

1492 — 1992: Christopher Columbus slaver and thief

Joe Black

1992

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THIS YEAR sees the celebrations of the ‘discovery’ of America in 1492 by Columbus. The celebrations have generated some debate about the rights and wrongs of the events which followed the discovery. In Spain itself, Seville has seen riots as marches protesting at the celebration have been broken up by the police.

America was not discovered, it was already populated by many nations of people. Some of them were composed of primitive communistic societies of hunter-gathers. It was these peoples that the European merchants first found and exploited to extermination. In Mexico and Peru two military empires were in existence, the Aztecs and the Inca’s

A TIME AND A PLACE

America was ‘discovered’ at a time when Europe was entering a period of rapid change. The merchants were gaining more power and coming into conflict with their feudal rulers. It would take 200 years for the merchants to settle the conflict in the French revolution of 1788 but the seeds were growing. Part of this expansion of early capitalism was based on the search for the source of the spices and metals that international trade was based upon. The direct trade routes having been cut by the Turkish empire. The “discovery’s” of this period were driven by this historical process.

When Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492 he had little interest in the new plants and animals of this land. Instead he was confident that the Spanish crown could make the Arawaks and Caribs collect and give “what was needed”. He established a system by which the Arawaks were required to produce a certain quantity of gold every three months or have their hands cut off. The survivors of this period were worked to death on the sugar plantations.

The empires on the American mainland also fell before the Spanish expansion. The Aztecs at the time ruled over central Mexico but their empire was overstretched and full of internal divisions. The ruling class was divided along religious lines but in an echo of the process occurring in Europe these was also conflict between the Empire and the merchant class. The Inca’s ruled the length of the Andes, some 5000 kms but they too were internally divided. By allying with the enemies of these two empires and making use of these internal divisions the Spanish were able to overthrow and enslave both nations with comparatively few men.

Both these empires were class societies whose development was halted by their destruction at the hands of the Spanish. They suffered a similar fate to the primitive communist societies of the Caribbean. Within a single generation 80% of the Aztec population had been worked to death in the mines or on the land. They had died of torture and because of the destruction of the infrastructure that had supported them.

Throughout this period the Catholic church was involved with the carnage, Columbus himself was deeply religious and the slogan of the conquistadors was “God, gold and glory”. Forced conversions were a policy of the time, commonly as a preliminary to execution. One of the few to publicly argue against the brutal treatment of the Americans was a priest however he was rapidly shut up by the Vatican. The church produced an ideology of conquest designed to provide moral right to the brutal oppression of the native people.

SPANISH GOLD

The wealth that was generated by the Spanish conquests was enormous. This wealth and the trade it generated within Europe was the backbone around which capitalism was built. As the native populations of the Americas were wiped out merchants made more profits by kidnapping Africans and selling them to the sugar plantations and mines of America as slaves. This along with the earlier barbarities required capitalism to develop a racist ideology as a justification for its brutality.

The Columbus debate is important because it exposes the brutal basis on which capitalism was built. There is however another argument that sees the pre-Columbus societies as perfect societies which would have remained so were it not for European interference. Could these societies have developed without going through all the horrors imposed on them by the European bosses?

History can not be re-played but we do know that these societies were already going through a process of change. Both the Aztecs and Inca's were military empires based on conquest of other peoples. The Aztecs also carried out ceremonial murders on a mass scale, in 1486 for instance 20,000 captives had their hearts cut out during a temple dedication. They were societies with class and caste divisions. Those peoples who still lived in primitive communist societies did so because these societies were not capable of generating any surplus for a minority to take.

The 500th anniversary serves as a remainder of how barbaric capitalism as an economic system is. It is not Columbus who should be celebrated but rather those millions of native Americans on whose lives modern society was built. There is no finer monument that can be raised to them than the creation of a society based on satisfying need, not greed.

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