Moral Reflections on the Columbian Legacy

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LIKE MOST HISTORICAL ANNIVERSARIES, the quincentenary of the Columbian “Encounter” will give rise to all sorts of trivial nonsense, much of it harmless, some of it dangerous. It would be an especially great pity if we were blinded by all the public hoopla and private hucksterism to the moral immensity of that event. What we are commemorating — not celebrating — five centuries after 1492 is not the textbook-simple event known as “the discovery of America,” but the much more complicated, longer-range legacy of Columbus and the Europeans who sailed in his wake. For what Columbus set in motion was the creative recognition of a unified world, its continents and islands bound together in rounded space by a single navigable sea. In less abstract terms, Columbus and his nautical successors brought together, not an Old and a New World, but two ancient worlds whose former unity was irretrievably lost in geological time.¹

In moral terms, the Columbian legacy was to bring into contact and often conflict not only the human populations of Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas but their plants, animals, and organisms, their institutions, values, and ideas. Inevitably, this global encounter of peoples and cultures raised a host of moral questions for contemporaries. It raises still more for us because we are the often direct legatees of those momentous encounters, many of whose consequences are unfolding fully only in our own time. Whether we have benefited or suffered, the Columbian legacy
can be calculated more accurately today, I think, because we have also inherited a goodly share of hindsight. The farther we stand from the events of the past, all things considered, the better chance we have of seeing the event whole — its causes, forms, and outcomes — and of putting some emotional distance between us and the historical participants on all sides.

A degree of critical disinterestedness — a studied lack of personal interest in the evolution and dénouement of past events — may be our most valuable piece of equipment on this moral excursion because the “Columbian Encounter” did not then and does not now mean only one thing to all people. It speaks to us in many tongues with many voices, each filled with passion and urgency. Its moral meanings resonate with the vocal accumulations of the past and the interested polyphony of the present. If we have any hope of making moral sense of that great and ongoing event, we must listen carefully to all the voices, not just a favorite one or few, from the past as well as the present. Even when they are weak or altogether silent, especially then, we must strain our empathy and imagination to hear them.

The Columbian colloquy features four main sets of voices. The first set belongs to the Spanish explorers, conquistadors, and officials who sought to explain, legitimate, and rationalize their extraordinary actions in what they regarded as a “New World.”

“We men of Castile and Aragon (they might have said) were the first to discover the New World and to incorporate most of it into the Spanish empire, an empire greater than Rome’s, an empire upon which the sun literally never set. And we did so according to the laws of God and of nations. As loyal soldiers of Christ, we sought to extend God’s earthly kingdom, first, over our own peninsula and its Muslim invaders in the glorious 800-year Reconquista, and then over the millions of pagan inhabitants of the Americas. Our voyages to the New World were little more than extensions of the Crusades to free Jerusalem from the scimitared hand of the Infidel. Moreover, His Excellency Pope Alexander VI gave us exclusive right to bring the New World into Christ’s fold in a papal bull issued immediately after Columbus’s return in 1493.”

“When our Christian brethren in Portugal confirmed our papal privilege in the Treaty of Tordesillas the following year, we added the force of international law to the acknowledged right — indeed duty — of all civilized nations to convert and to reduce barbarous peoples to civility. It was incumbent upon us to wean the West Indians from their shameless nakedness, lasciviousness, and cannibalism and the Aztecs from their insufferably proud despotism and their bloodthirsty priests, who cut out the beating hearts of thousands of captives annually as offerings to their false gods and idols. In turn, we brought them the priceless blessings of the one
holy Catholic Church, the legal and military protection of the greatest empire on earth, and the comforts of European technology, society, and values."

"We did all this with scrupulous regard for law. After an unfortunate initial period of social experimentation, we abolished the enslavement of peaceful Indians, prohibited their cruel and unfair treatment in a series of laws passed in 1512 and 1542, and established a hierarchy of judges and courts to oversee the colonies, including a special court for Indian cases. Moreover, we prohibited our conquistadors from making unjust war on the natives by requiring them to read to every Indian group encountered a brief history of the Catholic Church and of the Spanish crown's rights to the New World and to offer them a clear choice between stubborn resistance and peaceful acquiescence. If the natives resisted the gentle yoke of civilized law and true religion, their wives and children would be enslaved, their property forfeit, and just war waged against them. Even a notary was required to witness the reading of the Requerimiento and to affix his signature and the date to it. Who among our European imitators has paid as much attention to the protection and incorporation of strange and unpredictable peoples?"

But the Spanish colonists did not speak with one voice. Particularly critical of the Hispanic party line in the Americas was a relatively small but vocal group of clergymen and judges who felt that the conquistadors and encomenderos — those who received grants of Indian labor and tribute from the local Spanish governors — were literally getting away with murder. From his pulpit in Santo Domingo in 1511, Fray Antonio de Montesinos told the assembled citizens and officials that he and his Dominican brethren henceforth refused to confess or absolve anyone who continued to oppress or enslave the Indians of Hispaniola, at that time the major Spanish island. With "choleric" but "efficient" sternness, he harangued his audience:

"You are living in deadly sin for the atrocities you tyrannically impose on these innocent people. Tell me, what right have you to enslave them? What authority did you use to make war against them who lived at peace on their territories, killing them cruelly with methods never before heard of? How can you oppress them and not care to feed or cure them, and work them to death to satisfy your greed? And why don't you look after their spiritual health, so that they should come to know God, that they should be baptized, and that they should hear Mass and keep the holy days? Aren't they human beings? Have they no rational soul? Aren't you obliged to love them as you love yourselves? ... You may rest assured that you are in no better state of salvation than the Moors or the Turks who reject the Christian Faith."
The Dominicans raised their fiery voices in protest during the lawless "boom" period of colonization on Hispaniola, before the royal reforms and the Requerimiento of 1512. Yet the Spanish treatment of the Indians in the rest of the Caribbean and on the mainland did not noticeably improve, to judge from later Spanish voices. The Franciscan friar Toribio de Motolinía, one of the twelve "apostles" who began Mexico’s conversion in 1524, likened the advent of the Spanish to the ten plagues of Egypt. The Mexicans were devastated, he said, by deadly outbreaks of imported diseases; by famine; by overwork in the gold and silver mines, during the demolition of the majestic Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, and in the building of Mexico City upon its pagan ruins; by the cruelty of Negro and native overseers; and by the deadly chain gangs that provisioned the mines and cities.4

The principled investigating judge for the vast Audiencia (the supreme royal court) of Mexico, Alonso de Zorita, added impressive weight to the friars’ accusations. Risking the universal opprobrium of his countrymen, who gave "not a rap whether [the] poor and miserable Indians live[d] or die[d],” he reported to the king that the Mexicans were much better off before the Spanish liberators arrived, even under the allegedly despotic rule of Montezuma. “Because of the sufferings and cruelties the Spaniards inflicted on the Indians, and because of the plagues that have vexed them, there is not one third the number there used to be.” Nor could the natives expect relief from the Spanish judiciary, “for the Spanish judges either are blind to [the oppressive nature of the colonial labor system] or wink at it, and some actually approve of it and even coerce the Indians to do the Spaniards’ bidding.” Under the encomienda system, Zorita lamented, the tribute demanded of the natives was so excessive, particularly as the population declined, that many Indians “sold their land at a low price, and their children as slaves.” Many others were enslaved in so-called “just wars” and sent to the mines or to the chain gangs, where they perished in appalling numbers from “hunger and cold or extreme heat.” When an Indian porter, “man or woman, was worn out from the burden he was carrying, the Spaniards cut off his head so as not to have to stop to unchain him....” As for the royal laws to protect the Indians, the judge explained, they are “obeyed but not enforced” — in the classically evasive formula of colonial governors — “wherefore there is no end to the destruction of the Indians.”5

By the time Bartolomé de Las Casas, former conquistador-turned-Dominican friar and bishop of Chiapas, penned his chilling Very Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies in 1544, the native populations were plunging toward oblivion. Of the American territories then under Spanish rule, Las Casas thundered, “the inhumane and abominable villainies of the Spaniards have made a wilderness.” “Over twelve million souls
innocently perished, women and children included.... Moreover,” he continued, “I truly believe that I should be speaking within the truth if I were to say that over fifteen millions were consumed in this massacre.”

In the face of such massive destruction and loss of life, it is a minor miracle that the native voice was not completely silenced. But the human spirit is unquenchable and natives have raised their voices in grief, in protest, and in pride ever since Columbus set foot on the warm sands of Guanahaní. Their descendants have certainly not been quiet about the Quincentenary and what it means to them.

As the victims of the earliest encounters, the non-literate natives sought the motives of their invaders, not in the Europeans’ paper rationalizations or propaganda, but in their unvarnished actions and behavior. The Aztecs of Tenochtitlán had no difficulty discerning what brought the Spanish in 1519 to their beautiful lakebound city, far from the Gulf coast and the islands of the Caribbean. When Montezuma sent to Cortés’s approaching army a gift of gold ensigns and necklaces, Aztec oral sources well remembered after the conquest that “the Spaniards burst into smiles; their eyes shone with pleasure.... They picked up the gold and fingered it like monkeys.... The truth is that they longed and lusted for gold. Their bodies swelled with greed, and their hunger was ravenous; they hungered like pigs for that gold.”

A somewhat subtler understanding of the white man’s motives was expressed by the Iroquois of New York State at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This they conveyed in an oral tradition about “How the White Race Came to America and Why the Gaiwio” — the revitalizing message of the prophet Handsome Lake — “Became a Necessity” for the downtrodden Iroquois. It seems that the Devil cozened a young Jesus-like preacher into sending a bundle of “five things that men and women enjoy” to the native peoples of the New World in order to “make them as white people are.” The young preacher then found Columbus to do his bidding and to convey the bundle to the far shores. Which he and his successors in great number did until they had spread the Devil’s gifts to “all the men of the great earth island” (as the natives called North America).

Then the Devil laughed and revealed to the gullible preacher the contents of the bundle and their purposes: the pack of playing cards, he said, “will make them gamble away their wealth and idle their time”; the handful of coins “will make them dishonest and covetous and they will forget their old laws”; the violin “will make them dance with their arms about their wives and bring about a time of tattling and idle gossip”; the flask of rum “will turn their minds to foolishness and they will barter their country for baubles”; then will the secret poison from the decayed leg bone “eat the life from their blood and crumble their bones.”
Contemporary Indian assessments of the white man’s motives do not differ much from those of their ancestors and inform most native attitudes toward the Quincentenary. Wendy Rose, a Hopi/Me-wuk and Coordinator of American Indian Studies at Fresno City College in California, writes:

My people and my land have been obstacles to the maximization of profit for five hundred years ... I must remember that all of this death was for money.... I must remember that exploration and genocide have always just been business as usual. Neither scientific nor strictly political, those brave trekkers whose names frost the pages of every American child’s schoolbooks carried their banners not for kings, but for companies, for traders, for miners, for every kind of coinage, for the freedom not to worship or walk or speak or elect, but to profit beyond the reach of the king.9

Given the near-harmony of native voices about their past encounters with the invaders, it is small wonder that few Indians are disposed to celebrate anything about 1492, much less the “discovery of America.” The favorite bumpersticker in Indian country for some time has been “Americans Discovered Columbus,” with the (correct) implication that he was lost. “How can it be a discovery,” asked an Abenaki man, “if we were already here?” For a Mohawk elder, “October 12, 1492 is the date when the Dark Ages descended on the Indians of America.” Nearly three-quarters of the natives from North, Central, and South America who responded to a Cornell University American Indian Program survey about the Quincentenary viewed it either as “500 years of Native People’s resistance to colonization, or as an anniversary of a holocaust.”10 The Assembly of First Nations, a national Canadian Indian organization, felt the same way. “For the First Nations to celebrate the near destruction of our culture and identity would be insane.” “We are talking about 500 years of genocide and we don’t want to see another 500 years of that.”11

The last but not least set of important voices contributing to the Columbian colloquy belongs to black Africans. When, in 1784, the Rev. Jeremy Belknap of New Hampshire pondered whether the discovery of America had been “useful or hurtful to mankind,” he may have surprised many of his readers by arguing that “The NEGROES OF AFRICA have experienced the most fatal DISADVANTAGES” by the discovery.12 Although he could not have known, as modern historians do, that nearly twelve million African men, women, and children would be ripped from their homelands by both African and European merchants before the slave trade ended in the nineteenth century, he had correctly gauged the moral enormity of enslavement, transportation to utterly strange lands, and a debased and often short existence in harsh and perpetual bondage.13
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For a long time the voices of the slaves themselves were unintelligible to their white buyers and sellers, although the cries and moans of human hurt needed no translation. By the eighteenth century, however, a number of slaves and former slaves had learned to turn their native thoughts into European idioms. One of the most articulate Africans was Ottobah Cugoano, who had been kidnapped as a child from the Gold Coast, shipped to Grenada in the West Indies, and eventually carried to England, where he obtained his freedom and a singular education. In 1787 he published his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery*, which accurately linked the European treatment of Indians and of Africans, historically and morally. "The Spaniards began their settlements in the West Indies and America," he wrote without any mincing of words, "by depredations of rapine, injustice, treachery and murder... This guileful method of colonization... led them on from one degree of barbarity and cruelty to another" until "they had destroyed, wasted and desolated the native inhabitants" who performed all their labor. To replace the Indians they resorted to the slave trade, "that base traffic of kid-napping and stealing men... begun by the Portuguese on the coast of Africa." And what were Cugoano’s conclusions about the morality of those Columbian encounters?

None but men of the most brutish and depraved nature, led on by the invidious influence of infernal wickedness, could have made their settlements in the different parts of the world discovered by them, and have treated the various Indian nations, in the manner that the barbarous inhuman Europeans have done; and their establishing and carrying on that most dishonest, unjust and diabolical traffic of buying and selling, and of enslaving men, is such a monstrous, audacious and unparalleled wickedness, that the very idea of it is shocking, and the whole nature of it is horrible and infernal. It may be said with confidence... that all their foreign settlements and colonies were founded on murders and devastations, and that they have continued their depredations in cruel slavery and oppression to this day.14

Given the international magnitude of the Columbian encounters, it should not surprise us that there are many other voices from the past and the present that we could add to the moral dialogue of ’92. Those of the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 by the aggressively “Catholic kings” Ferdinand and Isabella are perhaps the next most important voices associated with the Quincentenary. Less than three months after the final surrender of the Moors at Granada and less than three weeks before Columbus signed on with Spain to sail west to the Far East, perhaps 50,000 practicing Jews and half-hearted *conversos* (Jews who had converted to
Christianity) fled the country and fanned out around the Mediterranean, where many continue to speak a form of Renaissance Spanish. Although they were officially barred, some made their way to the New World, where the Inquisition did its best to ferret them out.

Only in 1990, some 498 years later, did the Spanish government officially welcome them back and give Judaism the same official status that Catholicism enjoys. The famous Jewish Quarter of Toledo, with its Synagogue of the Transito and its “School of Translators” where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars worked in concert to transmit classical culture to Western Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is being extensively reconstructed as one of Spain’s many Quincentenary projects.

While some international Jewish groups are understandably ambivalent about the Quincentenary, most are participating under the aegis of Sepharad (the Hebrew word for Spain) ’92. A spokesman for the Jewish communities of Spain acknowledged his satisfaction with “this reparation for the injustice done our ancestors 500 years ago. But,” he added, “it is also a tribute that Spain is paying itself. It’s a re-encounter with its own past, its own identity.” An American organizer for Sepharad ’92 made the moral point even more clearly. “People think it’s a celebration,” he said. “It’s not. You can’t celebrate something as traumatic as an eviction. But you can commemorate it, like the Holocaust. Part of our experience is never to forget.”

An even quieter set of voices has given the moral debate a new twist in recent decades. Beginning as long ago as the 1930s with the work of cultural geographer Carl Sauer, a number of scholars who might be called “ecological historians” have charted, explained, and usually lamented the extensive changes in the biological world that resulted from Columbus’s maritime union of the “ecological islands” of Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. While as good ecologists they invariably go about their work whistling the measured tunes of value-free science, the conclusions they draw as good humanistic historians often scat up but mostly down the moral scales. The listener is left with the distinct feeling that while ecological change should be seen as inexorable, inevitable, and normal, Columbus and his human successors may be regarded as the serpents in the American garden of Eden.

Sample some of these voices. William McNeill believes that...
created sharp ecological crises for themselves and for the older life forms.... No one planned it that way. No one intended it to happen.... [But] the ecological vanguard of European expansion regularly prepared the way for, and often made possible, political conquest and settlement.18

In his nuanced ecological history of colonial New England, *Changes in the Land*, William Cronon concluded that “Capitalism and environmental degradation went hand in hand.... Economic and ecological imperialism reinforced each other.”19 The major student of the “Columbian exchange” is Alfred Crosby, a scholar with the mind of a scientist and the heart of a humanist. He writes that “the major initial effect of the Columbian voyages was the transformation of America into a charnel house.” The cataclysmic loss of native life, largely to imported diseases, “was surely the greatest tragedy in the history of the human species.”

The positive result [of the biological transfers from the eastern to the western hemisphere] has been an enormous increase in food production and, thereby, human population. The negative results have been the destruction of ecological stability over enormous areas and an increase of erosion that is so great that it amounts to a crime against posterity.... It is possible that [European man] and the plants and animals he [brought] with him have caused the extinction of more species of life forms in the last four hundred years than the usual processes of evolution might kill off in a million.... The Columbian exchange [he concluded in 1972 and reaffirmed in 1989] has left us with not a richer but a more impoverished genetic pool. We, all of the life on this planet, are the less for Columbus, and the impoverishment will increase.20

As bleak a scenario as that is, one final set of voices is even more pessimistic and certainly more strident. An ad hoc group of “progressive” educators, students, ecologists, and community activists, known collectively as “The Columbus in Context Clearinghouse,” proposes to prevent the official U.S. observances from being exclusively an “extravaganza of Nationalism, Patriotism, and self-congratulatory media messages reinforcing current-day Western mythology.” Their first brainstorming session in New York led to a newsletter entitled *What’s to Celebrate?* and a number of provocative suggestions for activities to “raise debate about the historical meaning of Columbus’s ‘discovery,’” particularly for Native Americans, Africans, women and working people.” Some of the suggestions were to:

- Celebrate the resistance of Native Americans to 500 Years of genocide....
• Plan a die-in to coincide with the appearance of the Tall Ships (yes, again!) in New York.
• Create a "truth squad" to respond to official pronouncements.
• Demonstrate the real impacts of "discovery": Imperialism & Colonialism, Racism and Oppression.
• Make connections with modern struggles, e.g., Wisconsin Native fishing rights, Puerto Rican independence, Bensonhurst.21

If nothing else, the moral stance of the "progressives" is unambiguous.

Any of the prevailing moral attitudes toward the Columbian encounter that we have sampled — or several at once — may strike a responsive chord in a modern audience. Nothing is unusual about that because the present is always involving itself in the moral conflicts of the past, usually willy, sometimes nilly. Even when those conflicts have no direct pertinence to us or our own dilemmas, we cannot resist the temptation to strike a moral pose. Indeed, it often seems that our moral reflexes (like the proverbial knee-jerk) tend to occur faster the less we know about the facts of the matter. In the absence of knowledge, it is easier to judge than to understand, for understanding in some depth usually undermines the rocky grounds of rectitude, often obviates the need for judgement, and sometimes leads to forgiveness, that most unfashionable virtue.

While "natural" in the sense of both frequent and unthinking, the human propensity to jump on moral bandwagons, to make snap judgements about human behavior in other times and places, causes a lot of mischief in our current lives and affairs. Our moral standards and behavior are confused, uncertain, and inconsistent because we commit too many elementary sins against straight moral thinking.

First, we hang simplistic, abstract labels when we should unpack and probe more deeply the complexity of past events, social conditions, and human motivations. To declare the Columbian legacy as nothing more than "Imperialism & Colonialism, Racism and Oppression," as the New York "progressives" have done in capital letters, is to close discussion, not to open it. To call a man (or woman) "sexist," a government (or college administration) "oppressive," or a person of European (or African) descent "racist" is to dismiss their views on all subjects and in advance as worthless and beneath contempt. Essentially, labeling is a form of name-calling, with just as few benefits. It might fulfill some atavistic need for visceral vocalization, but it does no justice to the object of reproach and leads to no reforms.

Our second mistake is to stereotype people on the basis of one or a few characteristics — usually the only ones we have bothered to learn about — when we should continue to search for their full and individual humanity and withhold judgement until we know much more of it. We are experts at
lumping people into racial, national, political, and other cultural categories, particularly people with whom we have no personal acquaintance; we should work much harder at splitting the human race into its individual components, at recognizing many more human faces in our mental crowds, just as we would like to be recognized by others. No person is a simple or single thing, which is the unfortunate result of stereotyping.

Take, as just one of many possible examples, the conquistadors of New Spain, who have gotten almost as much bad press as the Nazis of the Third Reich. We learn very little about a sixteenth-century Spaniard by calling him a “conquistador,” except that probably he received a share of captured native wealth or an encomienda of Indian tributaries for his investment of prowess and sometimes equipment in an initial “discovery” and search of an American region. For the Spanish root of conquest is simply “to seek.” And that’s exactly what the very diverse Spaniards who made up the rag-tag forces of “discovery” were doing — seeking their fortunes in any form possible: land, treasure, servants, or business. The great majority were anything but stereotypical “conquistadors,” lean and hungry-looking in morion and breastplate, brandishing thin Toledo swords while spurring foaming steeds into habitual and genocidal war. Horses were relatively scarce; a caballero received double shares of booty for his enhanced contribution. Cortés’s army of nearly 600 had only 16 horses; Pizarro’s was better equipped with 62 mounts for 168 men. As for martial prowess, nearly every contemporary Spanish male knew how to wield a weapon of some sort, but very few made a career of it, either in Europe or the Americas. Of the 91 conquerors of Panama, 41 had no military experience whatsoever: 20 were craftsmen, 11 farmers, 13 sailors, and 10 were members of the professional or urban middle class. Pizarro’s entrada contained the same cross-section of Spanish colonial society: notaries and clerks, merchants and managers, artisans, lower hidalgos, and upper plebeians. Most of them were single men in their twenties, in search of the main chance. Professional killers were few and far between.

Yet even if we know that many conquistadors were ruthless Indian fighters, particularly when they were badly outnumbered (as they invariably were), we should remember that they might also have been — all in the same person and at the same time — doting fathers and unfaithful husbands, devout Catholics and poor scholars, dutiful sons and headstrong servants, ardent gardeners and heavy drinkers, gentle lovers and gouging businessmen — bundles of human contradictions; in other words, just like the Indians and the Africans they often mistreated. Before we hang them or any other historical actors from a label, we should try to imagine how we would feel if we could be known to posterity by only a single negative
characteristic or action from our relatively long and constantly evolving lives.

Imagination is the key to moral understanding. Lack of it blinds us as seriously as it did the European colonists who savagely killed Indians and enslaved Africans. For as Margaret Atwood reminds us, “Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings.” When Columbus unified the world, it lost its center. Europe no longer occupied a privileged position; Jerusalem no longer appeared in the middle of the maps. In such a plural world of places and peoples, any person, any subject, was conceivably the center. But Europeans, even those who moved to the new worlds, remained incapable of recognizing “the others” they met as both different from and equal to themselves. They could not acknowledge the validity of plural paradigms for seeing and interpreting the world, nor would they relinquish their stubborn will to dominate inherent in their ethnocentric world views. The “other” remained for them an object, never a subject in his own right, and therefore the constant victim of intellectual and physical oppression.

The third error we make in our moral judgements of the past is to constitute ourselves one-or-more-person “truth squads,” clad in the armor of self-righteousness and armed with an infallible divining rod for the secrets of dead men’s hearts. Unfortunately, “the truth” is never simpler than it seems to the simpleminded, for whom the only colors are black and white; it is never clearer than it appears to the steely eyed, whose icy glare betrays an advanced case of myopia. When we reflect on how very difficult it is to obtain even half-truths about our own contemporaries, their thoughts, or their activities, we should be doubly humble about our ability to plumb the depths of the irreproducible past. Any historian who thinks he has grasped “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” about his subject, particularly given the accidental, fragmentary nature of our documentation, is a person given to delusions and a good candidate to join the next crusade of righteousness.

We are also impeded in our moral thinking by our sloppy handling of moral vocabulary, which is nearly as large as the language itself and for the most part unspecialized. Most of the words we use in history and everyday speech are like mental depth-charges. When heard or read they quickly sink into our consciousness and explode, sending off cognitive shrapnel in all directions. On the surface they may look harmless enough, or resemble something equally benign. But as they descend and detonate, their resonant power is unleashed, showering our understanding with fragments of
accumulated meaning and association. It therefore behooves us to use words—not just the moral-

sounding ones but all of them—with extreme care and precision because they are powerful instruments of judgement, capable of maiming heedless handlers.  

To take but one example, consider the use of “genocide” to describe the loss of Indian life during the colonial period. There are three major problems with employing such a highly charged word. The first is that “genocide” is too loosely employed whenever an historical European kills or even contributes to the death of an Indian, in total disregard of the accepted definition of the word. As you know, the word was coined in 1944 to describe the infamous Nazi attempts to annihilate the Jews, a religious and cultural group they mistakenly took for a biological sub-species or race. The latest and most inclusive definition of genocide is simply “a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator.”  

Such a definition excludes from consideration victims, civilian or military, of two-sided war, of any natural or unintended disaster, and of any individuals or “loose cannons” acting outside the orders of the state or political authority. If the word is to retain any meaning or moral impact at all, we must not apply it wholesale to every Indian death in the colonial period. To do so is to dilute our moral vocabulary to insipidity and to squander its intellectual and emotional force.  

The second reason to use “genocide” with extreme care is that it is historically inaccurate as a description of the vast majority of encounters between Europeans and Indians. Certainly no European colonial government ever tried to exterminate all of the Indians as Indians, as a race, and you can count on one hand the authorized colonial attempts to annihilate even single tribes. The (unsuccessful) Puritan assault upon the Pequots of Connecticut in 1636 and the French smashing of the Mississippi River Natchez and Wisconsin Foxes in the 1730s are the most notable, and even they do not differ much in method or result from the Iroquois destruction of the Hurons in 1649.  

For the rest, only the rare, certifiable, homicidal maniac sought to commit “genocide” upon the Indians. The vast majority of settlers had no interest in killing Indians—who were much too valuable for trade and labor—and those who did took careful aim at temporary political or military enemies. We should cleanly erase from our minds that much-misunderstood remark of a post-Civil War—not colonial—general who said that “the only good Indians I ever saw were dead.”  

By which he meant, not that all Indians should be shot on sight, but that none of the dangerous Indian warriors he was fighting on the Plains were to be trusted. That quotation, always taken out of context, has done more harm to straight
thinking about Indian-white relations than any number of Sand Creeks or Wounded Knees.

The final problem with “genocide” as a description of, or even analogy to, the post-Columbian loss of Indian life is that the moral onus it tries to place on the European colonists, equating them with the Nazi S.S., is largely misdirected and inappropriate. As Edmund Burke warned us in the late eighteenth century and as we have come to realize in the late twentieth, “you cannot” — or rather, should not — “indict a whole nation” for the misdeeds and crimes of a few. A relatively small and pernicious cadre of Nazis was guilty for all six million Jewish deaths; the colonists were personally and directly guilty for only a fraction of the Indians who died in the two or three centuries after contact. Even the Spanish of the “Black Legend” were not directly responsible for most of the native deaths in Latin America. In North and South America, the vast majority of Indians succumbed, not to colonial oppression or conquistador cruelty — as real and pervasive as those were — but to new and lethal epidemic diseases imported inadvertently by the settlers. In only one or two verifiable instances late in the colonial period did the colonists — British officers rather than Spanish, incidentally — deliberately spread smallpox among an Indian group in hopes of diminishing their formidable armed resistance. Genocide, as distinguished from other forms of cruelty, oppression, and death, played a very small role in the European conquest of the New World.

Finally, we make a hash of our historical judgements because we continue to feel guilty about the real or imagined sins of our fathers and forefathers and people to whom we have no relation whatsoever. The dirtiness of their business somehow keeps rubbing off on us. This is perhaps understandable but it is also unnecessary and unproductive. We carry all the moral weight we can bear from our own dilemmas and conflicts; we do not need any excess baggage. Only when we perpetuate the immoral actions and attitudes of our predecessors should they be of personal (as opposed to historical or heuristic) concern to us. Despite the resort to universalizing labels such as “Imperialism” and “Colonialism,” most of the moral battles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are behind us. Unless the United States militarily invades Quebec or Mexico in the near future and makes it the 51st state, we can stop flogging ourselves with our “imperialistic” origins and tarring ourselves with the broad brush of “genocide.” As a huge nation of law and order and increasingly refined sensibility, we are not guilty of murdering Indian women and babies, of branding slaves on the forehead, or of claiming and confiscating any real estate in the world we happen to fancy. We have a related but quite different set of moral problems: personal and institutional racism toward people of
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all colors; Indian reservations and urban ghettos of hopeless poverty and disease; leveraged buy-outs and junk bonds; predominantly non-white prison populations; military interventions in Latin America and the Middle East; immigration quotas; abortion policies; and campus intolerance, to name just a few.

None of these criticisms should be construed as an argument against the legitimacy and utility of judging the past. We do it all the time, we are incapable of not doing it, and we should do it. But we should do it well and we should do it for valid reasons, not because our knees or trigger fingers figuratively twitch every time we open a history book.

It seems clear that we judge the past for three important reasons. The first is to appraise action, an intrinsic part of historical thinking. Not to make such judgements is to abandon the past to itself, rendering it unintelligible, untranslatable, to the present. The second reason for judging the past is to do justice to it. But rendering judgement is not the same as passing sentence. As historians, professional or amateur, we are too involved in both the prosecution and the defense; the words and reputations of the dead on all sides are in our hands. Moreover, historical justice is retrospective; its goal is not to punish or rehabilitate historical malefactors — who are all mortally incorrigible in any event — but to set the record straight for future appeals to precedent.

Finally, we also judge the past to advance our own moral education, to learn from and, in effect, to be judged by the past. Since we think and speak historically for our own generation, we can have judgemental effect only on ourselves. Consequently, history becomes, in Lord Bolingbroke’s famous phrase, “philosophy teaching by example,” a “preceptor of prudence, not of principles.” After bearing witness to the past with all the disinterestedness and human empathy we can muster, we should let ourselves be judged by the past as much as, or more than, we judge it. For the past is filled with the lives and struggles of countless “others,” from whom we may learn to extend the possibilities of our own limited humanity. And as we learn about what it is like to be other than ourselves, we are better able to do justice to the past. The best way to learn to make discerning moral judgements is to practice making them. To judge is human, and to judge according to the highest standards of moral judgement is humanizing.

But what standards should those be? One of the firmest canons of the historical discipline is that a past society must be judged first and foremost by its own values and norms. We judge the conduct of people by their success in acting in accordance with the ideals they have chosen. While an individual event or action should be evaluated in terms of the practices and conventions of its time, we may also measure it comparatively against
similar events in other times and places and, less effectively perhaps, against our personal scales of values. Whichever standard we choose, our judgements should be made only after we have thoroughly done our homework. "To advance and defend our view of how things were, and why, and what this meant to the people of the time, and what it means" — or should mean — "to people of today" is, as Gordon Wright said, a final step, not one to be taken prematurely or lightly.33

When cultures, societies, and groups clash, as they frequently did during the Columbian "encounter," however, how do we assess or resolve the moral conflict involved while honoring the values of each side? I suggest that after making a special effort to achieve parity of understanding, we simply let the conflicting societies judge each other, as much as possible in their own words. "Contemporary moral judgements enable us to enter the lives of the [people] of the past. We begin to see 'heroes' and 'villains' in their terms, and thus to appreciate more fully not just their circumstances, but the moral choices and judgements that they themselves made."34 If the surviving documentation of their respective positions is lopsided, as it usually is in Indian-white relations, we may sensitively apply our imagination and empathy to a mastery of the slim sources on the native side to establish a culturally valid standard of judgement, and we may make a light use of irony or gentle iconoclasm to prick the pretensions and self-righteousness of the advantaged society on the other. If more comment or moral criticism is called for by the complexity, abnormality, or enormity of the conflict situation, we may use the standards of other contemporary societies, preferably neighbors who found themselves in similar circumstances. Beyond this kind of concrete, contextual treatment most of us will not need or want to go.35

As we drift toward 1992 and beyond, I hope we will hear not only the certain noises of the national chauvinists, professional celebrants, and salesmen, but will make a public and private effort to listen carefully to the variety of authentic voices speaking from the post-Columbian past. Opportunities to hear those voices are or will be abundant. The educational fallout from this anniversary in the form of accessible scholarship, museum exhibits, and radio and TV productions is already greater than that produced by the '76 Bicentennial. If we still believe that we can learn from the past, the Quincentenary of the unification of the world — the fabrication of the "global village," as Marshall McLuhan called it — contains all the moral counsels and cautions we could possibly want. Perhaps our re-encounter with each other and our pasts will prevent us from making such a sad mess of it this time around.
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Notes


9. Wendy Rose, “For some, it’s a time of mourning,” The New World [Smithsonian Institution], 1 (Spring, 1990), p. 4.

10. The Web [Newsletter of the American Indian Program, Cornell University], April, 1990, [5], [7].


16. J. H. Elliott, Imperial Spain, 1469-1716 (London, 1963), 98; Quincentennial of the Discovery of America: Encounter of Two Worlds [Organization of American States newsletter], 17 (October, 1989). 3. Toledan chauvinism notwithstanding, the “School of Translators” was not a building or even a congress of experts but an uncoordinated, peninsula-wide effort of Jewish scholars to translate Arabic works into Castilian and later Latin. In fact, most Jewish scholarship was original rather than in translations and was especially important in science and mathematics. Norman Roth, “Jewish Collaborators in Alfonso’s Scientific Work,” in Robert I. Burns, ed., *Emperor of Culture: Alfonso X the Learned of Castile and His Thirteenth-Century Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 59-71, 223-24n.1 (thanks to William D. Phillips, Jr. for this reference).


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