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LAST100: VIDEO 2: “The Meeting of Two Worlds”

In our last video, we discussed the problem of locating Latin America in space: of saying *where* it is. We noted that its borders are fluid and uncertain, and may or may not include places such as the Falklands/Malvinas, Miami, Florida, or highland Peru, depending on the discipline or approach we take. We said, then, that it is best to think of Latin America as an *idea* rather than as a thing that can be pinned down or described with any confidence. Moreover, this is an idea that has its own history: it was invented at a particular time and place--nineteenth-century France--but it no longer has the same content today that it did then. The idea of Latin America is constantly changing, continually being reinvented. Our task is to chart the relationship between this slippery idea and the diverse histories and experiences that it tries to encompass.

When is Latin America?

Identifying *when* Latin America came into existence is equally tricky. One answer might be to examine the history of the idea since its invention, and to think about how and why it became popular during the twentieth century. Another answer might be to suggest that Latin America still *doesn't* exist: that it is a (political and social) project that remains incomplete. Both these approaches offer fruitful lines of enquiry. But finally, if somewhat anachronistically, yet another answer would trace the idea of Latin America as it has been projected back into the past, long before the term itself existed. In which case, one date immediately jumps out as an almost mythical point of origin for Latin America: 1492.

1492

More specifically, the early morning of October 12, 1492, would have been the precise instant that Latin America began, this being the moment at which the Genoese sailor Christopher Columbus, along with the crew of his three small ships, found themselves somewhere off the coast of an island in what is now the Bahamas.

1492 is a date that resonates through history, at least if we think of history as a sequence of punctual events that can be identified in terms of days, months, and years. For the Western hemisphere, 1492 marks the great dividing line between pre-colonial, pre-Hispanic (and thus, pre-Latin) America, versus the long periods of colonial rule and post-colonial legacy that follow. Indeed, we refer to indigenous civilizations, practices, beliefs, and artifacts from before that moment as "pre-Columbian": before Columbus.

1492 is one of the few dates, perhaps the only one, to trip off the tongue of just about every educated person in the Americas, and even worldwide, thanks to ditties such as "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." The event and its central figure are commemorated in paintings, statues, memorials, as well as the names of streets, cities, this Canadian province, and even (with Colombia) an entire country.

Yet things are not, of course, so simple. In the first instance, as we have already noted, 1492 only comes to assume this importance much later. It is a key element of a narrative that is only constructed in the aftermath of subsequent events. Whatever may have begun on October 12 of that year, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Americas would have remained utterly unaware for decades, in some cases centuries. Nor, in an age of difficult communications and restricted information flows, would most Europeans receive the news or find their lives affected until long after Columbus and his crew returned in March, 1493. To put this another way: colonialism was an uneven process, and it would continue to be so, making a mockery of any conception of history as steady progression from one epoch to another.

In the second instance, the very notion of a founding event erroneously implies that there is some organic, even inevitable, link between what we have now and what

happened then. There is no reason why history should have unfolded the way it did. After all, this was not the first time that Europeans had crossed the Atlantic: Vikings were in what is today Eastern Canada some five centuries earlier, and yet their settlement left little to no long-lasting impact. Moreover, the first several decades of Spanish exploration and colonization in the Americas were decidedly precarious, sometimes because of indigenous resistance, sometimes because of natural adversity, and at still other times because of infighting among the conquistadors themselves. History might well have turned out otherwise, and 1492 could easily have ended up being just a date like any other.

More importantly, and in the third instance, Columbus had no idea he was founding anything. It was, at best, a purely accidental foundation of which its main architect was, and would remain, unaware. For all the praise--and vilification--he has subsequently received for what he did, whether we call it "discovery" or "conquest," Columbus himself never recognized that he had done it. He went to his grave with the notion that he had charted a new route to the Indies, that is, to East Asia. As he says in the journal of his first voyage, however enticed he is by the various islands he comes across, he is "still determined to continue to the mainland, to the city of Quinsay [a port in what is now China], and to give Your Majesties' [the King and Queen of Castile's] letters to the Great Khan and return with his reply" (105).

Columbus Perplexed

There are moments when Columbus's insistence that he has (almost) accomplished his self-declared mission sounds like denial of the facts on the ground, and we often sense his perplexity that the new terrain and its people are not quite as he had imagined they would be. His constant search for gold is testament less to greed (which he denounces in the behavior of fellow captain Martín Pinzón [122]) than to his belief that close by should be the great civilization that travellers to the East such as Marco Polo had previously reported. Hence also his frequent distrust when the natives seem to tell him otherwise, and his repeated assertions that he can never verify: "There *must be* large settlements inland here, with hosts of people, and things of great profit" (128; emphasis added). In effect, Columbus was himself pre-Columbian.

Columbus was unsure as to what (if anything) he had achieved. He shows a palpable anxiety as he tries to convince his crew, his sponsors, and perhaps even himself that this journey was worth the effort. The journal is no neutral record of a set of experiences. It is an exercise in (self-)justification. From the start, for instance, Columbus has to deal with the reluctance of his own men, to whom he provides a false reckoning of the distance travelled as they traverse the ocean. Shortly before landfall in the Americas, they are practically mutinous: "they could contain themselves no longer" (92). And his assurances to the King and Queen are an effort in repeated special pleading, given that he has signally failed to prove his wager on a trade route to the East. He turns back for home just as he declares that "the enterprise now appears so splendid in extent and of such high promise" (159). Yet apart from a few trinkets and some no-doubt miserable (hardly magnificent) indigenous captives, all he can offer their majesties is this promise of rewards deferred to some unknowable future.

But we, too, cannot be all that certain of the significance, if any, of 1492.

Many Narratives

The literary critic and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov argues that Columbus's journey was as important for defining a European sense of identity as for any impact it went on to have for the Americas themselves. Todorov claims that the "discovery of America" is best seen as the discovery (or invention) of the modern European "self" via the American "other." As such, it "mark[s] the beginning of the modern era" (5). Modernity begins, in 1492, on a remote Caribbean island. This is a good enough a way of understanding things, if somewhat narcissistic. But it is just one narrative among many.

Let's interject a question or two here. Get a pen and paper and jot down responses to the following prompts. I wonder, first, what impression you had of Columbus *before* you looked at his own account of 1492. Had you been led to believe, for instance, that he was a hero or a villain? What narrative had you found convincing? And then, second, I'm interested in how your thoughts may have changed *after* reading about events in

(more or less) his own words. Were you more persuaded of his heroism, or more convinced of his villainy? Or perhaps something else?

Pause the video and write your answers. I fancy a mug of tea, but I'll be back.

[. . .]

So what did you put? I'm sure you had a variety of answers, but in my experience these days many people are quick to point the finger at Columbus. And yet that is not the story that I, at least, was taught when I was growing up. It is that we have progressed, now that schools provide more nuanced and critical accounts?

What may surprise you is that debates over the significance and morality of Columbus's achievement, and what followed, are longstanding, and not simply a result of contemporary sensitivities or political correctness. The so-called "Black Legend," portraying Spanish imperialism as rapacious and corrupt, arose as early as the sixteenth century. Within Spain itself there were important debates about the ethics of colonialism, such as the 1550 confrontation between legal scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas. In 1542 (only fifty years after Columbus's first contact), Las Casas wrote a searing exposé of Spanish cruelty and genocide of the indigenous population in a book entitled *A Short History of the Destruction of the Indies*. It is then hardly a novel or radical gesture to post denunciations (say) on Facebook for Columbus Day. As Todorov points out, "There is a certain frivolity in merely condemning the wicked conquistadors and regretting the noble Indians--as if it sufficed to identify evil in order to oppose it" (254).

Such gestures (and the questions that prompt them) tell us more about ourselves than they do about Columbus or the Spaniards of the 1400s and 1500s. And to some extent that is no bad thing. 1492 is a mythic story, whether the spin is positive or negative, and myths cannot easily be surrendered. It is worth asking ourselves why we are so eager to believe them. Rather than trying to replace the myth with some "truth," perhaps it is best to acknowledge the Columbus story as an *allegory*, a literary genre whose true object is missing or displaced.

For what's intriguing in reading Columbus's journal is how hard he works, and how quickly he fails, to capture his experience in words. "I am not giving it the hundredth part of the praise it deserves," he tells us. "No one will believe it unless they see it with their own eyes"; "whatever efforts I make to tell Your Majesties about it, my tongue could not tell the whole truth, or my hand set it down" (124; 127). However little opposition he meets from the indigenous people themselves, there is something about the place that resists or escapes.

Columbus as Literature

Columbus's text battles with a fundamental gap between the thing itself and the means he has to represent it. This is why the journal becomes inescapably literary as he is forced to employ poetic and rhetorical figures such as simile: he is always telling us that what he sees is *like* something else that is more familiar ("like a wax candle"; "like a horse's tail"; "like a baker's shovel" [93; 94; 95]), but different. Nothing can quite be pinned down, even if it can be bartered, appropriated, or stolen from its rightful owners. His task is to describe what is new, but he can only do so in terms of what is old and familiar. At best he has to make do with signs: words or things that point to his true object (signs of land, signs of people, signs of reverence [91, 125, 138]), but which can't quite take its place.

In the end, Columbus's journal charts not simply his way to the Americas, but also the onset of a crisis of representation that will affect modernity as a whole. (What comes to be) Latin America induces in a particular way an anxiety about our inability to communicate, even to say what things are. No wonder the idea of Latin America is so slippery. If it has an essence, perhaps this is it.

works cited

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