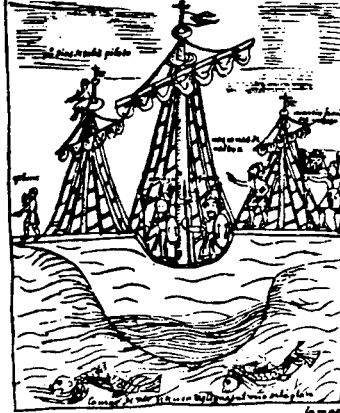


Franklin W. Knight

Christopher Columbus
Myth, Metaphor, and Metamorphosis
in the Atlantic World, 1492-1992

DISCOVERING
THE AMERICAS



1992 LECTURE SERIES

Working Papers

No. 12

Department of Spanish and Portuguese

University of Maryland

College Park

1991

Franklin W. Knight is Professor of Latin American and Caribbean History at The Johns Hopkins University. He has held fellowships from the Social Science Research Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Ford Foundation, among others. Dr. Knight's major publications include: *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Wisconsin, 1970); *The African Dimension of Latin American Societies* (MacMillan, 1974); *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (Oxford, 1978); *Africa and the Caribbean: Legacies of a Link* (Johns Hopkins, 1979), co-edited with Margaret Crahan, and *The Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, 1989), co-edited with Colin A. Palmer, as well as numerous articles in scholarly journals. Dr. Knight is currently writing a book on *Spanish American Creole Society in Cuba, 1740-1840, and the Rise of American Nationalism*.

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ISSN 1046-1671

Department of Spanish and Portuguese
University of Maryland at College Park
2215 Jiménez Hall
College Park, MD 20742

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INTRODUCTION

The highway along the north coast of Jamaica presents one of those extraordinarily spectacular panoramas so common throughout the Caribbean islands. As one moves westerly along the north coast of Jamaica, just past the sleepy village of Runaway Bay, the mountains slant gently down from the left passing some abandoned remains of historic plantations of sugarcane, coconut, pimento, and virtually flow across the barbergreene road surface to meet an in-rushing, iridescent sea below on the right. Just before leaving the parish of Saint Ann, one crosses under an aerial bauxite ore carrier, ineptly painted dark-green to match the verdant hills. On the left, at the head of a lovely little bay, stands a monstrous ore deposit encased in metal and painted the same incongruous green of the overhead ore conveyors. Long ago the conveyors – as well as the surrounding countryside – used to be bauxite red; and the green paint is a concession to the rising chorus of the environmentalists. But everywhere the penetrating red of the bauxite rust betrays the contents of the storage silo and the principal product of the region. The area is unmistakably bauxite country. Kaiser bauxite country.

But I am not going to talk about the bauxite company. And I am not going to talk about the bay.

The bay used to be called *puerto seco* a lingering legacy of the Spanish place names that have survived more than three centuries of British colonization. Legend has it that this was the dry harbor – as opposed to harbors with swamps or fresh-water rivers – that Columbus found and docked his weary ships in 1494. In 1947 it was renamed Discovery Bay by one Mr Hal Peat.¹

On the western side of the bay, between the road and the sea lies a small, but enormously interesting park called Columbus Park. As you might expect, it commemorates the landing of Columbus at that spot – or near it – in 1494. Nowadays it is a haven for sightseeing-starved tourists on the north coast hotels, crammed as it is, with a seemingly incongruous collection: a cemetery headstone

¹ See Inez Knibb Sibley, *Dictionary of Place-Names in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1978), p. 44.

from the estate of the family of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, cannons, shots, steam engines, a water wheel, boiling pans, curing pans, water jars, grass cutters, pimento scales, and all the other paraphernalia that accompanied plantation activity down through the ages. Standing at any corner of the small, cramped park you can imagine a lot of local history with the passage of time.

It seems curious at first glance that Christopher Columbus should have anything to do with the activities represented by the artifacts in that isolated hillside park that presently bears his name. Yet, on reflection – given the country and the place – the park represents a brilliant piece of historical documentation. It is the history of Jamaica and the Caribbean in microcosm.

The Columbus Park at Discovery Bay, Jamaica, provides an excellent recapitulation and encapsulation of the historical myth, the enduring metaphor, and the socioeconomic metamorphosis that most Americans, especially Afro-Americans, hold when they think of Christopher Columbus and the history of European expansion into the Americas.

There is no consensus on the impact and importance of Columbus, the navigator, and the approaching quincentenary merely reopens an old debate.² The great majority of Americans who are not classified as “white” by the North American census takers – Indigenous Americans, Asian Americans, East Indians, Afro-Americans and the biological mixtures produced by time and familiarity – do not share the same view as Italian, Iberian, and some other “white” Americans of the quincentenary commemoration of the arrival of Columbus to the Americas. Nor should they. To this essentially non-European majority the Columbus quincentenary does not connote a narrow vision of medieval gallantry, majestic caravels, dramatic discoveries, or incredible conquests. It connotes in its most elemental forms, social disruption, enforced emigration, the agony of the middle passage, slavery, and the horrors of the *encomienda*, the plantation, and the hacienda. If the discovery of the Americas represented both glory and gore – the Europeans remember the glory and the non-Europeans the gore.

Both views, it must be conceded, reflect the reality of each group’s historical experience. So it should never be asserted that one is more correct and acceptable than the other. Just as each coin has two sides, so each event can be interpreted in at least two ways – and

² See, for example, the article in *The Evening Sun* (Baltimore) Monday, October 9, 1989, by Jack Weatherford, “Abolish Columbus Day” on the Op Ed page.

often many more. Differing perspectives cannot be categorized, much to the eternal dismay of religious and other fanatics, by the confining polarity of “right” and “wrong”. And sometime along the historical trajectory of human events, we must accept the different as different without qualitative distinctions. For our essentially materialist age, that is very hard to do.

When Columbus moved his weary band along the north coast of Jamaica in the middle of his frantic second voyage in early May, 1494, he – nor anyone else – could not have foreseen the fundamental changes that his American adventure would subsequently have on the vast region of the New World, as well as on the conventional ways and beliefs in those worlds with which Europeans, Asians and Africans had long been familiar.³

To appreciate the magnitude of these changes, we need to recall that the initial agreement between Columbus and the Castilian monarchs (the agreement having been signed by both Ferdinand and Isabella) – as well as the general understanding of the age – was that Castile and Columbus were engaged on an essentially commercial enterprise in 1492. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the third part of the original contract:

Item, That of all merchandise, whether pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, or other things of whatever kind, name, or description that they may be, which may be bought, bartered, found, acquired, or obtained within the bounds of said Admiralty, Your Highness will and decree that the said Don Cristóbal Colón shall take and keep for himself one tenth part of the whole, after all expenses have been deducted, so that all that remains he may take the tenth part for himself and dispose of as he pleases, the other nine parts belong to Your Majesty.⁴

The optimistic hopes of Columbus were not realized in his lifetime. Trade, when it developed, involved spices (although not those of Asian origin such as sandalwood, cinnamon, cloves and peppers). The pimento – source of allspice – grew in abundance

³ See Gianni Granzotto. *Christopher Columbus. The Dream and the Obsession. a Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), pp. 215-218.

⁴ The agreement between Columbus and the Castilian monarchy may be found in many biographies. This extract is taken from Björn Landström, *Columbus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 44.

along the mountainous slopes, although its unfamiliarity to Europeans meant that considerable time would pass before its value was recognized. Indeed, it was some time after Columbus that meaningful trade would develop across the Atlantic Ocean.⁵

That transatlantic trade involved gold, silver, salt, sugar, indigo, cotton, tobacco, cochineal, logwood, (and later bananas and coconuts). These trades went arm in arm with the trade in European servants, and African slaves. And the slave trade created the foundation of the series of revolutions that would dramatically alter the concept of the Caribbean in particular and the New World in general.⁶

The slave trade brought millions of Africans to generate prosperity and to fashion new societies in these unfamiliar – to all the immigrants – American lands. Africans made an indelible imprint on all the Americas, from Alaska to the Argentina, but nowhere more so than on the staple producing plantations of tropical America, especially in the Caribbean.⁷ Of course, not all of tropical America was devoted to plantations; and not all the plantations were prosperous. But the plantation custom and culture prevailed to the extent that it became a sort of metaphor for the societies there – and a most useful one at that.

But this does not indicate that the descendants of this servile immigrant population introduced to provide the labor force of these tropical plantations have no appreciation for the complex impact of Columbus – if less so for the man. The myth that the Columbus adventures gave Castile and Spain the legal right to the Americas

⁵ Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex. Essays in Atlantic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

⁶ A good summary of these developments may be followed in *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic World* edited by Barbara L. Solow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷ In addition to Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade. A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), see also, Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis", *Journal of African History*, 23:4 (1982): 473-501; Colin A. Palmer, *Human Cargoes. The British Slave Trade to Spanish America, 1700-1739* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Herbert Klein, *The Middle Passage. Comparative Studies in the African Slave Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); and *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Hispano-américa y el comercio de esclavos. Los asientos portugueses* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, 1977).

had worldwide ramifications, especially for Africa and Africans after 1518 when Charles V sanctioned the slave trade in Africans.⁸

Whether in commemoration, celebration or cerebration, what happened five hundred years ago had a profound, though unequal, impact on the entire world. If the achievement of Columbus was momentous for Italians, Iberians and Europeans, it could have been hardly less so for Africans, Asians and indigenous Americans.

So the curiosity lies in the significance of this invidious distinction now made for Afro-Americans. Why should Afro-Americans not respond to the quincentenary of the Columbus arrival in the same fashion as others in the Americas and the rest of the world? After all, the Africans of that time and after were in every way as involved in the transformation of the Americas as any other group and they did play a major role in exploring and integrating this hemisphere. Participating in the events of 1992 should be an educational experience for all Americans regardless of ancestry.

In expanding the horizon of our consciousness to include in a positive and emphatic way the perspectives of the Afro-Americans, the native Americas, the Asians, and all those who in 1492 found themselves outside the narrow consciousness of Columbus and his Europeans we are forced to come to grips with the three aspects of Columbus: Columbus as myth; Columbus as Metaphor; and the metamorphosis of the post-Columbian world.

COLUMBUS AS MYTH

The major myth of Columbus is that he "discovered" the Americas. This led the Jamaican reggae singer, "Burning Spear", to describe the Admiral, in one of his songs, as "A damn blasted liar". In Spear's irrefutable logic, since Indians and others were here when Columbus arrived, then he could not have "discovered" America. The Americas - and its inhabitants - were not, by their own reckoning, lost. Columbus was. He was, after all, on his way to China, and thought, on reaching land that he was off the coast of India.

Nor was he the only bold sailor to venture into hithertofore uncharted waters at that time. Columbus was merely one of many who sought to drive back the frontiers of maritime knowledge and satisfy the inquisitive nature of the Europeans. Vasco da Gama,

⁸ I have expanded on this theme in "Slavery and Lagging Capitalism in the Spanish and Portuguese American Empire, 1492-1713" in Solow, ed. *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic World*.

Ferdinand Magellan, Jacques Cartier, John and Sebastian Cabot, Amerigo Vespucci were all part and parcel of that age of exploration and discovery.⁹ Columbus, then, was neither singularly bold nor uniquely adventurous for his day and age. He was one of many – fortunate to a degree to have made it to the Americas for the kings of Spain, but unable to extricate himself from his obsessive illusions. He was merely a part of a wave of adventuring that had, for nearly a century, been inexorably driving forward the maritime frontier of Europe, and thereby transforming the European experience.

Not surprisingly, then, with all the biographies that we have of Christopher Columbus, we still know very little about the person – although we have a good store of knowledge about his personality, as befitting someone who easily aroused both jealousy and enmity. Indeed, 1992 has less to do with Columbus the individual than the significance of Columbus's legacy to Castile and to the wider world.

If the first myth is that Columbus discovered the Americas, then the second is that these new found lands belonged to the discoverers as a matter of fate. Soon America came to mean freedom, abundance, opportunity, and equality – but only to the European immigrants, not to their servile classes. Of course, by the late eighteenth century white Europeans could no longer support the inherent contradiction of slavery and freedom. With the legal abolition of slavery, the myth expanded with magnetic force until the present. Although it tends to be localized in the United States (and to a lesser extent, Canada), America as the land of unbridled

⁹ For a sample of the literature on this period, see, William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance 1420-1620* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952); John H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970); C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969); and C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (London: Hutchinson, 1965); Charles Verlinden and Florentino Pérez-Embid, *Cristóbal Colón y el descubrimiento de América* (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1967); John Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (New York: World, 1963); Pierre Chaunu, *L'Expansion Européenne du XIIIe au XVe Siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1969); Frédéric Mauro, *L'Expansion Européenne 1600-1800* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1964); John J. McCusker & Russell Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: Institute for Early American History and Culture, 1985); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves. The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Historia de Puerto Rico, 1600-1650* (Seville: CSIC, 1974) and Troyd S. Floyd, *The Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean, 1492-1526* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973).

opportunity and inexhaustible wealth continues as a powerful myth among most of the world's poorer countries.

COLUMBUS AS METAPHOR

In reflecting on Columbus, then, it is less the individual that we seek to understand. We are not likely to know more about the elusive individual than we now know. But we cannot escape the appeal of Columbus as a metaphor.

In pondering the true significance of 1992, I think it incumbent that we ask, what did Christopher Columbus and 1492 mean to America and the world?

I hope that I make a reasonable assumption that in this selected audience we are not simple partisans to the general recognition that Christopher Columbus was merely a great sailor, or a great discoverer, or a great man. [After all, a strong case can be made that he was a mediocre sailor, a poor administrator and leader, and that he failed even to discover that if his goal was to reach China he was hopelessly lost in the Caribbean]. But we need not be bogged down by such pedestrian concerns.¹⁰

He might have been all of those –but those would be insufficient reasons to consider his misadventure of 1492 worthy of such enormous public attention in 1992.

Rather, it seems to me that what is truly significant about 1492 was not the individual man, not the specific event, but the nature of that age and the consequences of those encounters. Columbus, after all, was as I have indicated, merely one of a fairly large group of dedicated explorers who took up the challenges of their times and by so doing expanded the horizons of knowledge.

When Columbus reported to the monarchs of Castile that he had found a new continent and some new people, he was, understandably, being quite subjective. Neither the continent nor the people had been lost; and they could hardly have been called “new” in the sense that he intended. As one commentator declared, it was Columbus, not the indigenous people, who were lost.

The significance lies, not in the conscious achievement of discovering a new world but the unconscious restructuring of the

¹⁰ Verlinden and Pérez-Embid, *Cristóbal Colón*; Landström, *Columbus*; Granzotto, *Christopher Columbus*; Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea. A Biography of Christopher Columbus*. 2 volumes (Boston: 1942).

universe and all its inhabitants after 1492. For this simple reason, those who emphasize “encounter” over “discovery” have already advanced their consciousness immensely.

Columbus and his fellow explorers together created an Atlantic World that would eventually change the destiny of all peoples wherever they lived.¹¹ That was their achievement, for better or for worse. So we suggest to you that Columbus was both man and metaphor – and it is the metaphor that assumes the greater importance in our day and for our times.

And what we should ponder in 1992 – and that is certainly not peculiar to Africans and Afro-Americans – is not merely some past individual “discovery” but a collective awareness; not a familiar past but an uncharted future; not the fact of an occurrence but the consequences of a fate. We should consider 1992 not just as an occasion to look back comfortably on the past achievements of a selected few over the past five centuries, but on the foreboding challenges that confront the entire world and its peoples at the beginning of a new century.

For in the twenty first century we need to prepare ourselves for an ever newer world, that, as the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, wrote in *Morte d'Arthur*, “advances, and in times outgrows those laws which in our father’s days were best.” Just as the inhabitants of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had to respond and adjust creatively to the new “discoveries” of their day and the incorporation of new knowledge that challenged the very basis of their beliefs, so those of the twenty first century will have to make fundamental readjustments to notions that they have held very dear for centuries.

Although it has probably not fully seeped into our contemporary consciousness, yet the world of the 1990s is quite different from that of the 1950s and 1960s when most of us developed our intellectual foundations. Since then there has been a great revolution in knowledge and information ranging from astonishing developments in nuclear fission to computers, optics and, with the launch of the Hubble telescope into space the incredible capacity to literally look into the past. In our lifetime the political and economic position of

¹¹ Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange. Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers, 1972); J.H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Gordon Brotherston, *Image of the New World. The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979); Carl O. Sauer, *The Early Spanish Main* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

the United States in the world has changed dramatically too. The United States is not the great, bountiful society it used to be. It is still the largest single economy in the world, but far from the hegemonic force it was in 1945, or even as late as 1960. More than ever it has become a nation of immigrants – not a melting pot – where identity congeals around race, color, ethnicity and geographical origin. No longer is it the universally admired, “can do” society willing to confront any challenge, pay any price, and dare any foe in defense of freedom and democracy. Both its military and commercial abilities and its self-confidence have been severely shaken by its debacle in Viet Nam, its involvement in the Middle East, its erratically inconsistent policy in Central America and the Caribbean, its declining competitiveness in international trade, and its overwhelming domestic social problems. The Soviet Union, its major adversary, is currently embroiled in a mortal struggle with internal national and ethnic minorities, suppressed for 50 years but now struggling to be free to pursue independent democratic paths. Both at home and abroad our revered institutions simply do not seem to be getting the job done – whether it is running the government in Washington or building cars in Detroit. So across the land there is much legitimate soulsearching.

Five hundred years ago, at just such a time in the history of Europe, Christopher Columbus appeared. He was a dreamer who passionately felt that it was time to change some of the prevailing rules. He was arrogant and persistent – typical of his age and his condition – that he could reach the east by sailing west. Although he did not do that, he was eventually proved right. Columbus is about creative reactions to incalculable changes, about bold visions and dogmatic perseverance in the light of overwhelming obstructions and disheartening difficulties.

Columbus as metaphor connotes challenges confronted. Columbus symbolized the beginning of the process of integrating the Atlantic World (in the Braudelian sense) with the wider worlds of India and Asia.¹² Columbus, in a very real way, inadvertently initiated the notion of the global village; of nations of immigrants; of universal

¹² The term is taken from the original French version of Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts of Material Civilization and Capitalism*. Translated by Patricia Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 80-81. Unfortunately the translations “world economy” or “world-economy” do not fully convey what the author intends by *economie monde*. In coining the word Braudel explained that he had in mind the German word, *Weltwirtschaft*.

brotherhood as well as universal strife. The age of exploration began before Columbus and continued after he died. But the legacy of that age is still with us.

After 1492 nothing would be quite the same again in any part of the world. That applied not only to the original inhabitants of the Americas. That was equally true for Europeans, for Africans, for Asians – even for the relatively newly segmented societies of Australia and New Zealand. The history of all human societies changed in new, unexpected, and unpredictable ways. Change, always constant, assumed a qualitatively new dimension. *That is the essential importance of 1492 and the Columbus episode.*

When Africans, Afro-Americans and indigenous Americans think of Columbus, then, it is more with “doom-burdened” gore than with commendable glory. For the ancestors of these people, the definitive end of their complacent world began with the age of exploration and discovery. The post-Columbus world brought not triumphs, but traumas. And theirs has not been a happy history since. Yet, they cannot turn the clock back; nor can anyone else. So from their nettle of despair they must grasp the metaphorical aspect of his deeds. And in those rest the challenges, the dreams and the actions.

THE MEANING OF COLUMBUS AND THE AGE OF DISCOVERY/ENCOUNTER

To emphasize the meaning of Columbus and the age of encounter/discovery is nothing new, of course. By the eighteenth century intellectual circles were quite preoccupied with the consequences of 1492, although they tended to express it, quite sensibly, in broader terms than merely the aftermath of Columbus.

In 1768 Cornelius De Pauw published his reflections on the impact of the discovery of the Americas on Europe.¹³ To De Pauw, the discovery was, from an ethnocentrically European perspective, an unmitigated disaster. Everything negatively viewed by his contemporary Europeans – political strife, economic inequality, epidemic diseases, social unrest – De Pauw blamed on the unfortunate consequences of the discovery of the Americas. But two years later, in 1770, the Abbé Raynal, unpersuaded by the De Pauw's

¹³ De Pauw was a New England industrialist turned writer and philosopher. Granzotto, *Columbus*, p. 279; Elliott, *Old World and New*, p. 1.

arguments and intellectually ambivalent on the matter, offered a prize for the best essay replying to the following multiple question:

Has the discovery of America been useful or harmful to mankind? If useful, how can its usefulness be enhanced? If harmful, how can the harm be diminished?

The Raynal prize was not awarded until 1792.¹⁴

Although he signally failed to arrive at any clear conclusion, no one reflected more intelligently, if also unconventionally, on the matter of the meaning of America than the Abbé Raynal. Indeed this is clearly demonstrated at the very beginning of his monumental study, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*:

No event has been so interesting to mankind in general and to the inhabitants of Europe in particular, as the discovery of the New World and the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope. It gave rise to a revolution in the commerce, and in the power of nations; as well as in the manners, industry, and government of the whole world. At this period new connections were formed by the inhabitants of the most distant regions, for the supply of wants they had never before experienced. The productions of climates situated under the equator, were consumed in countries bordering on the pole; the industry of the north was transplanted to the south; and the inhabitants of the west were clothed with the manufactures of the east; a general intercourse of opinions, laws and customs, diseases and remedies, virtues and vices, was established among men.

Everything was changed, and must change again. But it is a question, whether the revolutions that are past, or those

¹⁴ Abbé Guillaume-Thomas-François de Raynal [1713-1796], better known to history as the Abbé Raynal, was a leading member of the French intellectuals of the Enlightenment. His major works included histories of the Netherlands (1747), the English Parliament (1748) and, with Denis Diderot, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* in 1770. Between 1750 and 1754 he edited the highly influential literary *Mercure de France*. His works were publicly burned in 1881 by order of parliament for his anticlerical and anti-European sentiments. There is no direct evidence that Raynal read De Pauw's work, but given the temper of the times, the debates on such matters must have been widespread.

which must hereafter take place, have been, or can be, of any utility to the human race. Will they ever add to the tranquillity, the happiness, and the pleasures of mankind? Can they improve our present state, or do they only change it?¹⁵

Adam Smith, a contemporary of Raynal, showed none of the latter's reservations. He confidently declared in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* published in 1776 that "the discovery of America and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."¹⁶

When Afro-Americans ponder the quincentenary, their sentiments fall closer to those of the Abbé Raynal than to those of Adam Smith. To any sensitive individual the significance of Columbus cannot be removed from the significance of America – and America in the geographical, not the political sense. To try to understand Columbus and the age of exploration is to try to understand the world in which we live, and the legacy that we will leave for our descendants.

If you go to the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress you will find as you enter – a fitting counterpoint to the Columbus coat-of-arms on the opposite wall – a magnificent mural done by a Brazilian artist that faithfully captures the true metaphorical significance of Columbus with four panels illustrating discovery, pioneering, cultural beginnings, and work. Without being formally told, Afro-Americans have been conscious of this complex relationship for a very long time.

In the final analysis it really does not matter what our individual attitudes to Columbus are, or should be. It is less of question of historical chronology, of personality, or of the event itself, as I have said before. What is at stake for all of us regardless of race, color, religion or national origin, is the processional panorama of the complexity of the world in which we live. What is at stake is our common understanding of the enduring legacy of the world of

¹⁵ Abbé Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Translated by J. O. Justamond. 6 volumes (London: J. Mundell & Co., 1798. Reprinted New York: Greenwood, 1969), pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ Cited in Elliott, *Old World and New*, p.1.

Columbus. Whoever we are, we have a common interest in this theme.

THE LEGACY OF COLUMBUS

The legacy of Columbus gradually worked itself out in a number of ways all over the globe.

On February 15 1493, while on his caravel off the Canary Islands, Columbus wrote a long summary of his accomplishments to his monarchs. It is full of the self-justifications, rationalizations and misconceptions from which he suffered – and for which he suffered.

...I write to inform you of how in thirty three days I crossed from the Canary islands to the Indies, with the fleet which our most illustrious sovereigns gave me. I found very many islands with large populations and took possession of them all for their Highnesses; this I did by proclamation and unfurled the royal standard. No opposition was offered.

...In conclusion, to speak only of the results of this very hasty voyage, their Highnesses can see that I will give them as much gold as they require, if they will render me some very slight assistance; also I will give them all the spices and cotton they want, and as for mastic, which has so far been found only in Greece and the island of Chios and which the Genoese authorities have sold at their own price, I will bring back as large a cargo as their Highnesses command...

Thus the eternal God, Our Lord, grants to all those who walk in his way victory over apparent impossibilities, and this voyage was pre-eminently a victory of this kind. For although there was much talk and writing of those lands, all was conjectural, without ocular evidence. In fact, those who accepted the stories judged rather by hearsay than on any tangible information. So all Christendom will be delighted that our Redeemer has given victory to our most illustrious King and Queen and their renowned kingdoms, in this great matter. They should hold great celebrations and render solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity with many solemn prayers, for the great triumph which they will have, by the conversion of so many peoples to our holy faith and for the temporal

benefits which will follow, for not only Spain, but for all Christendom will receive encouragement and profit.¹⁷

Since 1492 the entire world has, reluctantly or enthusiastically, but unavoidably had to come to grips with five large interrelated themes dealing with the revolutions that accompanied the expansion of Europe and the progressive integration of the world communities:

- 1: culture contact and social diversification;
- 2: encounter and exchange;
- 3: national and regional identity;
- 4: ethnocentricity and racism;
- 5: the role of the United States of America in a changing world system.

These are the themes that deserve our attention as we place the past events of 1492 and the coming events of 1992 within the relevance of our lives.

1. CULTURE CONTACT AND SOCIAL DIVERSIFICATION

Culture contact and social diversification are constant features of all contiguous communities. But in the Americas this took on an entirely new and unexpected dimension. For only in the Americas did the consequences of contact produce such a diverse variant of new hybrid peoples – for example creoles, mestizos and mulattoes – who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of vast regions.

While the present populations of the Americas occasionally look like and behave like their contributing local and imported components, yet one must admit that, in the main, they are most assuredly *sui generis*. They are not what they were in 1492.¹⁸

The original local populations of the Caribbean were totally dislocated, destroyed or decimated by colonization and conquest. In places like Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola the sedentary agricultural Arawaks lost the vitality of their culture, but not before

¹⁷ Cohen, *Four Voyages*, pp. 115-123.

¹⁸ D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, I: Atlantic America* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1986); *Native Populations of the Americas* edited by William M. Denevan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).

making an indelible imprint on the Spanish and other newcomers.¹⁹ Elsewhere in the region the Caribs resisted bravely and survived, but paid a great price in linguistic and cultural modification.²⁰

But the Europeans also changed – both those who ventured overseas and those who remained at home.

The incorporation of the New World after 1492 had extremely far-reaching consequences for the Europeans. It reshaped their domestic politics; affected their demography; their cultures, their economies, and most of all, their consciousness of themselves.²¹

2. ENCOUNTER AND EXCHANGE

As my colleague, A.J.R. Russell-Wood succinctly expresses it,

...Exchange is at the core of the Columbian legacy and provides the point *de depart* for examining the impact of the Americas on the wider world. Such an exchange is ongoing, organic, dynamic, and evolutionary and it is characterized by ebb and flow, and of varying levels of intensity. It may embrace pathogens, intellectual traditions, crops, technological skills, biological exchanges, flora and fauna, or humans.²²

No one has explored this dimension better than Alfred Crosby in his brilliant study, *The Columbian Exchange*, which traces the biological and pathological transformations that accompanied the subsequent integration of the world. Entire ecological zones were created or destroyed or altered as people, plants and animals freely moved hither and yon.

Europeans introduced to their new world in the Americas varieties of plants and animals with which they were familiar, or

¹⁹ See Julian Steward and Louis Faron, *Native Peoples of South America* (New York, 1959); Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth. The People of Guatemala and Mexico – their Land, History and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Linda Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Jalil Sued Badillo, *Los Caribes: realidad o fábula* (San Juan: Editorial Antillana, 1978); Ricardo Alegría, *Las primeras noticias sobre los Indios Caribes* (San Juan: Centro de Estudios avanzados, 1981).

²¹ J. H. Parry, *Europe and a Wider World* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

²² A.J.R. Russell-Wood, “The Columbus Quincetennial: The CLAH Initiative”, Keynote address, *The Conference of Latin American Historians*, December 1987.

which attracted their interest for economic or aesthetic reasons: citrus, sugar cane, cotton, wheat, horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and dogs from Europe; bananas, coffee, ackee, and yams from Africa; rice, breadfruit, mangoes and the mongoose from Asia. In return they brought back to Europe samples of what novelties they found in the wider world, especially in the Americas: tobacco, maize, manioc, chocolate, potato, tomato, pineapple, peanut, the turkey and the buffalo.

With the unrestricted movement went new and unfamiliar, and highly contagious diseases that migrations disseminated and dispersed among populations lacking immunity – often with lethal consequences.

And the largest early migration involved Africans and their descendants. Accompanying the very first voyage of Christopher Columbus, Africans participated in every aspect of the conquest of the Americas. They fought as ferociously as any Spanish *conquistador*. They crossed the uncharted oceans, forded the mighty rivers, climbed the snowcapped mountains, traversed the mighty plains. They pacified the hostile Indians. They established the new cities; built the magnificent houses (that they could not occupy); planted the staple crops; and made viable the colonial economies that became the foundations of powerful metropolitan states.

When Europeans came in the hundreds; Africans came in the thousands. When Europeans came in the thousands, Africans came in the millions – some ten millions by the end of the nineteenth century. No aspect of the post-Columbus history of the Americas can be written without a proper understanding of the crucial role that Africans and their descendants played in this development.

Nor should we forget that the first major revolution in the Americas was a demographic revolution. And this revolution had two aspects. The first was in the composition of the population as the indigenous inhabitants became overwhelmed by imports from Africa, Europe, India and Asia. The second was the locational revolution as places previously sparsely settled – North America, Brazil, Argentina and the Circum-Caribbean – became densely populated.

When we speak of a metamorphosis of the Atlantic World, therefore, we address ourselves to the fundamental structural change that accompanied the alteration of the European vision of the Americas. For shortly after the Spanish established themselves in this New World, they saw their mission not just of expanding the horizons of Christianity and discovering a new sea route to Asia by sailing west. They saw the Americas as a sphere of new settlement. America

became the land of opportunity, the utopia, the reward to God's elect, the perfect region for economic exploitation. No one expressed the combination of materialism and spiritual quest better than Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the intrepid soldier of Hernán Cortés when he declared that the Spanish went forth "for the service of God and His Majesty, to give light to those who were in darkness, and to procure wealth, as men desire."²³

Surely part of the agenda for 1992 should pertain to the complex ways in which the Atlantic World changed after 1492, and the important contribution that Africans made to the new construct.

3. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL IDENTITY

It was only with the return of the Columbus expeditioners that the reality of the Americas – especially the intellectual notion of the Americas as a land of opportunities – began to seep into the general European consciousness.

What made the Columbus expedition different from the many others that may have gone before was the continuity of its impact on both the sending and the receiving societies. The encounter with the Americas changed the European concept of reality as well as their vision of themselves and their universe. This constituted a revolutionary change in European self-awareness.

Let us take just one small example of this intellectual revolution: that of map-making. European maps before the end of the fifteenth century encompassed three continents – if Europe can be called a continent rather than a peninsula – Africa, Asia and Europe. The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were considered one great sea.

Once Columbus returned from the Americas – and his achievement was almost immediately complemented by the expeditions of the Cabot brothers, of Jacques Cartier, of Amerigo Vespucci, and of Ferdinand Magellan – a new horizon appeared. But the task of geographical rectification was much more difficult than adding the new knowledge on to the old maps. Europeans had to come to grips with some new realities – new peoples, new products,

²³ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico*. Translated from the Spanish by Maurice Keating, esq. (London, 1800. Facsimile Edition, La Jolla, California: Renaissance Prints, 1979), p. 502. Varying translations of this quotation appear elsewhere, for example, John Parry, *The Age of the Reconnaissance. Discovery, Exploration and Settlement, 1450-1650* (New York: World Publishing, 1963), p. 19.

new languages, new flora, new fauna. And they had to integrate this new knowledge into their consciousness, balancing it carefully against the known and the familiar – as the journals of Columbus reveal time and time again:

.. in this district were.. holm oaks and strawberry trees and others like those of Castile... and its fields and trees were like those of Spain; and in a net that they had made, the crew caught many fish like those in Spain – that is to say, sole, skate, salmon, shad, dories, gilthead, conger, sardines and crabs – the Admiral decided to give the island a name related to that of Spain; and so on Sunday, 9 December, he called it Hispaniola.²⁴

Almost immediately the new knowledge forced the Europeans to redefine themselves and their world more clearly and more arrogantly. They began by giving new names to the people and territories that they found: America, Indians, Santiago, Nueva España, Nueva Castilla – names of significance to Europeans.

Of course, in defining their relationship with the new-found peoples they also had to define their relationship with themselves. The Spanish and the Portuguese (with the connivance of the Popes) tried vainly to establish a hegemony over the new lands for Castilians and Portuguese.

In the early sixteenth century the Spanish Crown (if not its free lance invaders) invested much time and thought to a range of troublesome questions about how best to rob the land, enslave the natives, and justify their actions to their consciences, their rivals, and their god. The Spanish clergy pondered the nature of the natives. Crown and clergy anesthetized their consciences by resorting to the innate superiority of Spaniards over other Europeans and Europeans over all others in the world.²⁵

²⁴ *The Four Voyages of Columbus* edited and translated by J. M. Cohen (Baltimore: Penguin Book, 1969), p. 85. A slightly different translation appears in *The Log of Christopher Columbus*, translated by Robert H. Fuson (Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing Company, 1987), p. 131.

²⁵ Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1965); Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians. A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970); Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers's University Press, 1971), pp. 71-137.

The questions raised in the early years did not go away. Land disputes, abuse of native peoples, derogation of workers, denigration of Africans are topics as timely in our world as they were in the world of Columbus, Las Casas, Cortés and Sepúlveda. The Indian problem still surfaces in Canada, the United States, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina. But the "Indian problem" is part of a wider problem: the problem of ethnocentricity and racism.

4. ETHNOCENTRICITY AND RACISM

The experience of America undoubtedly sharpened and hardened the ethnocentricity and the racism of the Europeans. To a certain extent, all peoples manifest this ethnocentricity. This may be clearly illustrated in the earliest writings of the Europeans about the peoples of the wider world in the accounts of Gomes Eannes de Zurara, Martín Fernández de Navarrete, or Bernal Díaz del Castillo: a sober wonder or amazement at the magnificent cities, the admirable bravery, and the impressive culture of the non-Europeans. By 1580 the mood is clearly changing as a Castilian factor in Manila in the Philippines requests of Philip II "50 good Castilians that I might conquer for Your Majesty the Kingdom of China."²⁶

By the nineteenth century racism had become highly intellectualized with Auguste Comte's positivism, Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest", Rudyard Kipling's "white man's burden", and Hilaire Belloc's cynical lyric about imperialism:

Whatever happens, we have got
The Maxim gun and they have not.

5. THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN A CHANGING WORLD SYSTEM

From 1492 the Americas have been the catalyst in an ever changing world system. After 1776 the rebellious British North American colonies appropriated the term "Americas" to refer to themselves as a convenient abbreviated form of their new title. And for two hundred years they played an important role in the development of

²⁶ Parry, *Age of Reconnaissance*, pp. 19-37.

a world political order. They continue to do so in 1992. But how long will they continue to do so in the 21st century?

After the Second World War it was thought that the United States would dominate the world for a century or more. That domination proved short-lived. The most sympathetic observers concede, generously, that it lasted "from Yalta (1945) to Malta (1989)." So the United States has to adjust to a new position in the Americas and a new position in the world.

To the old problems of 1492 – political, economic, social and ethnic diversity – have been added new problems of population explosion and ecological deterioration. Even as we seek new worlds in outer space, we are rapidly losing our common ability to survive here on the shrinking earth.

We should not go blindly into that new age. As we prepare for 1992 we need a thoughtful agenda that reflects our common national, hemispheric as well as universal concerns.

THE AGENDA FOR 1992

From where we stand our agenda for 1992 should encompass a return to the intellectual preoccupations of the Abbé Raynal. The focus should be on the Americas, on the entire hemisphere of the Americas. But, in consonance with the changes over time we need a new format and a new context. We need to ask his questions in slightly different form if we are to appraise the main character and interdependence of American societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

What are the strengths and weaknesses, the advantages and disadvantages of cultural and ethnic pluralism which today constitute an important issue in every American society? How are all the American States preparing themselves to face the challenges of the twenty first century? What has the influence of the United States of America been on the politics, commerce and customs of Europe, Africa, and the World? How will it continue to influence world events in these rapidly changing times? Has this influence been for the better or the worse? Can the country that legitimized political revolution in the modern world at the end of the eighteenth century return to lead revolutionary social change with justice in the twenty-first century?

These are not questions that only pertain to the United States of America. They are of importance to the entire world; and together we must work on these questions. We can do it either collectively or

individually as international associations or national collections of scholars. And the themes are important enough that they deserve to be centered in an organized Institute for the Study of the Americas, or some such organization.

In an institute for the study of the American experience – or in a number of small institutes in separate states throughout the hemisphere – scholars from all academic disciplines should direct their energies to the resolution of some of the basic problems that divide and antagonize our world.

Our intellectual quest in 1992 ought not merely to recapture the vicarious thrill of the lonely Columbus caravels on the Atlantic Ocean. Our quest is to expand serious knowledge of the entire Atlantic World, of all the peoples and cultures and geography of Africa, of Asia and the rest of the forgotten Americas. Our quest must be to educate ourselves about a brave new world devoid of the arrogance and ethnocentrism of the past, in which *all* people are taken on their own terms and accorded with dignity and respect: the rich as well as the poor; the developed as well as the undeveloped; the mighty as well as the weak; the large as well as the small. Our interests lie in inculcating a new vision of the world that reflects the perceptive remarks of John Donne that

no man is an island unto himself; every man
is a part of the continent, a piece of the
main

and that all men wherever they might reside may some day be treated with equal courtesy and equal respect in this our growing global village.

This, I humbly suggest, is a worthy challenge for any intellectually based humanistic center to accept as its agenda for the Columbus Quincentenary and the twenty first century. It does not seem, today, an impossible dream.

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