

Lleras, R.

Universidad Externado,

Calle 12 no. 1-17 este,

Bogotá, Colombia.

E-mail: roberto.lleras.rl@gmail.com

## Europe in America: Beyond the Black and Pink Legends

The arrival of Europeans in America by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century marked a turning point in the history of the continent. Likewise, the history of Europe changed and America became a source of unlimited fantasy and unending riches. Even though there have been many investigations, the truth is that the social process was extremely complex and differed from region to region, so that up to the present date it is far from being fully understood. Since the sixteenth century two opposite and radical versions have been constructed: the Black Legend, which basically states that the conquest was a bloody massacre; and the Pink Legend, which promotes the benefits of Christian colonisation, together with the languages and technology brought by the conquerors. Both versions are completely European and little attention has been given to the voices of the conquered Indian nations. This paper attempts to provide a more balanced view of the impact of European contact in America. I analyse the evolution of population size, economic production and land occupation, the foundation of cities and the long term effects that the colonial policies have had on the Latin-American Republics to date.

KEY WORDS: *conquest of America, Black Legend, Pink Legend, demographic decline, urbanisation, colonial policies.*

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### The endless legends

*“Among these gentle sheep and of the aforesaid qualities, so given by their Maker and Creator, entered the Spanish as soon as they met them, as cruel as wolves and tigers that had been starved for many days. And no other thing have they done from forty years ago until this day and they still do it, but tear them apart, kill, anguish, afflict, torment and destroy them by means of the strange, new, varied and never before seen, or read or heard manners of cruelty, of which a few will after be told, to such a degree that being in the Española island over three million souls that we saw, there are today not two hundred of her natives.”* (Las Casas, 1542/1999).

In this manner the Spanish friar Bartolome de Las Casas expressed his disgust in 1542, just fifty years after the discovery of America by Columbus. His *Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (*Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies*) was published in Seville in 1552 and translated into Dutch, French, English, German, Latin and Italian in the following 74 years. The book fuelled the already strong anti-Spanish feelings all over Europe and gave a stronghold to the Black Legend of Spain in America. Many others shared this point of view, both during the sixteenth century and in the centuries to come. From then onwards, the Spanish rulers, whatever their true character might have been, found it difficult to set aside this very negative image. In America the Black Legend played an important role in the ideology of the independence

movements of the nineteenth century, to the point that it can be easily recognised in the political documents written by Francisco Miranda, Antonio Nariño and Simon Bolivar, three of the most prominent heroes of the independence (Lleras, 2013). The complete intellectual construct of the Black Legend has other implications. It is not only that the Spanish were cruel, vicious, unmoral and lustful, but that their counterparts were quite the opposite. The image of the Native American Indians as kind, innocent and moral people was duly promoted by the Black Legend. Perhaps the best example of such an image is given by the same Bartolome de Las Casas:

*“All these universal and infinite people in every way God created as the most simple, with no evil or treachery, obedient, most faithful to their natural Lords and to the Christians whom they serve; more humble, more patient, more peaceful and quiet, devoid of quarrels or hustles, not prone to fight or complaint, un-resentful, hate less, un-revengeful that there are in the world.”* (Las Casas, 1542/1999).

Thus, as a corollary of this aspect of the Black Legend, there emerged another ideological construction, as strong and long lasting as the legend itself: the idea of the Good Savage. The core of this concept is that Native Indians were kind, unpolluted people, despite being ignorant and defenceless, and that this was so because they were mankind in its natural state, which had long been lost in the Old World. However naïve it may sound, the truth is that the idea became popular and we can certainly see it even in the political thoughts of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1995) and in the underlying academic political current of the Indigenist movement in Latin America during the twentieth century.

There was a reaction to this legend, which could not have been otherwise. The Pink Legend thus arose to promote the moral values of Spain, the paramount superiority of catholic religion, the unsurpassable beauty of Spanish language and the magnificent work of the conquerors and colonisers, who fought bravely to bring civilisation and order into the new lands. Spain thus appeared as the motherland:

*“I will expose before you, grandchildren of Spain, though not its children, blood of blood, flesh of flesh, nerve of nerve of Spain, what was and will be the Motherland. I want to speak about the black legend of Spain, formed as a consequence of false opinions poured along several centuries of anti-patriotic propaganda, about the magnificent saga unfolded during seven centuries of the re-conquest that made of our nation a cauldron of races and prepared the advent of this other saga: that of the discovery of the New World.”* (Blasco Ibañez, 1909).

Again, the image of American Indians had to fit the portrait in a way that would correspond to the positive image of Spain and its works in America. And such an image was indeed constructed. It was not a difficult task; all that was needed was the general opinion of the masters of the Indians, be they Europeans or white American creoles. The image of the Native American as a lazy, dirty, vicious and treacherous individual, barely able to speak, incapable of complex thought and prone to kill or rape at the least opportunity, filled the books of historians and second-hand chroniclers. (Lleras, 2010). The panorama was complete; two opposing legends, each brandishing the weapons of

moral superiority, giving nothing away to the other and fighting endlessly with no hope of winning or losing.

Whereas in most of Europe the discussion eventually faded away, in Spain and Latin America that was not the case: Indigenists and Hispanists kept on quarrelling throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the truth behind the discovery, conquest and colonisation of the New World. In time, the two points of view became synonyms of political positions; the first closely associated with left wing politics and the second with a right wing position. Thus the theme became not merely an academic one; it turned into a political issue. Moreover, a political issue of European fabrication; both the Black and the Pink Legends were conceived in Europe, by Europeans and with European aims in mind.

The impact of this controversy in the studies of the Indo-European contact is huge. The polarisation has obscured a balanced view of the facts behind this process and has diverted the efforts of researchers. It has taken great effort and many years for fresh studies to appear, and for a new point of view to shape itself beyond all of the passions. In 1992, to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery, the Smithsonian Institution planned a series of exhibitions and published a catalogue edited by Herman Viola and Carolin Margolis. *Seeds of Change* explored topics such as the contribution of America to food production, the introduction of cattle in the American grasslands, wine in the New World, African slaves in the Antilles, the African contribution to creole cuisine, etc. (Viola & Margolis, 1991). The example set by this breakthrough has been followed by investigators, both in Europe and America; gradually, interesting things are coming through.

With this historic background in mind, it is my turn to leave behind the legends and to start a brief exploration into some topics which to archaeologists and historians are the most interesting: population and demographic tendencies, economic production, land occupation, and the long term effects that the colonial policies have had on the new shape of Latin American countries.

### **Demography, before, during and after the contact**

It is extraordinarily difficult to make a calculation of the population size of America at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The reason being that nobody, neither the Native Americans nor the European conquerors, was at all interested in counting at least not in the beginning. This concept of calculating the size of the population appeared only years after the conquest, when it became necessary to know the size of the working force and the corresponding volume of taxes to be collected at the different villages and communities.

This has given rise to exaggerations, both towards the lower and upper ends of the figures. The total population of the continent before the arrival of the Europeans might

have been between 60 and 90 million (Denevan, 1992). Whatever the real size might have been, the central fact is that this population size was the result of long lasting historical trends. Early population began around 30,000 years ago with the migration of north-eastern Asian groups entering through Beringia, in at least two different waves separated by thousands of years. In spite of the small size of these groups, they managed to colonise the whole continent, down to the southernmost tip by around 8000 b.P. (Politis, Prates & Pérez, 2009).

From then onwards, the demographic history of America was extremely complex. Population growth was not constant, as far as we know, and the trends in each region probably obeyed different dynamics. During the period when groups depended mostly on hunting and gathering, the absolute growth of population seemed to have been very slow and the density in the few areas where there are basis for calculation remained unchanged, thus implying that population growth led to colonising new areas rather than increasing intra-site density (Idem). The adoption of agriculture did not change this trend immediately; it took the best part of a thousand years to record increases in population densities in a few regions.

By the first millennium before the Common Era there were remarkable changes. Local ethnic groups in regions such as the coast of Peru, the Titicaca plateau, the Orinoco basin of Venezuela, Yucatan in southern Mexico and middle Central America grew extraordinarily and experienced profound changes in their social structure. In most cases this led to the emergence of powerful states that extended their control over wide regions; this was the case for the Moche and Tiawanaku-Wari in Peru and the Olmecs and Mayas in Central America. Other groups spread rapidly over neighbouring and even distant regions; the Chibcha and Arawak expansions in northern South America and the Antilles are the best examples of this large scale population movement, probably triggered by rapid local demographic growth (Constenla, 1991).

Those trends were by no means irreversible; the large population of the Maya area experienced a marked descent during the collapse of the cities around 900 C.E. In most of coastal Peru, villages were abandoned and the population decreased periodically under the influence of the El Niño (ENSO) climatic changes. The climatic history of Central and South America is not exactly characterised by long term stability, and this in turn meant that stable conditions for steady population growth were not the general rule. However, over time, demographic trends adjusted quite well both to environmental and historic fluctuations. Apart from small scale local crises, we have no archaeological evidence of the pathologies commonly associated with demographic catastrophes, such as extended famines, overcrowding, endemic war, epidemics, child abandonment, population over-aging, etc.

By the sixteenth century the situation, in general terms, had not changed radically. Certainly the American population was larger than at any other time in its history, but in every region the patterns of concentration, the relation between urban and rural areas, the shape of the age pyramid and demographic indexes, such as birth rate, age expectancy,

etc., were different. Large urban populations existed only in Central Mexico and in a few valleys of the Peruvian Andes. Elsewhere there were patterns that combined villages, scattered rural houses, isolated extended family residences, etc. Population size and growth were still affected by war, invasions, food availability and so on.

The arrival of the Europeans brought demographic changes, which at first glance were not different to those that had affected the continent during its pre-European history. War, diseases, population displacements and forced recruitment for labour had already happened in America. What was completely new and different was the scale, the extension, and the pace of the changes induced by the European conquest. While in ancient times the largest population displacements, such as those carried out by the Inca Empire, involved a few thousand people, under the Spanish rule the sum of local forced population movements totalled millions. And such was the scale of all the other factors affecting demography.

The causes of this demographic catastrophe have been exhaustively discussed. They involve, in the first place, the widespread incidence of diseases brought from Europe, such as the common flu, smallpox, measles, typhus and pneumonia (Denevan, 1992). The second group of factors in importance was the forced displacements, forced labour in mines and the collapse of the native social structure. Finally, massive killings, during episodes of resistance or raids on villages to capture gold, took their toll. (Idem) Independent of the position of the researcher, with regard to the above discussed Black and Pink Legends, it is important to note that the demographic decline was not intentionally sought by the Spanish Empire and that it became a problem for the colonial administration, since it affected the availability of the work force, the volume of taxes, and the capability of extending real territorial control. There were, nevertheless, many independent actions carried out by *Adelantados* and *Capitanes*, the Spanish conquistadors who were not too keen on obeying the law. After all, the Spanish conquest of America was largely a private enterprise.

As we have seen, there is no agreement on the size of the population of the continent prior to the Spanish arrival. In spite of this, most investigators tend to agree that the demographic decline during the first 100 years of colonisation can safely be assumed to have been over 85%. (Idem) The sheer scale of this phenomenon is simply astonishing.

The data that support these calculations is quite abundant and has been thoroughly examined; most of it corresponds to the *visitas* or *tasaciones* of Indian communities carried out by Spanish administrators. These censuses were done mainly at the request of the representatives of the Spanish Crown in order to provide information related to taxes. The observable patterns are strikingly similar everywhere; whether the surveyed communities were located in the Mexican plateau, the Peruvian Sierra or the Colombian highlands, the successive *tasaciones* show progressive declines that in many cases led the population size to zero. Hundreds of villages simply disappeared; after a while the Spanish Crown was forced to issue a new policy whereby very small villages were fused with larger ones in order to reorganise in a better way what was left by the demographic

decline. These *reducciones* mixed people together who had been traditional enemies or had no relation to one another, giving rise to a whole new set of social problems.

In regions where the effective control of the Spanish Crown was weaker, it was impossible to implement the population policies and the surviving Indians were left to their fate, something which proved to be better for them. In regions like the Amazon basin, Patagonia, the deserts of northern Mexico and western United States, Guyana, northern Canada, Alaska and the northern Pacific Coast of South America, Indian communities managed to reorganise and survive in relative isolation for a longer time.

Whether the situation after a century of demographic decline ended up in *reducciones* or in isolation in remote places, it is quite clear that the impact was huge. The key difference between the demographic situations before and after the conquest was that in earlier times the communities were able to adjust to the changes induced by external or internal factors. But there was no possible way to adjust within any reasonable time to the changes induced by the Conquest. Depending on the region, it took two or three centuries to reach the population levels of the sixteenth century. And even by then there were regions that never really recovered their population. The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia was described by the Spanish chroniclers as a place so populated that Indians sprang from the earth "*as bees in a beehive*". (Simón, 1625/1981) When the archaeological explorations of the northern face of the Sierra started in the decade of the 1970s as many as 300 pre-Hispanic villages were found, but there were no living Indian communities.

The other factor that contributed to changing the shape of America was the importation of African slaves. The first slaves were introduced in the Antilles at the end of the fifteenth century, less than eight years after the discovery. This business proved to be so profitable that from then onwards they were brought in by the millions, roughly twelve, in fact, to the new continent (Lovejoy, 1983). In demographic terms, this meant that the Afro-American population was about the same size as the Native American population after its decline. For a long time Indian and African populations remained apart, since most Africans were kept in plantations and mines. This changed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries due to massive escapes and the rebellions of slaves, such as those that took place in Brazil and Haiti, and ultimately because of the freedom of slaves decreed in the newly formed republics. Free Africans settled mostly in the lowland tropical areas of South and Central America and south-eastern United States, thereby creating areas with new population patterns.

What I have sketched so far is, of course, a complex process that can only be entirely understood by means of thorough research into the multiple factors that were involved. Nevertheless, this brief survey does allow us to reach a couple of basic and useful conclusions:

- 1) The demographic transformation of America between the sixteenth and nineteenth century is a unique episode in the world's history, nowhere has a phenomenon occurred of such a scale and with such far reaching implications.

- 2) By the period extending from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when most American countries gained independence, the continent's population was approaching the size it had been prior to the conquest.
- 3) By that time, the ethnic composition of the population had changed so much that many people were not descendants of the original population, but instead, had their ancestral roots in other continents.
- 4) Practically all of the previous trends in population structure and distribution had shifted. Several densely populated areas had been abandoned; people were now clustered in urban environments, while in rural areas there were only scattered peasant houses instead of the traditional villages.

America did not look the same; it was, in fact, a completely different landscape, both in ecological and social terms. Some other things helped to shape this transformation.

### **Economy and land use**

I mentioned earlier that the Spanish conquest of America was mainly a private enterprise. Christopher Columbus himself set the pattern of what people interested in coming to America should do: raise the money, obtain a royal license, and embark on an adventure hoping to get lucky. The procedure became official quite rapidly, the Spanish Crown set the *Casa de Contratación* of Seville in 1503; apart from regulating the monopolistic trade between Spain and its colonies, the *Casa* had an important role in the conquest. (Crespo, 1996) Any individual who wanted to travel to America in search of treasure or to explore and to conquer new territories had to sign a contract with the *Casa de Contratación*, nominally the Spanish Crown. The leader obliged himself to perform certain duties in the name of the Crown and for its sake. In exchange, the Crown granted permission for the *quinto real*, one fifth of the treasure or booty obtained, under the obligation to evangelise the native populations and to claim the new lands for the King (Idem). Other matters that could be settled in the *Capitulaciones* included the founding of new cities and keeping written accounts of the explorations. The terms agreed established the limits of exploration, the length of time assigned, and the people who would accompany the expedition; generally a friar, in charge of preaching and keeping records, was included.

At the beginning of the conquest of America the Spanish Crown was relatively poor so it did not provide money for these expeditions; afterwards it became very rich but things did not change at all. All the expenses had to be financed by the leader who signed the *Capitulación*. This leader, now officially recognised as an *Adelantado*, had to provide a ship, provisions for the journey, horses, weapons and equipment, plus soldiers and servants. When the expedition finally left Cadiz the happy *Adelantado* was indebted

beyond imagination, his estates in Spain were mortgaged and his soldiers were still expecting a pay which had not yet been given. This imposed a particular mode of action in America; the first consideration was to obtain, as fast as possible, as much gold and silver as could be found so that the fellow members of the expedition could be appeased, the creditors persuaded to wait and the Crown satisfied as to its share. This could not be attained through the patient work of establishing productive enterprises, farms or workshops; that was the last thing in the minds of the stressed *conquistadors*. At length the system worked for most of them and they managed to pay their debts and get rich, but the system failed to establish a sustainable economy in the lands of Spanish America.

While the population decline hit hard the native economic system and food production dropped sharply, no alternative was being built. The first decades of the conquest were marked by this predatory activity and the recession of native production, a fatal combination that caused a long lasting drawback. Mining of precious metals soon appeared as a profitable activity and by 1539 there was intense mining in Santa Barbara, the Ecuadorian province of Cañar. (Lleras, 2006). The same happened elsewhere, the common factor being that these were not new discoveries but rather the re-working of mines that the Indians had been exploiting. Usually no new technologies were applied so that the productivity of the mines depended on the sheer size of the work force employed in them. The substantial recruitment that the Spanish mine owners imposed took many Indians away from agricultural production, something that was counterbalanced only when African slaves were introduced in large numbers. Gold and silver were extracted in huge quantities in the colonial era; the Potosi Mountain in Bolivia became legendary because of the astonishing quantity of silver that it produced. Mexican production was comparable and gold was abundant in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Even so, mining left little behind, except for barren lands and lots of holes in the hillsides. The returns from this activity were split between the Crown and the mine owners, but in both cases it barely covered the luxury items and lavish lifestyle of a horde of unproductive people. No investments were made so that when one mine was exhausted the only next possible step was to find another.

Where no gold and silver mines existed, the strategy was a little better. One of the provisions of the *Capitulaciones* stated that the leader of an expedition and its principal members could be granted *Encomiendas*. This was a cession granted by the Crown to a person for the duration of his or her lifetime, which enabled them to have Indians under their authority. The beneficiary of this cession, *encomendero*, could exact a tribute from the Indians for their maintenance from which he paid the Crown taxes. In exchange the Indians received catholic evangelisation. The *encomenderos* were not entitled to the property because all of the land belonged to the King; as a result of this arrangement, the only real stimulus for the *encomenderos* was to profit as much as possible from their cessions before they died and their families were forced to leave in haste, since there were always plenty of candidates waiting to become new *encomenderos*.

Again, no productive innovations were implemented; the *encomenderos* collected



their tributes in the form of traditional Indian products: corn, cotton, blankets, potatoes, salt, etc. Eventually wheat and cattle were introduced to respond to the growing demand for bread, dairy products and beef. But, even so, agricultural production remained at a very low level of technological development. The use of ox-ploughs, for instance, was very limited because it was cheaper to have Indians ploughing the land than to raise oxen for this purpose. The only reason they avoided a generalised famine was that the population had diminished so much that the demand for food was extremely low.

It was a general complaint at the time that the colonial administrators did little to correct all the aberrations and problems which were causing so much harm. And it is rather odd to note that in a certain way the concept of State intervention existed. The Crown issued many laws; the *Leyes Nuevas* (1542), aimed at correcting the situation described by Bartolome de Las Casas, was one of the best examples. But then, just as now, laws were little more than good intentions written on paper; at such a distance the Crown was powerless over the mighty *encomenderos*. Finally the whole thing became too scandalous and the *Encomienda* was abolished.

Where there were still enough Indians left they were grouped in communal lands termed *resguardos*, the Spanish version of a reservation. This new institution did much to protect the surviving Indian population since it provided a sheltered space where language, family ties, traditional culture and self-sustaining economy were preserved. On the other hand, from the point of view of the colonial nation, the *resguardos* were closed-circuit economies, mostly isolated from the larger context; trade between *resguardos* and the cities was very limited, if not completely inexistent. The descendants of the *conquistadors*, some of whom had now become effective land owners, resented the existence of the *resguardos* and fought them fiercely. One of the goals that they achieved, by legal and illegal means, was a progressive reduction in the size of the lands allocated to them. This factor, together with the growth of the population of the *resguardos*, rendered most of them unviable in the long term. Alongside these *resguardos*, there were enormous and largely unproductive *haciendas* owned by members of the aristocracy.

We may conclude, therefore, that during most of the colonial period the economic system was in shambles, though it would, perhaps, be more appropriate to say that it barely existed. The problem was that the whole structure of the Indian economy was destroyed, mostly unintentionally, and no significant replacement was ever constructed. Apart from food, only the very basic commodities of life were provided by this precarious economy: coarse clothing, pottery, furniture for the lower classes, basic leather goods and construction materials (baked bricks and tiles, forged iron hinges and locks, wooden beams, windows and doors). Very slowly productive enclaves began to appear. At a certain point, around the eighteenth century, substituting imports made sense because demand for certain commodities grew and it became far too expensive and difficult to continue bringing them from overseas. Spain kept a firm hand on the monopoly of trade but was unable to provide all that was needed.

Finally, a reason appeared for manufacturing, and a profit, and a few workshops

were established. The market was, of course, quite limited because it was composed mainly of the local elites and sectors of the church with purchasing capacity. Even so, in Santa Fe, Lima, Quito, Mexico, Buenos Aires, Santiago, and a few other cities some artisans established businesses that managed to survive and prosper. There were artist studios that produced large paintings and carved wooden sculptures for churches and monasteries, gold and silver smiths, potters, tailors, sweet and biscuit factories and some other workshops that produced the traditional basic commodities with better quality standards. Even if limited, the manufacturing activity gave rise to a new social class; workers and artisans. By the time of independence this new class had acquired some influence in urban society.

When discussing demography, I mentioned how difficult it was to establish estimates for the size of the population of America; regarding the economy, I must say that establishing production indexes was even more difficult. An estimation of the gross product of America before the Spanish conquest would be nothing more than a wild guess. Even for the colonial period with its administrative documentation, it would still be nothing but an uncertain appraisal. What we can do with reasonable confidence is to establish the general trends in the economic history of the continent, from the time prior to the conquest until the early nineteenth century. In that order of ideas, it is quite clear that the most evident trend is an acute decline in the gross product, both in absolute and in per capita values, that continued unhaltingly until the early eighteenth century, when it finally receded. This phenomenon was followed by a very slow recovery; probably by the mid nineteenth century the gross product had reached the level it had before the conquest.

### **Cities and urban life**

Urban life in America before the conquest was very limited; there had been medium and even large cities since around the beginning of the Common Era, but they were isolated enclaves in the middle of what was predominantly a rural environment. Eventually all of these cities, such as Wari, Tiawanaku, Chan Chan, Teotihuacan, and Monte Alban, collapsed and rural life returned to the regions where the cities had been. The only exception to this rule is represented by the Maya area where many cities grew over a long period, thus establishing a real urban environment over a large area. But Mayan cities eventually also collapsed and by the sixteenth century there were only two regions where the urban phenomenon had importance. One was Mexico, where the twin cities of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco were probably the largest and best organized urban environments of the world, surpassing Paris and London in population size and urban planning. The other pre-Hispanic State with a good number of cities was the Inca Empire; Cuzco was a large settlement with impressive civic and religious buildings. All over the Empire the Incas built cities resembling Cuzco, though not as large as the capital. Even so, both

in the Aztec and Inca Empires, most of the population lived in rural areas or small villages; elsewhere in the continent this trend was even stronger.

Spanish *conquistadors*, on the other hand, received precise instructions regarding the foundation of cities. The formal act of taking possession of newly discovered lands involved usually just a formal declaration made in the name of the King and the celebration of a religious ceremony, a mass or a solemn prayer. But it was only when a foundation was made that effective possession could take place. Founding a city was both an act by which the *conquistador* complied with the obligations of the *capitulaciones* and also a way of securing his discoveries from the ambitions of other *conquistadors*. Last, but not least, cities provided a protected location, usually guarded by garrisons, where the colonisers could feel safe from what they regarded as a hostile environment. Those factors determined, right from the very beginning, the establishment of many foundations throughout the new continent.

However, in order to establish a city, the *Adelantado* had to have official permission; not just anybody could found a city. That permission would have been included in the *Capitulaciones*. Then, the orders recommended that the founder should select a place away from Indian settlements, in order to avoid a close contact that could bring about a difficult coexistence. The spatial plan of the city had to follow strict rules, as this seventeenth century testimony from a friar clearly describes:

*“For this they first draw a plan, so that everybody would build in a uniform way: the first gave a space for a church, large or small, according to the number of neighbours. By its side they placed the house of the priest, before the church a very large plaza, different from the cemetery, opposite the house of the garrison or council, beside it the jail, and nearby the inn or the community house where the foreigners would stay. The rest of the town was divided with a string, the streets on the right north to south, on the left east to west, in the shape of blocks and in this second trace the plots were distributed to the neighbours according to their quality.”* Hardoy, 2001.

During the first years of the conquest most cities were founded by the sea or near the coastline, thus allowing easy communication by sea and an escape route in case of danger. Later on, the *Adelantados* and their troops ventured further on and new cities were founded inland. There was no reason to disobey the orders concerning the pattern of the cities; as a result, all the cities founded by the Spanish in Latin America, whether they are seaports or inland cities, in low or high lands, look very much the same. And there are many; the foundation of cities was one of the most prolific activities of the Europeans in America.

It is argued that the very first city was Santo Domingo del Puerto, founded by the brother of Christopher Columbus in Santo Domingo in 1496; nevertheless, there are doubts as to whether this was really a city or just a military post. Historically documented foundations started in 1500 with Nueva Cadiz in the island of Cubagua, Venezuela. Then came, among others: Santa Maria la Antigua del Darién in Colombia, 1510; Cumana in

Venezuela, 1515; Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Panamá, 1519; Sancti Spiritus in Argentina, 1527; San Vicente in Brazil, 1532; Cuzco in Peru, 1533 and the list goes on endlessly (Hardoy, 2001). The foundation of cities did not stop at any time during the colonial period; there are late foundations from the early nineteenth century, just before the declarations of independence of the Latin American countries. Those late foundations, made by groups of merchants, miners or agriculturalists, maintained the ancient colonial urban plan.

Taking into account the rural characteristics of most of pre-Hispanic America, it becomes clear that such a proliferation of urban settlements must have meant a drastic change. This was something new and quite prominent in the landscape of the continent, both in geographic and cultural terms. All the cities, whether large or small, had in common the fact that their centres, the blocks around the main plaza, were inhabited by the most illustrious people. As the cities grew their centres were shared by the large houses of the urban elite, the administrative buildings and the monasteries of the religious communities. Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustines and later on Jesuits, together with their feminine counterparts, occupied large portions of the urban space and became extremely important in terms of economic production and consumption. In the periphery of the city nucleus there were humble quarters inhabited by Indians, half-breeds, freed slaves and poor descendants of European migrants. These quarters were not traced in orderly blocks with ample streets like the city centre; but grew rather spontaneously, accommodating the topography while making space for irregular terrains where wood and straw huts strived to survive the floods and landslides. Hence the new world city acquired this divided character that has endured until the present day in modern Latin America.

Cities, from their very beginning, were the focus of colonial economic and political systems. Markets where peasants and Indians interacted took place in the main plaza, law courts held sessions in the adjacent buildings, religious services were performed at the church, education was provided at the monasteries, and practically everything that mattered either happened in the city or had something to do with it. Even though the city depended upon the rural areas for the provision of food, water, lumber and raw materials, in reality rural areas were at a complete disadvantage.

Throughout the colonial period the countryside's inferiority with regard to the city evolved into a wider breach. That did not change with Independence, even though the wars against Spain were fought with armies composed of peasants; there were no benefits for the countryside from the new political situation. Most political leaders of the nineteenth century were quite happy with the countryside as a reservoir of lands for the *haciendas*, a source for soldiers for the civil wars, and as a food supply. Throughout the history of Latin America, there was a notorious lack of effective public policies for the countryside or efforts to revive the depressed economic and social rural life.

This asymmetric relation between cities and rural areas has acted in the social history of Latin America in two very strong directions: First, it has pulled people massively

towards the cities, thus de-populating rural areas. Latin America is a region with one of the highest densities of large and medium cities, and that happens despite the fact that there is no large industrial or commercial activity that can absorb the ever increasing urban population. Most urban migrants cluster in the peripheries and develop various modes of informal work whereby they manage to survive. Those peripheries are, however, dangerous and vulnerable environments where criminality is extremely high and all types of social pathologies become endemic.

The second consequence of the asymmetric relation between cities and the countryside was a very acute centralism. Rural areas were virtually devoid of any real decision making power; everything, from the allocation of public money, the design of educational programmes, the construction of roads and hydroelectric projects down to the diffusion of the latest trends in fashion and the broadcasting of television series, happens in the city or is decided there. There have been a few episodes in the history of Latin America when this passive role of the countryside has given way to important rural social movements. One such episode, however, was the main foci of rebellion during the Mexican Revolution, headed by the countrymen Pancho Villa in the north and Emiliano Zapata in the south. Another, the *Revolucion de los Comuneros*, in Colombia in 1781, was also a peasant movement against colonial taxes. And the *Guerra de Canudos*, in north-eastern Brazil in 1896, a massive peasant movement against the miserable living conditions in rural areas. In not one of these cases was it possible for the countryside to revert this situation of oppression and dependence.

## Epilogue

In this brief dissertation I have barely scratched the surface of this extremely complex topic. The Indo-European contact was an event that radically changed the history of mankind. The more we explore, the more evident it becomes that we do not yet fully understand it. At the same time, we feel, with astonishing certainty, that 500 years after it began we are still feeling its consequences; we know that the demographic, economic and cultural processes that it triggered are still unfolding and that they will keep on shaping the future in many unpredictable ways.

Along with these processes, public debate also continues. Few themes are so likely to raise passions and contradictory emotions. Most probably, we will keep on discussing and investigating, and most certainly, we will keep on fighting. When the preparations for the celebration of the fifth centennial of the discovery of America were being made, this quarrel acquired great intensity. Each Latin American nation took a stance and there were those, like the Dominican Republic, who declared their joy at having been colonised and given such marvellous gifts as Christianity and the Spanish language. Then there was the other radical position taken by Mexico, which refused to celebrate what it considered to be an act of savagery and genocide. The tenor and arguments of the nine-

teenth century were still controlling views. One of the leading contemporary writers of Latin America, Mario Vargas Llosa, wrote:

*“The fifth centennial will raise many speeches. There will be rhetoric effusions all over the Hispanic world, endless, but I am afraid that most of the celebration will be limited to the rhetoric effusions. I am afraid that in Latin America old and completely fusty controversies as those of Indigenism and Hispanism will be revived. That the conquistadors will be billed for the destructions and murders and that the opportunity for something that should be a creative celebration will be lost, for example, to fight against nationalisms, a battle that we still have to fight.”* (1989).

Let us hope then that we can go beyond the black and pink legends, because there is much yet to be learnt and understood, and because it is important to portray ourselves as the heirs of social processes, not the hooligans of rival legends.

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