groups of merchants and cells of free thinkers, the structures and the mentality of the time were rocked. The correspondence between Christopher Columbus and the Catholic kings (1493) gave a first glimpse of what would be the original portrait of the native American: beautiful, generous, free, indifferent to material wealth – as if he lived in an Age of Innocence.

Vespucci, confirming Columbus's first impression, wrote, "They are not used to having a leader, nor do they march in any order; each one is his own master. Their wars are caused neither by the ambition to rule, by the desire to extend their territories, nor uncontrollable greed." When the Americans were asked why they had wars, according to Vespucci, "They were unable to give us any other reason but that they warred to avenge the death of their ancestors or of their fathers. They serve neither king nor master, they obey no one, they live in utter freedom."

In the convulsed Europe of the time, which was racked by religious wars and territorial disputes, there also existed, alongside the Renaissance humanists, active messianic movements, providentialist in character, who believed that the only thing that could stave off the imminent end of the world was the appearance of the Promised Land declared by the Creator in the Old Testament. In the eyes of Europe, America embodied this immemorial desire for Paradise, this search for happiness.¹ Europe saw America through the eyes of classical antiquity. What other view could Renaissance Europe have had? An Edenic land in which a race free of sin dwelled, a land without hunger, epidemics, or oppression – this was what existed in

1. Ainsa, Fernando, *Necesidad de la Utopía*, Nordam Comunidad, Montevideo 1990.

America. There, men had neither kings nor masters, and in the firmament appeared a radiant idea that would reverberate throughout Europe: "They live in utter freedom." This initial perception of the people discovered in the Caribbean gave rise to the first European legend of the American native: the noble savage.

This image, the first seen in the mirror of Europe (American otherness looking at itself in a foreign mirror), had its moment and its importance. What was hidden or discovered in this mirror? In the books of Rabelais (1534), one finds a mixture of admiration and curiosity about these Indians who "appreciated a piece of iron more than a lump of gold."² The essays of Montaigne tried to understand men of different cultures and customs, forming a basis for cultural relativism. Europe tried to understand the different rationality of the native American, his indifference to precious stones, gold and silver, and why he attached an almost religious significance to feathers and woven cloth. This was discovered during the surprise encounter between the ambassadors of Montezuma and Cortés; while the Mexicans offered their guests gifts of metal and colored feathers, the conquistadors threw themselves on the objects of gold, leaving the Aztecs puzzled, since gold was neither as scarce or as delicate as feathers.³ This meeting produced a clash between different ways of thinking, between two socioeconomic systems with different priorities, both trying to understand each other and, in the attempt, producing endless misunderstandings. A culture of bronze and of mercantilism, avid for "precious metals," could not understand the agricultural-religious mode of production of the native Americans. Ultimately, the economic imperatives of Europe were imposed upon them.

The idea of the noble savage was maintained for a long time, although it was soon to coexist with another legend – that of Eldorado – which maintained that America was not only the land of gold, but also the land of youth and fruit, the garden that Providence had chosen to spread its bounty throughout the world. As if sent by Providence, Europe thus received, in addition to precious metals, the highly regarded potato (according to the poor peasants, "the only proof of the existence of God"), corn (which started an agricultural revolution in northern Europe), the avocado (which,

2. Febvre, Lucien, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI siècle. La religion de Rabelais*, Editions Albin Michel, Paris 1988.

3. *Visión de los vencidos. Relaciones indígenas de la conquista*, Introduction and notes by Miguel León-Portilla, UNAM, Mexico 1959.

according to La Condamine, was “very good for matters of love”), the miraculous *cinchona* bark, which could lower the most persistent fever (the king of France commissioned a detailed study of this plant), cocoa or chocolate (fashionable thanks to its energizing properties), and finally vanilla, the peanut, and mangos, which led to the discovery of delicacies previously unknown to the European palate, generating a true culinary revolution.

Within a few years, reports of the conquest were translated and printed throughout Europe. Around 1510, there was already vigorous Spanish colonization of the principal islands of the Caribbean – Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Cuba – with cities that had their Army Plaza, their governor’s house, barracks, church, and prison. The islands of Hispaniola (with its city, Santo Domingo) and Cuba became the center of operations for the conquest of the rest of America, since it was known with certainty by then that on *terra firma* one would find Dariem (present-day Panama), while to the south was the famed Inca empire, and to the north the empire of the Aztecs. It was also known, from local information, that on the other side of Dariem was an ocean, which Balboa would soon “discover.” At the same time, Pedro Mártir de Anglería, the Italian humanist attached to the Spanish court, witnessed Columbus’s return to Spain. Having also read the reports of other travellers, he noted the novelties and then passed them on, first in private, and then in printed form to the public. Through this work, entitled *Décadas* (Decades), Europe was informed of the advances and discoveries resulting from the exploration of America, much like readers being updated by a foreign correspondent.

Some scholars of Utopianism, such as the Argentine Ezequiel Martínez Estrada or the Frenchman Jean Servier,⁴ have speculated that Sir Thomas More, in 1515, read several volumes of Anglería’s *Décadas* while in Anvers – at the behest of the king of England – to negotiate the reopening of commercial contacts between his country and the Netherlands. Thanks to vigor of transatlantic commerce, Anvers had become an important port. There one could find unpublished documents describing the lands beyond the seas and the intrepid navigators who had traversed these seas (one of these navigators, from Portugal, actually figures as Hythlodeus – the Greek “narrator or chronicler” – in More’s *Utopia*).

The eight *Décadas* awakened a remarkable interest among Euro-

4. Servier, Jean, *Histoire de l’utopie*, Idées-Gallimard, Paris 1967.

peans. In 1533 Antoine Fabre translated *Décadas* into French and published it in Paris under the title *Extraits ou recueil des isles nouvellement trouvées en la grande mer océane* (Extracts or Compilations from the Islands Newly Discovered in the Great Ocean Sea); it contains, in addition to the first four *Décadas* of Mártir de Anglería, two narratives describing the conquest of Mexico, starting with the letters of Cortés. In Fabr e’s translation, one finds the origins of the legend of the noble savage (in fact he coins the term). Fabr e’s version observes that these noble savages “leave their gardens open, and have no laws, books, or judges; but by their very nature follow that which is just and reject that which is bad and unjust, all that does injury to others.”

This conception of the *natural* condition of the native American, who is viewed as a mere “extension” of nature, formed an entire school of thought and became the predominant and preferred ideology for dealing with Americans. This school of thought stretches from Buffon and La Condamine in the eighteenth century, to scholars of more recent times, such as Hegel, who deny the historicity of native Americans (referring to the origin of the Amerindian, the European works say “a natural of”). The basic idea was that America belonged to the realm of Nature and not to the realm of History and Reason. This was a restricted reflection of America in the mirror of the Other (and in some ways this limited perception continues to the present day, as now the Other requires of America a Macondian exoticism).⁵

A third legend was soon added to the noble savage and Eldorado: the black legend. The legend of Eldorado, inoffensive and friendly at first sight, portrayed a mythical America and served perfectly to conceal the cruel reality of the massive exploitation of the Amerindians’ gold and silver, destined to fill the coffers of Europe and to make mercantile capitalism viable. The economist Raymond Barre has argued that these precious metals – which started the famous price revolution – gave birth to Europe as a commercial power, as they brought mercantilism into popular acceptance; consolidated banking power in such important cities as Lyon, Seville, Anvers, Frankfurt, and Amsterdam; started the first stock exchange; and permitted extraordinary commercial and entrepreneurial activity, which has molded the destiny of Europe to the present day.⁶ Was not the myth of Eldorado the ideological curtain that served to

5. Macondo is the name of the town in Gabriel Garcia-Marquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

6. Barre, Raymond, *Economie politique*, IPUF, Paris 1983.

obscure the price in indigenous lives of extracting gold and silver, wood and indigo? Similarly, the black legend, which portrayed the Spanish conquistadors as always cruel and bloodthirsty, was a clever reverse magnification that served equally to obfuscate the human and economic rape of America.

These two legends – the black legend and the legend of Eldorado – were the mechanisms by which the Christian West was able to maintain its good conscience. By looking only to foreign causes, such as attributing to Spain alone the vampirism of precious metals that actually served all of Europe, many were able to ignore the human consequences of the conquest. In the mirror of otherness, it was necessary to avoid confronting, face to face, the hidden aspects of the slave trade, the rape of Indian women, the destruction of cultures, the invasion of lands, the epidemics. Thus the true face of America was hidden from the conscience of Europe, disguised in the quicksand and ambiguity of myth; had it been any other way, America would have been the source of feelings of profound guilt (is not there something cynical, and of ancient and deep-seated origins, in all these quinqucentenary festivals, in that the victims receive no visible benefit?).

Father Bartolomé de las Casas's vigorous and exceptional denunciation of the abuses committed during the conquest – in his celebrated *Apologética historia sumaria* (Apologetic Summary History), which was published in Seville in 1533 with the approval of the king of Spain – was well received in Europe. The work provoked controversy and was soon exploited by the promoters of the black legend. It rapidly became popular: it was published in Dutch in 1578; in French – in Anvers (1578), in Paris (1582), in Lyon (1594); in German in 1597; and in English in 1656. Its translation, often falsified, served both to reveal and to feed the bitterness and envy of the other European powers toward Spain. The influence of the book – it was read by humanists, by scholars and visionaries, and by the ideologues of the French Revolution – was considerable. The book was read as a warning to the West: less than fifty years after the conquest, it was clear that “the destruction of the Indies,” brought on by the European invasion, was inexorable.

America and the Emergence of Modernity

In the avalanche of books devoted to the discovery, there would appear one that would displace those of Mártir de Anglería and Bartolomé de las Casas in molding the European image of America.

Where Las Casas had succeeded in instilling in his European readership true commiseration for the Indians' plight, the Incan Garcilaso de la Vega, in his history of the Incan empire, entitled *Comentarios Reales* (Real Commentaries, Lisbon 1609: not Royal Commentaries, as the French version has it), instead would instill admiration for Inca culture and society. With polished prose, Garcilaso communicated to his readers an ordered, methodical, harmonious vision of the Inca empire. With this version, Garcilaso radically reconstructed the European idea of America; he spoke not of innocent savages but of great cultures, and traces of his outlook can be found in almost all the great thinkers and literati of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Why was Garcilaso so comprehensible and fascinating to the European reader? It should be recalled that Garcilaso was born in Cusco, the capital of the Inca empire, in 1539, five years after the Spanish occupation of the city. A *mestizo* [a person of mixed racial heritage] of high noble extraction, son of an Inca princess and an illustrious Spanish captain, he was taught, from an early age, a knowledge of the Latin language and alphabet, as well as the sciences. His is privileged testimony to the terrible fall of Inca rulers; every afternoon he would listen attentively to the stories told by his maternal ancestors recounting the glories of Inca history; he knew Quechua, knew how to decipher the *quipu* (a Peruvian device for recording facts and events), and participated in certain Inca rituals that survived the conquest. At twenty-one years of age he travelled to Spain to continue his studies and to reclaim his hereditary titles. Afterward he embarked on a military and literary career. Secluded in Montilla and then in Cordova, he dedicated himself to reading and studying; he mastered the Greek classics and the Roman historians; he learned Latin, Italian, and French, developed an interest in agriculture, music, architecture, and horses, and followed with particular interest the works of the chroniclers of the Indies, in which he found many errors, misrepresentations, and falsehoods (a few paid "historians," like López de Gómara, were then in fashion). As a result of all this, he decided to write his *Comentarios Reales*. He considered his commentary "real" in the sense that it rectified the falsehoods of the chronicles of the Indies, "stating and amplifying many things that they began to say, but left imperfect."

The Inca author, imposing upon himself the huge task of truthful reconstruction of history, tried to show to Spain and other Europeans that the Incas "were gentle and not barbaric," and that

because of this Spain should discard the sword and the harquebus (a matchlock gun of the fifteenth century) as a means of governing a nation already conquered militarily, and that instead it should concentrate its efforts on treating the Incas with the consideration befitting a highly developed culture.⁷ It should be recalled that only a half-century before, López de Gómara, an historian whose salary was paid by Cortés and whose work was translated into all the languages of Europe, tried to justify the bellicose actions of Spain by saying that they were necessary to subdue these “barbarous peoples, who were given to idolatry, anthropophagy, and libertinism.”

The Spanish edition of Garcilaso’s work, published in 1609, was followed by a French edition in 1633, an English edition in 1688, and a Dutch edition in 1705, and there were an infinite number of reeditions well into the nineteenth century. The first French edition, published in Paris “with the approval and the privilege of the King,” appeared under the title *Le commentaire royal ou l’histoire des Incas rois du Pérou. Ecrite en langue péruvienne par l’Inca Garcilaso della Vega et fidelment traduit sur la version espagnola par J. Boudoin* (The Royal Commentary of the History of the Inca Kings of Peru. Written in the Peruvian language by the Incan Garcilaso della Vega and faithfully translated from the Spanish version by J. Boudoin). The translator was one of the founders of the Académie Française. The two-volume edition of 1744, abbreviated but amply annotated with commentary by noted scientists of the day, deserves particular attention. In this work, the *Comentarios* are evaluated on the basis of their scientific value, and Garcilaso is symbolically compared to eminent naturalists and traveller-philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose own annotations – confirming or clarifying what was written by Garcilaso – are signed at the foot of the page. Among these leading scholars were La Condamine, Godin, Frezier, Fuillée, Gage, Margrave, and Pifon.

What new vision of Inca life does Garcilaso communicate to his readers? He shows what the Inca empire was, describing its strict social organization, its communitarian structure, its system of land distribution, its collective agrarianism, and its essential monotheism (based on Pachacamac, the principal god, he who gives life to all). He points to the Inca empire’s achievements in the areas of agriculture, hydraulics, architecture, and civil engineering (roads that go from Cusco to Quito, cyclopean cities like Cusco and Machu Pic-

7. Montiel, Edgar, *Inca Garcilaso. Identidad de la Historia*, Cuadernos Americanos, UNAM, Mexico 1990.

chu), the fineness of its goldwork and textiles, the profundity of its astrological knowledge. Garcilaso also mentions the advances achieved in the domestication of animals and plants, such as the potato, which originally was a poisonous tuber.

The knowledge of the existence of such a planned, equitable society, whose social organization was based on the tithe system (a tax of one-tenth of all material wealth) and vertical intervention by the state, and whose architecture was based on geometry, was cause for amazement and inspiration to the utopians and reformers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In a Europe thirsty for equality and eager for reforms (Pachacutec, “reformer of the world,” was used as a symbol), the Inca society proved that a *different* social organization of the world was possible, that the redistribution of wealth and riches was an attainable earthly ideal, and that there could be another way of conceiving the relationship between Man, State, and Nature; not as opposites in a dialectical game, but as harmonic complements, such as already had been seen in the Inca-inspired, Jesuit-administered republics of Paraguay.

The Inca vision conveyed by Garcilaso can be found in the works of Campanella, Bacon, and in Morelly, the French utopian author of *Le droit de nature* (The Law of Nature, 1753), who was an ecologist *avant la lettre* (i.e., before ecology became a developed science) and greatly influenced both the thinkers of the French Revolution and the utopian socialists of the nineteenth century. Montesquieu annotated Garcilaso’s book, while Voltaire made it required reading for his disciples, including Madame de Graffigny – who went on to write *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*; indeed Garcilaso inspired Voltaire himself to write a theatrical piece on the subject, “Alzire.” Inca egalitarianism was also of great use to Rousseau. Marmontel wrote an extremely successful historical novel, *Les Incas ou la destruction de l’empire du Pérou* (The Incas, or the Destruction of the Peruvian Empire), for which Bartolomé de Las Casas and Garcilaso are his principal informants. Garcilaso’s book also had an impact on theatre and dance: the opera, *Las Indias Galantes* (The Indian Courtesans), by Rameau, was an enormous success; Offenbach and Prosper Mérimée wrote similar works. By the middle of the eighteenth century America had become fashionable once again, giving rise to a new legend: the rose legend.

The Birth of the Modern World

In the end, all of them – philosophers, moralists, politicians, artists,

dramatists, composers, monarchists, the bourgeoisie, reformists, and revolutionaries – would find in the Inca experience both inspiration and a starting point for discussions of their own desires and projects. The Other was now not simply a reflection in the mirror, but had been internalized in Europe's own vision. One and Other now looked with similar eyes – a trap of Otherness. The object in the center of the mirror was projected outward, into infinity.

Because of this, it is not surprising to find the Académie de Lyon, already in the throes of the French Revolution, announcing a competition whose very theme – The Influence of the Discovery of America on the Happiness of the Human Race – immediately betrayed its universalist orientation. Traces of Garcilaso's influence can be found in the works of many participants, but it is especially apparent in the winning entry, written by the abbot Genty, who interpreted Garcilaso in a context already defined by the debate over the Revolution: he suggested that collective property had made the Incas a happy people, but that the absence of individual property rights was a source of weakness that in the end permitted the victory of the conquistadors: "The many monuments and all the works of art were but a result of the prodigious forces of patience and industry; the major part of the national activity was utilized ineffectively, because of the lack of instruments to direct it and to multiply its effects."⁸

This was a suggestive and polemical hypothesis. Of course, neither Las Casas nor Garcilaso could have suspected that their teachings would be present in the impassioned debates over the French Revolution. In this way, America as the Other, different in its people, its geography, and its cultures, found itself immersed in another powerful historical process: the French Revolution. This event would spread its universalist message – nourished by the ideas of justice, reform, and modernity that men like Garcilaso and Las Casas provided – throughout the world. First a geographic referent (proof that the Earth was round), then a source of precious objects for the world economy (minerals and vegetables), America became, in addition, a springboard for ideas and social projects. Nature and Ideas: these were the weapons with which America entered the modern age. In the birth of modernity, America contributed hope and pain. One cycle had closed, giving way to another. Looking at the Other in the mirror was like gazing into the future.

Translated from the Spanish by Katherine Hagedorn

8. Cited by Louis Baudin in *L'Empire socialiste des Inkas*. Spanish version published in Chile by Editorial Zig-Zag, 1943.