Geographical terms applied to the various portions of the western hemisphere present difficulties of a linguistic nature which have their origin in historical and ethnic sources. To begin with, should the United States of America, properly speaking, be known as "North America" or "United States"? The citizen of the United States who has had some cultural contact with Latin America will often refer to himself as "North American" instead of "American" in order not to offend sensibilities. Many Spanish Americans, with some justification, resent the fact that the Yankees have appropriated for themselves the name of the entire continent. They too, are Americans! Yet their protest, although valid from a logical point of view, seems unimpressive at times, since they hardly ever refer to themselves in ordinary conversation as "American", but rather as Argentines, Mexicans, Cubans, Nicaraguans, etc.

As a matter of fact, the term "North America" is also inaccurate, if applied exclusively to the inhabitants of the United States. A Canadian is also a North American, and so, incidentally, is a Mexican - all of which adds up to another frustrating instance of linguistic inadequacy. A U.S. citizen, travelling in Europe, will not refer to himself as a Texan, a Californian or a New Yorker to designate his nationality. If he is speaking English, should he say that he is a "United Stateman" (an awkward term at best)? But this would be inaccurate, since, as already indicated, there is more than one country in America that calls itself the United States.

The terms used to designate the southern half of the American continent offer further complications. Those who opt for "Latin America" will find it difficult to exclude Quebec from this classification, since the language spoken in that part of Canada is derived from Latin. A further examination of the term "Latin America" will reveal that this designation was coined by the Second French Empire in the mid-nineteenth century to justify its expansionist policies in the New World. There are thus political and economic implications involved in the nomenclature which have left their mark in present day usage.
just as erroneous, he insists, to speak of the civilization of “Latin America” as to refer to the United States as “Anglo-Saxon.”

The question of nationalism with respect to the emergence of the New World on the stage of history presents some interesting schematic problems. One must use the word “new” to look at the “discovery” of the New World.

What does the term “New World” actually mean? The word “new” is ambiguous. “New” in relation to what? New only when the “new” was discovered and not because it had grown old? Did the “new” exist before the “old”? The New World was new only for Europeans, claims Luis Alberto Sánchez. It is really the oldest world and made its entry into history thousands of years before the Spanish, French, English, and Dutch established their respective communities. From the perspective of the aborigines the Spaniards were “new.”

As for “discovery,” the term is immediately empty, the New World had been “discovered” earlier by the Scandinavians and the indigent peoples themselves, who are said to have migrated from Asia via the Bering Strait. It is most likely that the Vikings reached the North American continent about the end of the tenth century. Norse literature credits Leif Ericson with reaching some part of New England or Nova Scotia during the early Middle Ages. It should therefore be pointed out that the invasion of the continent by the English on the one hand and the Spaniards and Portuguese on the other, can be said to constitute the “second discovery,” as well as the first conquest” of the New World.

In fact, in many contemporary Spanish American circles one prefers to speak in terms of the “capture” of America, rather than its “discovery.”

In the view of North America, i.e., more specifically the inhabitants of the United States, the long-accepted tradition concerning Columbus’s “discovery” was that it was a venture produced a country which eventually became a symbol of freedom and democracy, a symbol for the persecuted. In recent years this version has been attacked as existing in the world of mythology. Columbus’s journey, it is argued, was the prelude to an invasion. Europe conquered the indigenous peoples of the New World and destroyed their culture. Europe brought slavery and infectious diseases to the natives.

In more contemporary terms, the dominance of European values has

3 Madarasa, p. 489.
also resulted in the dangerous deterioration of the environment. In short, Columbus, according to this revisionist view, is not a hero but a villain. 6

It cannot be denied that generation of the hemisphere by the English, Spanish and Portuguese was violent and destructive. Hundreds of thousands of natives perished; countless numbers of Africans were subsequently brought over in slave ships because their labor was needed to replace that of the aborigines.

This attempt to re-write history may be viewed with a considerable measure of sympathy and understanding. Yet it would be appropriate to explore the motivations behind this altered perspective. Such an examination would reveal that the controversy is more germane to problems pertaining to the contemporary era than to 1492.

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed an intensification of efforts on the part of native American Indians and Blacks to reinforce their cultural identity and assert their ethnic heritage. This would explain, at least partially, the attempt to emphasize “conquest” rather than “discovery”. Laudable as this effort may be, it must be conceded that civilizations, empires, warfare and cruelty existed on the continent before Columbus came alone. One should not allow an extremist position to obscure any long term positive elements which have resulted from Columbus’ voyage. Any possible revisionism carries with it the risk of replacing one mythology with another. Taking note of the year 1492 should be an occasion for Americans, both north and south, to renew their efforts to make their world a better place in which to develop as responsible human beings.

History teaches us that Columbus, in search of a sea route to Asia, stumbled upon a land mass which he identified as Asiatic. In contrast, Amerigo Vespucci identified these same territories not as Asian but as something new and unknown. The element of novelty eventually qualified him as their discoverer and, hence, bestowed upon him his name rather than that of Columbus. Of interest, too, in this regard, is the fact that Columbus’ son, Fernando, attempted to conceal the fact that his father had mistaken this new land for certain regions in Asia. Recognition of this error would have made it impossible to consider Columbus as the discoverer of the New World. 7

The origin of the name America still gives rise to contradictory opinions. The popular accepted notion is based on the exploration offered by the German cartographer, Martin Waldseemüller, in 1507 to the effect that the continent was discovered by Amerigo Vespucci. It appears that Waldseemüller was completely ignorant of the fact that the Vikings had explored the area hundreds of years earlier; nor had he even heard of Columbus. Interestingly enough, Waldseemüller, some years later, was disposed to reject his earlier 8

10 Caja, p. 245.
affirmative. If the discoverer feels that there is something to be found, the discovery "by accident" is not really discovery. The nature of America's "discovery" may be viewed from still another perspective. The "discovery" may be linked to the needs and interests of the "discoverers". If one is to accept the premise that nothing is permanent and that, on the contrary, everything is contingent and circumstantial, then it must be concluded that America (both North and South) is subject to constant change. The nature of the continent is based on a series of concepts which attempt to explain its origin, geographical formation and historical evolution. These concepts are characterized by their tentative nature, since they are subject to continual modification.

For this reason, the very idea of America, in the interests of exactitude, should be couched in terms of "invention" rather than "discovery". If we return to O'Gorman, we find that he considers America to be a concept which was "invented", an invention related initially to the geographic entity and, subsequently, to its historical essence. The Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea suggests a slightly different perception. America was perceived as a European creation. It emerged as a concrete reality from the cultural crisis which Europe was experiencing. The discovery of the American continent, according to Zea, had its origins in the unavoidable need which confronted the European, namely, the need to discover it. In other words, it is impossible to define America without comparing it to the western world or placing it within an historical context. The western world, at the very outset, i.e. in the sixteenth century, wished to convert America into a family of colonies and an instrument in the service of its interests. It is precisely because of this that it can be said that America was "discovered" because Europe needed it.  