

Lipp, Solomon:

U.S.A. - Spanish America:
Challenge and Response.

London: Tamesis Books, 1994

1

AMERICA: NOMENCLATURE AND "DISCOVERY"

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 the United States of North America, since there are also other countries which bear the designation "United States" (e.g. Brazil and Colombia)? The citizen of the U.S.A. who has had some cultural contact with Latin America will often refer to himself as a "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 Statesian" (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.

1

History is reflected in the term "Spanish America"¹ and may conceivably be linked with the colonialism of the past. In some quarters this designation at one time assumed ideological connotations. Many Spanish intellectuals, especially during the Franco dictatorship in Spain, emphasized the spirit of "Hispanidad" when speaking of the former Spanish possessions in the New World. "Hispanidad" stressed the religious values that go back to the Catholic Monarchs. The definition of Spanish America, according to this point of view, was intertwined with a sense of mission – that of Catholic proselytizing, coupled with the diffusion of the Spanish language and culture; in short, a point of view which speaks in the name of Spanish tradition.

Advocates of "Hispanidad" tend to look to the past for their inspiration. In this sense they are "traditionalists"; they utilize static elements of the past in order to justify their demands upon the present. If tradition is static instead of dynamic, it becomes traditionalism. Perhaps the Spanish traditionalists who harken back to the times of Ferdinand and Isabella do not realize that the Catholic Monarchs, ironically enough, represented in their day, progressive forces that brought about radical changes in the life of Spain.²

The term "Indoamerica" introduces a new concept. Coined by the Peruvian, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, it is symbolic of the expulsion of the Spaniard by the Indian. It can be said to represent a psychological necessity; it is anti-Hispanist because of resentment, and is identified with the struggle of the exploited masses against their exploiters. However, those who prefer to speak of Indoamerica, thereby eliminating the Spanish component altogether, are guilty of a dual error. In the first place, the Indians of America are not related to India. Secondly it can be said that the term reflects a "mestizo" mentality, rather than that of the Indian. If one bears in mind that Indoamerica purports to concern itself with the interest of the entire continent, such purpose would hardly be served by an ideology which is based on resentment against the white element of the population, a point made by the Spanish historian, Salvador de Madariaga. Madariaga emphasizes the Iberian or Hispanic influence as being the preponderant factor in the personality configuration of the many republics that comprise the lower half of the continent.³ Yet it should be pointed out that the presence and influence of other groups cannot be ignored. What is called for is a synthesis of all the elements involved, such as suggested by the Peruvian writer Luis Alberto Sánchez, who maintains that the culture of his continent is Indo-Iberian. It is

¹ Those who speak of colonization by Spain and Portugal employ the term "Ibero-america." For a fuller discussion of "American" nomenclature, see Edmund Stephen Urbanski, *Hispanoamérica, sus razas y civilizaciones* (New York: Eliseo Torres & Sons, 1972), Chapter one.

² Salvador de Madariaga, "Presente y Porvenir de Hispanoamérica", *Obras escogidas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1972), p. 482.

³ Madariaga, p. 480.

just as erroneous, he insists, to speak of the civilization of "Latin America" as to refer to the United States as "Anglo-Saxon".⁴

* * *

The question of nomenclature with respect to the emergence of the New World on the stage of history presents some interesting semantic problems. One must pause and take a second 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" because the New World was discovered later? Later than what? Did the Old World become "old" only when the "new" one 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".⁵ From the perspective of the aborigines the Spaniards were "new".

As for "discovery", the term is a misnomer. Strictly speaking, the New World had been "discovered" earlier by the Scandinavians and the indigenous 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 "conquest" 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 the venture produced a country which eventually became a symbol of freedom and democracy, and a haven 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 people of the New World and destroyed their culture. Europeans brought slavery and infectious diseases to the natives. In more contemporary terms, the dominance of European values has

⁴ Luis Alberto Sánchez, *Examen espectral de América Latina*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1962), p. 22.

⁵ Luis Alberto Sánchez, "A New Interpretation of the History of America", *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, No. 23 (1943), p. 442.

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 penetration 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 along. One should not allow an extremist position to obscure any long term positive elements which have resulted from Columbus's 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 Vesputio 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 them his name rather than that of Columbus. Of interest, too, in this regard, is the fact that Columbus's 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 popularly accepted notion is based on the explanation offered by the German cartographer, Martin Waldseemuller, in 1507 to the effect that the continent was discovered by Amerigo Vesputio. It appears that Waldseemuller was completely ignorant of the fact that the Vikings had explored the area hundreds of years earlier; nor had he ever heard of Columbus. Interestingly enough, Waldseemuller, some years later, was disposed to reject his earlier

⁶ "The Trouble with Columbus", *Time*, Oct. 7, 1991.

⁷ José Gaos, *Filosofía mexicana de nuestros días* (México: Imprenta Universitaria, 1954), p. 227.

assertion.⁸ In fact, some authorities even go so far as to doubt whether Vesputio's baptismal name was Amerigo. Others believe that "America" is derived from "Amerisques" or "Amerricas", names of indigenous tribes of Central America.⁹

* * *

The "discovery", aside from historical consequences, can also be said to have provoked a good deal of philosophical speculation, since the concept itself tells us what Columbus did, not what he planned to do. The dilemma can best be expressed by the following question: Is the "discovery" of a "fact" independent of intentionality, i.e., of the idea of looking for something, especially if the two are not necessarily connected? In other words, is "discovery" *a priori* or *a posteriori*? Additional questions follow: Can one make a distinction between the idea of a fact, i.e., its interpretation, and the fact itself? Are there any facts which are independent of the ideas which we may have about them? Is the idea a necessary ingredient of the fact? In concrete terms and referring to the specific matter which concerns us: Did the "discovery" of America take place *after* the discovery of the unknown land mass?

It would seem futile at this time to attempt a mechanical separation between fact and idea. This would lead us directly into the firing line between idealists and empiricists. Perhaps it would be feasible to say that facts are not independent of ideas, nor are they reduced to ideas.¹⁰ One may even venture the suggestion, and thereby put an end to this speculation, to the effect that the ideas themselves may be conceived of as facts which enter into historical relations with other facts.¹¹

The basic question remains: If America existed as a "thing-in-itself" (and of course it did) before it was "discovered", at what point did it enter into the realm of historical awareness as America, and not as Asia? Our reference to Vesputio seems to provide the key. Whereas Columbus harbored the *a priori* thesis that the land mass he came upon was Asian, Vesputio, on the other hand, proceeded in a *a posteriori* fashion. For him there was no previous "Asiatic" conditioning. The new, unexplored lands belonged to an unknown continent. Empirical evidence replaced previously held suppositions.

In short, it turns out that the "discovery" of America was an "accident" in the sense that Columbus was merely looking for India. The problem seems to be one which bears repetition: Is intentionality an essential ingredient of discovery? The Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman would reply in the

⁸ Jesús Arango Cano, *Estados Unidos, Mito y Realidad* (Bogotá: n.p., 1959), p. 15.

⁹ Arango Cano, p. 16.

¹⁰ Gaos, p. 249.

¹¹ Gaos, p. 254.

affirmative. If the discoverer feels that there is something to be found, the discovery "by accident" is not really discovery.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

¹² Edmundo O'Gorman, *La Idea del descubrimiento de América* (México: Centro de Estudios Filosóficos, 1951), p. 20.

¹³ Abelardo Villegas, *Autognosis: el pensamiento mexicano en el siglo xx* (México: Instituto Panamericano de geografía, 1985), p. 124.

¹⁴ Antonio Gómez Robledo, *Idea y experiencia de América* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958), p. 32.

¹⁵ Abelardo Villegas, *La filosofía de lo mexicano* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960), p. 155.