The Real Motives for the Conquest

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It will soon be four years ago that, to complete the destruction of this land, a mouth of hell was discovered, through which a vast number of people passed each year, whom the Spaniards’ greed sacrifices to their God. This is a silver mine called Potosí (Letter of Domingo de Santo Tomás, later bishop of La Plata, Bolivia, 1 July 1550; AGI Charcas 313).

I have already written a number of articles about this period in Concilium;¹ in this article I shall deal simply with the topic suggested by the editors of this issue, the ‘real motives’ of that event which was the conquest – if by ‘real’ is understood the deepest root of the actions of those ‘invaders’ who carried out the ‘modern’ expansion of Europe, which in 1992 reaches the half-millennium of this dominatory ‘planetarization’. It also needs to be borne in mind that the ‘conquest’ followed the ‘discovery’, and that the two are distinct and to some extent have distinct motives – certainly the motives for the second throw light on the motives for the first.

I. The conquest is a ‘European’ Christian act

The first aspect I would like to stress is that, contrary to what some people think, the fact of the ‘conquest’ of the New World, a ‘world’ absolutely unknown to the whole of earlier Euro–Afro–Asian history, is a ‘European’ Christian act (and not just a Luso-Hispanic one). In terms of world history it is ‘Europe’ which went beyond its borders in the fifteenth century – and consequently it is Europe as a whole which benefited from the inability of Portugal and Spain to develop an industrial capitalism, as happened in other areas in the centre and north of the continent. Therefore responsibility for the conquest is also Christian and ‘European’.

1.1 Christian Europe as ‘peripheral’

It is of the utmost importance for an understanding of the global
significance of the conquest of the New World to accept from the start the absolutely ‘peripheral’ position of Christian Europe (in terms of geography, population, history, economy, etc.) until the end of the fifteenth century.²

Hegel has accustomed us to explanations of world history by a movement going from east to west, following this schema (to be read from right to left):³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(A) Modern Europe</th>
<th>Middle Ages</th>
<th>Rome←Greece←Persia←India←China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(B) Modern Period</td>
<td>Middle Ages</td>
<td>Ancient Period</td>
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The arrows in A indicate the direction of the growth of ‘freedom’, ‘development’ and ‘subjectivity’, with its final axis in Christianity (in Hegel’s view). The arrows in B indicate the direction of the ‘unfolding’: from the foundation, by a sort of ‘inversion’. The movement is towards what is founded, what explains is what is realized (modern Christian Europe, England and Germany, in Hegel’s view), and what comes before is its prehistory. In this way Christian ‘Europe’ achieves, certainly from as early as the fifteenth century (from 1492), but ideologically, philosophically and theologically from the ‘Enlightenment’, a ‘reconstruction’ of world history in which Europe projects itself backwards as the ‘centre’ of that history from the origin (from Adam and Eve, thanks to the ‘Eurocentric’ interpretation of the Adamic myth). Christendom, Europe, ‘Europeanizes’ the Hebrews and Jews, the Greeks and the Romans, the primitive Christians and even the Byzantines.⁴

The reality is the opposite. The neolithic revolution, which began in Mesopotamia with the organization of confederations of cities in the fourth millenium, in Egypt in the third millenium, some time later in the Indus valley (modern Pakistan), later in China, and later moved east, crossing the Pacific Ocean and, through the influence of Polynesian and other east Asian cultures, reached the New World. The classical culture of Teotihuacán in the valley of Mexico flourished from AD 400 to 800, and Tiahuanaco beside Lake Titicaca in Bolivia a little earlier. It was a gigantic ‘march to the west’. The inhabitants of the New World were part of the Far East, Asian in their roots, languages and religions.

In 1492 the Europe of Christendom, from Vienna (besieged a little
earlier by the Turks) to Seville (near which in January of that year the last crusade of Christendom recovered Granada from the hands of Muslims in Europe), with something less than sixty million people after the population disaster of the fourteenth century (perhaps three to four times fewer than inhabited the territory of the Chinese empire at the time), occupied a tiny eastern corner of the map, largely dominated by the Muslim world, the vast Dar-el-Islam. From Morocco the Moslem world stretched south across the Sahara, reached modern Tunis, Egypt, the caliphate of Baghdad, the kingdoms of Iran, the Moghul empire (a little later), the trading sultanates of Malacca and Indochina, and as far as the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. The only real ecumenical universality in the fifteenth century was Muslim: from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Mongol khanates, defeated only a short time before by the principality of Moscow, to the kingdoms of the African savannah. European, Latin–German Christendom was ‘peripheral’ – and had never been ‘central’ in world history.

By means of the crusades (in part a product of the European demographic expansion which resulted from the great agricultural revolution of the tenth century onwards), the Europe of Christendom had attempted to conquer the centre of the contemporary world market, Palestine and Egypt, the meeting point of the Mediterranean (which was not a Christian sea until after the battle of Lepanto in 1571) and the ‘Arab Sea’ (later the ‘Indian Ocean’). The merchants of Venice, Amalfi, Naples, Genoa and Barcelona helped with the crusades for the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre (a motive even naively suggested by St Bernard), but were in reality an instrument of an economic and political expansionist project of the trading powers of Christendom in the Mediterranean. The Muslims repulsed all these crusades, and the Europe of Christendom continued to be ‘shut in’ on itself and ‘peripheral’.

1.2 The ‘expansion’ of Europe: the conquest of the New World

There is nothing surprising in the fact that it should have been at its extremities that the Europe of Christendom was able to evade the blockade maintained for centuries by the Muslim world. The principality of Moscow, the Third Rome, expanded east, across the tundra, and was to reach the Pacific at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Czarist empire was to guarantee the Orthodox world (‘Oriental’, not strictly ‘European’) the presence of Christianity in north Asia.

Portugal, too, from the end of the fourteenth century, and decisively from 1413, when it captured the North African port of Ceuta from the Muslims, began the expansion of ‘European’ Christendom. Compared with this phenomenon, the Renaissance, the Reformation and even the
Enlightenment are internal European events, but not world events. 1492 is the first ‘European’ date in world history, and from this point the ‘centrality’ of Europe was slowly constructed in the sixteenth century. The process was begun by Portugal and Spain, which were later tossed to one side and exploited as ‘semi-peripheral’ by ‘central’ Europe, Holland, France, England, Germany, principally from the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, though from much earlier by the financial power of the European bankers.6

The so-called ‘conquest’ of America, carried out mainly by Hispanic Christendom, has to be placed in the context of this other European ‘expansion’, more specifically, from the Mediterranean, starting-point of the navigators, source of much of the financial resources and origin of the conflicts of interest with the Muslim world of the eastern Mediterranean). In reality, at the beginning the Atlantic was an eastern branch of the Mediterranean, until Columbus’ second voyage in 1493; from that date the Mediterranean became a secondary eastern branch of the Atlantic, and its ‘centrality’ died with that of the Muslim world at Lepanto, a victory for the Hispanic gold and silver won in the New World, with the blood of Indians and black African slaves.

The expansion of European Christendom, Luso–Hispanic at the beginning, took place under the mercantile system. Trade with the Muslim world was partly replaced by the Portuguese, who impoverished the Muslim world with the precious metals of the New World (through a process of inflation which drained the Muslim world’s money of its value). This trade was enormously expanded by Spain, which opened up new markets and products which could be traded in them. Mercantilism transferred to Europe huge quantities of ‘money’ (gold and silver), which came through Spain, first via Seville and later through Cadiz and was deposited in the chests of the bankers in Genoa, Augsburg or Amsterdam and, with the passage of time, in London. Spain was able to acquire ‘money’ but, having destroyed its nascent bourgeoisie (Jews, Moors, communards, etc.), was unable to transform it into ‘capital’.7

1.3 The ‘actors’ in the conquest

The actors in the process of domination involved in the conquest were, to name but a few, ‘money capital’,8 the state (in Spain and the ‘state’ of the Indies), the conquistadores, the missionaries and those who suffered the consequences (the ‘object’ of the domination). Their praxes intersected in all directions, though the ‘social relations’ had different directions and therefore different meanings.9 Each one of these ‘actors’ had a different function, and it should be borne in mind that there were also differences between each one of these classes or fractions of classes. The first four
constituted the hegemonic ‘historic bloc’ in power, and the fifth the origin of the ‘social bloc’, the oppressed, the Latin American ‘people’.\textsuperscript{10}

**The Five ‘Actors’ in the Conquest (before 1530)**

![Diagram showing the five 'actors' in the conquest](image)

Numbers in brackets indicate the ‘actors’; the arrows \((a, b, \text{etc.})\) the ‘social relations’. The direction of the arrow \((\rightarrow)\) indicates the practice of domination; the opposite direction is the practice of the subjugated.

The Crown, their Hispanic Majesties (with the union of Aragon and Castile in 1479), the emerging Spanish state (which was at the same time the ‘State of the Indies’ \([1]\)), controlled by its ‘lordship’ the whole structure of the conquest (arrows \(c, d\) and \(e\)):

God our Lord has deigned to give us the Lordship of this world . . . \textsuperscript{11}

Without a shadow of a doubt, it was the dominant ‘actor’.

In second place came the Spanish ‘nobility’ \((2)\), with its ‘fractions’: the ‘grandees’, large landowners who controlled the agricultural and pastoral system of the *mesta*, the sheep-breeders’ union; those who possessed titles, the knights (*caballeros*) and lastly the squires (*hidalgos*), ninety per cent of the nobility. They were the main, though not the only, military ‘actors’ of the conquest. They were the mainstay of the monarchy, its privileged subjects (arrow \(c\)). The crisis of agriculture and livestock raising, the depopulation of Spain, sent them off to the Indies as ‘conquerors’. 
Thirdly (3) the merchants (at the beginning of the Hispanic Mediterranean), the possessors of money in Spain (Andalucia or Castile), who paid or lent money for the ventures of the conquest, and who, very soon, came to be dependent on the big foreign financiers of Central Europe (the Fuggers, the Welzers, the Eingers, the Sayllers, etc.). They had enormous power, even over the monarchy (arrow a) and the nobility (b). The Spanish bourgeoisie was weak, as a result of the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors, and the defeat of the communards in the wars of 1519 to 1521, when Charles V, influenced by advisers controlled by Flemish finance capital, finally destroyed the possibility of the emergence of a Spanish ‘bourgeoisie’. This weakness was to determine the fate of the Hispanic and Latin American world for the next five centuries. To these groups must be added the merchants or traders, mine-owners and slave-owning estate or plantation owners who appeared later in the Indies.

In fourth place there was the church (4), which held a third of all land in Spain, and was the third power of the kingdom, after the Crown and the nobility. With its plentiful clergy, its powerful bishops and archbishops (men to be feared even in the military sphere), its cultural power in the universities, the church pervaded both public and everyday life. However, by a well-organized system of patronage, Christendom had at its head the King (arrow e). Rome was in the background, but the patronage system allowed no direct intervention of the Pope in the New World (until after the wars of emancipation, from 1826 onwards). Missionaries performed an essential function in the conquest.

The whole made up Hispanic Christendom (parallel, with a few differences, to that of Portugal), which threw itself into the activity of the ‘Conquest’ as an immediate continuation of the ‘Reconquest’: the one ended in January 1492 and the other began in October of the same year.

The fifth actor (5), this time from the New World, the Indians and later the black slaves, was to be the base of the pyramid of power, the dominated, 99% of the population by the end of the sixteenth century (if we include the various categories of mixed-race persons, white-Indian, white-African, mulatto-Indian and creole). All the arrows of domination (f, d, and g) converge on them. They are the ‘other’. The poor.12

II. The ‘motives’ of the conquest

It has to be understood, from the outset and as a general premise, that the fundamental ‘motive’ was the fulfilment of an ‘ideal of Christendom’ which, however, was by now no longer feudal or medieval, but renaissance, the first phase of the modern age. Nevertheless, the ‘motives’ had not yet separated out. The complex of political, economic, and cultural-
religious motives presents itself as an indivisible structure. And yet, because we are in the first phase of the modern period, it is already an emerging mercantile, money capitalist world. 'Wealth' is gold, not yet industrial capital in the strict sense. According to Bartolomé de Las Casas,

Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that the Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to high estate disproportionate to their merits.\(^13\)

This passage shows very clearly the parallel motivations (causes), wealth (gold, the 'money' of mercantilism) and the 'honour' sought by the 'squires' (or those who claim to be such 'disproportionate to their merits'). It is not, as in the case of the Dutch and English East and West India Companies, an essential capitalist motivation. It is something older and therefore not in contradiction with the 'ideal of Christendom' in the Reconquest from the Muslims, in which defending the faith, winning honour and acquiring wealth were simultaneous motivations.

This position needs to be distinguished from two 'legends'. It is different from the 'black legend', invented in the Low Countries in their struggle against Spain at the beginning of the seventeenth century and later used by England in its fight for world domination – the English used Las Casas to criticize the process of the conquest, even though their aims were the same and their methods no less unjust. And clearly it is not the 'Hispanicist legend', which grew up after 1930 in Francoism and Latin American populism, and in Catholic conservatism (for example Josef Hoeffner), in which the actions of Spain, of Catholicism, are defended and the genocide and subsequent final and unjust subjugation of the indigenous peoples are totally ignored. The Hispanicists had to refute Bartolomé de Las Casas, and their apologists set out to do so. The position which begins with Las Casas is different. It is the position of Latin American critical thought and theology. This, after weighing all the factors, comes to adopt the position of the indigenous, the black slave, the creole, the oppressed and the poor, as the position which follows from the gospel.

2.1 'The Lordship of this world'\(^4\)

First the practical motive of political domination justifies the destruction of the military defences – if any exist – of the former sovereign power. This is the action of the state (of the Crown and the 'State of the Indies', embodied from 1524 in the Council of the Indies). Consequently, the 'conquest' is first and foremost a 'war of occupation', preceded by the allegedly innocent 'discovery' and continued by the 'colonization' or 'exploitation' in the strict sense:
I beseech your Majesty, even though my insistence may be ill-timed, not to grant or allow what the tyrants have devised, carried forward and committed, what they call conquest...¹⁵ Let it not be granted to them, or it will be a violation of natural and divine law, and bring as a result most serious mortal sins, deserving of terrible and eternal torments... Rather [let your Majesty] cover this infernal demand with eternal silence.¹⁶

Planting the cross on an island, on a beach, in a village, in the square of Aztec Mexico or Inca Cuzco, is an act of ‘dominion’, of possession; it proclaims the sovereignty of the Spanish state in the person of the King. It is a ‘social relation’ of domination. This ‘relation’ is a sin, the fundamental, structural sin. This ‘motive’ was to be the basis of European expansion for the last half-millenium. It is the fundamental theological fact of the whole modern period – and the post-moderns are no less ‘Eurocentric’, a Heidegger or a Nietzsche, beginning not only with the Cartesian ego cogito, but with the royal ego conquiro mediated by the physical, empirical conquistador, Hernán Cortés or Pizarro: ‘will to power’ over ‘the other’.¹⁷

The first ‘actor’ (1) exercises dominion over all the others (in the diagram [2], [4] and [5], and relatively over [3]). Obviously this practical position is based on a ‘theology of Christendom’, of the expansion of Western Christian culture over the Muslims, the pagans, who die without salvation in their perversions and witchcraft.

2.2 ‘To swell themselves with riches in a very brief time’

This is the aspect which has rightly been stressed, though I have tried to show that, while it (materially) determines the political factor, it is also (practically) determined by it.¹⁸

Here the ‘motives’ followed by three ‘actors’ come into full play: practical realization by the conquistador (2), who is supported by the power of the absolute monarchy (1), and the ultimate beneficiary, mercantile-financial capital, in Spain and Portugal and finally in Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and England (3). It is the ‘productive-economic’ conquest, of precious metals, money, and tropical products, so valuable because they express, as luxuries, the emerging power of the European bourgeoisie.

These motivations can be seen very clearly in the protagonists of the ‘discovery’, who anticipate the protagonists of the ‘conquest’. In the contract of 17 April 1492 the Crown expressed them to Christopher Columbus, in a text which he helped to draft, to ensure that none of his prerogatives should be left out:

Your Highnesses, being Lords of the said ocean seas, guarantee to the
said Don Christopher Columbus... that all and any goods, whether
pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices and any other things and
merchandise of whatever sort, number and manner, which may be
bought, bartered, obtained by chance, won or had within the boundar-
ies of the said Admiralty...  

It is interesting to note the detail Columbus insists on with regard to the
possibilities of new 'riches' which might be found. There is no end to the
familiar examples – something I have investigated in detail in some of my
books— which show how the *conquistadores* sought nothing more than
gold, pearls, riches:

A cacique... called Hatuey... said to them, 'Now you must know
that they are saying that the Christians are coming here... because
they have a God they greatly worship... You see their God here.'
... He had a basket full of gold and jewels and said, 'You see their God
here, the God of the Christians. See here, if we keep this basket of gold,
they will take it from us and will end up by killing us. So let us cast away
the basket into the river.'

At the beginning it was the gold to be found in the rivers. But by 1520 there
was no more gold on Santo Domingo. Then began the cultivation of sugar,
black slavery. The *encomienda*, or allocation of indigenous serfs, gave way
to *haciendas*, estates (for agricultural exploitation); the *mita*, labour
assigned for mining; and plantations (for the exploitation of tropical
produce). The indigenous, and later the black slaves, were the 'hands' (in a
'social relation of production') exploited by the dominators (the practical
political level of domination is now connected with production involving
nature, the economic, practical production level).

The theologies of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (in Spain) or Fr Antonio
Vieira (in Brazil) are real 'theologies of domination' – they justify the
subjugation of the Indians, the slaves, and regard the 'conquest' and
'slavery' as 'civilizing' – today we would say 'modern' – processes. It needs
to be understood that this theology justifies the motivations of the
'conquistadores' (2) and comes into contradiction with the interests of the
Crown (1). From the beginning of the sixteenth century the Crown had
begun to see that the *encomenderos* and Spanish elites in the Indies were
reducing the power of the King in these territories, and as a result the
prophetic missionaries (4) had space to criticize these claims to domina-
tion and possession of slaves – with the support of the Crown.

2.3 'God our Lord... has been pleased to grant us... the Lordship of this
world'

By the papal bulls *Aeterni Regis* of 1455 for Portugal and *Inter coetera* of
for Spain, the church was turned into an *internal* component of the power structure of the Crown, of the ‘Christendom of the Indies’ under the absolute control of the ‘Council of the Indies’. These bulls began the Roman Pope’s handover of the Latin American church to the Spanish state, and subsequently to the United States, as when Texas, New Mexico and California were stolen from Mexico in 1848, or when Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines attained emancipation from Spain in 1898. The ‘Laws of the Kingdoms of the Indies’ are an ecclesiastical and a civil code at the same time. Evangelization is a power and a responsibility of the monarchy, although the church (4) is the direct agent of the mission, the ‘*spiritual* conquest’, as Robert Ricard called it, not noticing the contradiction in terms between ‘conquest’ and ‘evangelization’, an issue which Las Casas dealt with in his *Del único modo* (1538), when he sought to demonstrate the need for evangelization to exclude violence.

Columbus had already expressed this motivation in his diary of his first voyage in 1492:

> Your Highnesses, as Catholics, Christians and Princes who love the holy Christian faith and wish to see it increase, and are enemies of the sect of Mahomet and all idolatries and heresies, have seen fit to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the said parts of the Indies to see . . . what way there may be to convert them to our holy faith.

If religion was ‘the foundation of the state’ (Hegel), the religious motivation of the evangelization of the Indians became, as might be expected, the justification for the conquest. In the end it was the only rational case which could be made. Thus the enterprise of domination was left fetishized, and the ‘gold of the Indies’ became a ‘god’, in the words of the Dominican from sixteenth-century Bolivia which stand at the head of this article: ‘whom the Spaniards’ greed sacrifices to their God’. There is perfect theological articulation between the mining economy and idolatry: gold and silver are transformed into a ‘god’ of death. The evangelization performed by the church (4) justified the action of the political power (1), of economic power (of [2] and [3]) and gave the church itself absolute control over culture (education, the level of ideology and customs). The indigenous peoples and the black slaves were *absolutely* denied as historico-cultural subjects with their own rights.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that many missionaries and Christians evangelized in simplicity and poverty, distinguishing between the church and oppressive Spanish society, but they were never hegemonic: they never had control of the whole church. They had it in certain periods in certain regions, thanks to certain individuals, but the ‘structure’
of power remained located always in the 'Council of the Indies' and the subordinates of the Patronate as an organ of Christendom. The Jesuits, for example, would not admit the power of the Council of the Indies in their missions, and in time this became one of the reasons for their expulsion, from Brazil in 1759 and from Spanish America in 1767. Their expulsion, together with the ancient expulsions of Jews, Moors and communards in the sixteenth century, denied Latin America any possibility of starting the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century.

2.4 The prophetic critique of idolatrous motivations

From 1510, with the voice of Antón de Montesinos in Hispaniola (modern Dominican Republic and Haiti), a group of Dominicans launched a critique of the 'social relation' of domination over the Indians known as the encomienda (Indians were required to work for nothing for a Spanish master for a certain time). This was the exploitation which Bartolomé de Las Casas exposed clearly in 1514 at the moment of his 'conversion'.

There was a prophetic generation. Between 1504 and 1620 33% of the bishops were Dominicans and lascasianos, and some of them were martyred, like Antonio de Valdivieso in Nicaragua, and others expelled, including Pablo de Torres in Panama. They were able to 'discern' the motives of the various protagonists of the conquest. Among the thousands of documentary testimonies I have copied and published is this one, from Bishop Juan Ramírez of Guatemala, referring to the indigenous women:

The sixth form of force and violence never heard of in other nations and kingdoms is that women are forced against their will, the married women against the wishes of their husbands, the unmarried women and girls of ten or fifteen years against the wishes of their fathers and mothers . . . They are taken from their homes and forced to serve others, encomenderos in other persons . . . , in the course of which they are often made to be prostitutes for the master of the house, for men of mixed race or mulattos or blacks . . .

Some missionaries and bishops, exclusively members of the church and not servants of the state, were able to perform this prophetic function. They were, however, a minority, at some moments dominant, as when their influence secured the appointment of the Hieronymites at the beginning of the conquest of Santo Domingo, or the promulgation of the 'New Laws' in 1542 (though in both cases they ultimately failed), but never victorious. They were defeated by the Spanish or creole ruling class in power from 1492 until today, despite changes in these classes or class fractions during the long history of five centuries of domination. In the
process of emancipation (from 1809 onwards) or since the Second Vatican Council (with Medellin in 1968) this prophetic tradition was to enjoy a resurgence, and a temporary dominance, only subsequently to be defeated once more.32

Some members of this prophetic tradition, at the time (4), criticized the _conquistadores_ (2), relying on the power of the King (1)33 – since at the time it was good tactics to fight for the distant sovereign in order to overcome the nearby oppressors of the Indians, though without being able to escape the rule of ‘gold’ (3), whose idolatrous rule pervaded all. For them the main motive of the conquest was:

their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world. And also, those lands are so rich and felicitous, the native peoples so meek and patient . . . that our Spaniards have no more consideration for them than beasts . . . But I should not say ‘than beasts’, for, thanks be to God, they have treated beasts with some respect; I should say instead like excrement on the public squares.34

It was the beginning of modern times – in relation to which many today claim to be ‘post-moderns’ – of capitalism, in which the New World was established as a mediation of exploitability (nature was a mediation of wealth) and domination (other people, ‘the other’, was also a mediation sacrificed to the new ‘god’: Gold, Money, Moloch).

2.5 _The discoverers of the ‘real’ motives_

There were protagonists, ‘objects’ of the conquest, who discovered with their own eyes, the eyes of the ‘other’, the eyes of the poor, their eyes clear-sighted because they were totally outside the system which was beginning to be established (and which in 1992 will celebrate a triumphant half-millenium of exploiting the peripheral New Worlds of the South), the ‘meaning’ and the ‘real’ motives of the actions of the European _conquistadores_. These were the Indians and later the black African slaves. I will quote only one text from a prophecy of Chilam Balam de Chumayel from the Maya of Mesoamerica, in the _Libro de los Linajes_: 

In the Eleventh Ahau there begins the counting of the time . . .

It was only because of the mad time, the mad priests, that sadness came among us, that Christianity came among us; for the great Christians came here with the true God; but that was the beginning of our distress, the beginning of the tribute, the beginning of the alms, what made the hidden discord appear, the beginning of the fighting with firearms, the beginning of the outrages,
the beginning of being stripped of everything,
the beginning of slavery for debts,
the beginning of the debts bound to the shoulders,
the beginning of the constant quarrelling,
the beginning of the suffering.

It was the beginning of the work of the Spaniards and the priests...

The Indians were outsiders, outside the Spanish ‘community of communication’ (to use Habermas’ language); they did not participate in that community, they were excluded. Fernández de Oviedo even said that ‘they had become bestial because of their customs’, which meant that, ‘though rational’, they did not count as such. But because they were outside they were able to see the actions of the Europeans (in what the ‘invaders’ thought of as the ‘New’ World, but what was for the Indians the world of always), and interpret it hermeneutically with an extreme clarity. It was the poor, to whom the ‘kingdom of the heavens’ belongs, the ‘pure of heart’, who exposed the ‘motives’ which have produced the suffering in their wretched, tortured, starved bodies, from 1492 to 1992, and will do so for a long time to come.

From the point of view of the Indians (5), ‘discovery’ and ‘conquest’ were a single movement, an ‘invasion’. It was the ‘invasion’ of ‘our’ world (for the Europeans ‘America’), which became ‘theirs’, as the indigenous inhabitants became the ‘excluded’. From this perspective their land had been occupied by the whole panoply of ‘actors’: the conquistador (2) with his lust for wealth, honour and the glory of a ‘squire’ (hidalgo, ‘son of someone’, when in reality they were very often sons of nobodies), the church (4), which claimed to evangelize but (except for the prophets) could do nothing but justify the ‘conquest’, the King (1), who, though unknown because so distant, was feared as an almighty foreign god, and much more invisible to their eyes, the bankers of Genoa and Augsburg, the real ‘invisible gods’, fetishes. All these had occupied their lands, stolen their women (and slept with them) and children (and brought them up in an alien culture) – the end of a world. It is true that God performed a miracle of the Spirit among them and they became Christians, in the face of so many scandals, but that is not the subject of this article.

I should like to end by pointing out that now that the Berlin Wall – which separated West and East – has ‘fallen’, we need to consider, with a view to destroying it too, a wall immensely higher and longer, which divides the rich capitalist countries from the poor capitalist and ‘free market’ countries. The North–South wall should now be our concern, and it should be remembered that its building began, not in the 1960s, but in 1492, and its triumphant effectiveness is to be celebrated in 1992,
rendering invisible, in everyday ideology and dominant theology, the wretched countries of the South.

Translated by Francis McDonagh

Notes


5. See Cherubini Giovanni, Agricoltura e societa rurale nel medioevo, Florence 1972; Georges Duby, L’économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans l’Occident médiéval, Vols. I–II, Paris 1962, etc. From 1000 to 1340 the population of Europe rose from twenty-four million to something over fifty million.


7. This inability to transform money into capital explains the early poverty of Spain, from the end of the sixteenth century – the beginning of the growth, first of the Low Countries and later of England’s Cromwell, at the height of the seventeenth century. Marx describes perfectly this transformation of money into capital (see Capital I, Chap. 4, MEGA II, b, pp. 128–61). See my books La producción teórica de Marx, Mexico 1985, Chap. 7, ‘Hacia un Max desconocido’, ibid., 1988; Ch. 3: ‘El Marx definitivo (1863–1882)’; ibid., 1990, Chs. 2 and 5.

8. ‘Money’, not yet mediated by the ‘subsumption’ of ‘living labour’ as wage labour in the process of production, can be considered as the first ‘determination’ of capital, but not in the strict sense, that is, as ‘industrial capital’. See my writings cited in n. 7 above. Spain therefore participated in the ‘primitive accumulation’ of the ‘treasure-money’
which appeared in mercantile circulation: the New World gave the initial ‘loan’, without any interest, to the nascent modern capitalist Europe.

9. See the theological sense of ‘social’ (not ‘communal’) relation in my book *Ethics and Community*, Chapters 2–3 and 11–12: as sin (praxis), structural, institutional and historical determination.


11. First title, first law of the first book of the *Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias* (recompiled in 1681), Madrid 1943, vols I–II.


14. From the first title of the first law of Book 1 of *Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias*; see above, note 11.


17. See again my *Ethics and Community*, Chapters zff.

18. Marx notes that ‘production’ may be determined by ‘distribution’ (the practical factor): ‘A conquering people [eroberdendes Volk] divides the land among the conquerors, thus imposes a certain distribution and form of property in land, and thus determines production’ (*Grundrisse*, Introduction, Penguin Books and New Left Review, London 1973, p. 96). In this case the practical political level determines the productive economic level. Marx was not an economist, and did not put forward a ‘productivist paradigm’, as Jürgen Habermas believes (see, e.g., *Die philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt 1985, ‘Exkurs’ to the third lecture).


20. For example, in my nine volumes on *El episcopado latinoamericano defensor del indio* (1504–1620), Cuernavaca 1969–71, which reproduce (from the unpublished sources of the Archivo General de Indias [Seville]) hundreds of testimonies to this gold fever which shone in the eyes of the ‘conquistadores’, which scandalized some missionarians, and was the cause of the ‘devastation of the Indies’ and of the genocide without parallel which opened the famous modern period.

21. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Devastation*, pp. 54–5. Marx quotes this text, without knowing it is from Las Casas, when he writes: ‘The Cuban natives regarded gold as the Spaniards’ fetish. They celebrated a feast in its honour. ... Those savages would have regarded firewood as the Rhinelanders’ fetish’ (*The law abut thefts of firewood*, Marx, *Obras fundamentales*, Mexico 1982, p. 283 = MEW 1, p. 147, translated from the Spanish).

22. See my *Philosophy of Liberation*, Maryknoll 1985, for a critique of Habermas’ ignorance of the ‘practical productive’ level (neither merely practical nor merely productive or productivist; that is, neither merely practical political reason nor instrumental reason, but ‘economic reason’, real, practical-productive, a different type
of ‘rationality’). In theology it is ‘sacramental (eucharistic) reason’. The ‘economic’ or ‘eucharistic’ level (see my Herrschaft und Befreiung, Freiburg 1985) is not clearly brought out by theology influenced by Habermas (see Edmund Arens, Habermas und die Theologie, Patmos, Düsseldorf 1989). Even Helmut Peukert’s study, pp. 39–64, does not succeed in grasping the concrete and synthetic level of the economic, and this is not surprising, because Habermas left ‘economics’ as a ‘system’ juxtaposed to the ‘life-world’ and did not see its essential role. See also Helmut Peukert, Science, Action and Fundamental Theology. Toward a Theology of Communicative Action, Massachusetts 1986; see also my essay, ‘La Introducción de la Transformación de la Filosofía de K. O. Apel y la Filosofía de la Liberación’, Freiburg dialogue of 24 November 1989, to be published in Argument, Hamburg 1990. Certainly liberation theology will have to begin again the constructive dialogue (with a critical edge based on the eucharistic-economic ‘desperate poverty’ of the Third World’s ‘hunger without bread’) with the theology of the Habermas school, just as at the end of the 1960s there was a dialogue with the theologies based on the work of Ernst Bloch or the Frankfurt School of the period. The ‘Eurocentrism’ and ‘developmentalism’ of Popper’s or Max Weber’s ‘open society’ is much more influential in this theology than these authors think: there is a need for a new North–South dialogue. The ‘other’, the outsider to the ‘community of communication’ (such as the person who does not argue because they do not form part of that ‘community’), has been excluded, but they have previously been ‘excluded’ from participation in the ‘bread’ (because they are the ‘poor person’ whom John Rawls is unable to situate in his formal discourse).

23. From the text cited in note 14 above.

24. See my article, ‘Vatican Policy in Latin America’, to be published shortly in Social Compass (Brussels).


29. I have described the details of his prophetic ‘conversion’ in my Introduction to vol. I of the Historia general de la Iglesia en América Latina, pp. 17–24. In the text of Ecclesiasticius/Sirach 34.18ff. Bartolomé relates the eucharist to economic structures (see my ‘The Bread of the Eucharistic Celebration as a Sign of Justice in the Community’, Concilium 152, 1982, 56–65). As early as 1964 I mentioned this text, which is central to the history of the New World prophetic tradition (Esprit [Paris], July 1965, pp. 53–65).


31. Archivo General de Indias, Guatemala 156, 10 March 1603 (which may be consulted along with seventeen other injustices in my book cited in note 30 above, pp. 89–95). This subject is the theme of Chapter VII, ‘La erótica latinoamericana’, of my Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana, Vol. I, Mexico 1977.

32. On these three phases of prophecy, see my study of this history of Latin American theology, Prophetic und Kritik, Freiburg 1989 (shortly to appear in English).
