

Escaping from Europe

Why Our (White) Ancestors Came Here in the First Place

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

2008

“[The Arawaks]...brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks’ bells. They willingly traded everything they owned ...They were well built, with good bodies and handsome features...They do not bear arms and do not know them...They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane...They would make fine servants.”

–Christopher Columbus, ship’s log, October 12, 1492

This, written by that courageous Italian navigator and explorer sailing under the flag of Spain, describes his welcome by a gentle and guileless people upon his first day in the Americas. It ominously presaged all that followed.

Thus begins the oft-told tale of the ignoble and ignominious entry into the New (to the bewildered sailors of the three ships who thought they had arrived in Japan) World and the commencement of the European invasion and occupation of the Western hemisphere.

Most know the story of the greed, oppression and mass murder that resulted in the largest and most sweeping ethnic cleansing in history, causing the deaths of perhaps 30 million Native Americans.

The discovery of Columbus by the Arawaks was fortuitous as the three ships might have made landfall almost anywhere else on the continent that lay between the explorers’ intended destination in eastern Asia. The random meeting had deadly consequences for the tribal people who had cheerfully welcomed their strange visitors. They suffered a total genocide. The flourishing culture of the Arawak/Taino people was entirely eliminated as a genus after the establishment of the first Spanish colony on Hispaniola following Columbus’ second voyage.

The nearly naked Arawaks were fascinated by the clothing covering the entire body of their strange visitors, but particularly by the metal armor the soldiers wore. At ease in their land and their bodies, they didn’t realize the murderous potential of these armored men whose steel didn’t just cover and protect their corporeal beings. The invaders also possessed heavily armored personalities—extensions of an eons old culture of domination and submission, of hierarchy, patriarchy, state society, acquisitiveness as substitute for intimacy, symbolism replacing living life directly. An inferior culture met a superior culture, but the rigidity and arrogance of Columbus and his men blinded them to the reality of their historic encounter.

Rather than shedding their clothing and armor, stopping their obsessive search for gold, ceasing Columbus’ desire to possess every piece of land or water he saw by naming it in honor of their horrid religion, they saw these gentle people as objects to be eliminated or enslaved, their land to be confiscated, and their wealth to be looted. They thus destroyed the opportunity they must have at least vaguely glimpsed that offered them a chance for psychic revolt and renewal from the pathogen of European culture they carried with them. Columbus and his men could have shed their emotional and metal armor and embraced the people as the New World rather than the land.

The reasons for the brave voyage across a dangerous and uncharted sea are well known to all, and stated even in the most unapologetic versions of the Columbus navigations: the quest for riches and to spread the Christian

Gospel—to people who already had a mytho-poetic spirituality that was life-affirming as opposed to the cult of execution, sacrifice, sin, renunciation of the flesh, and repression demanded by the European death cult.

But it was the expedition for new sources of wealth for the motherland which framed the Columbus voyages and the subsequent ones of the other intrepid explorers of that era. This, of course, is not an unusual motive for a representative of a nation-state.

Since capitalism's establishment 4,000 years ago as a mode of production and exchange, with the simultaneous rise of the State as the guarantor of the class and rule racket, its rapaciousness has been ceaseless. Capitalism, by its intrinsic nature, necessitates continuous expansion; stasis is ruinous to it. By the late 15th century, driven by a profound society-wide crisis, Europe began to push beyond its historical geography.

Classic capitalist theory and its Marxist critique usually don't mark the rise of this form of political economy until thousands of years later. But when societies operate under a sign of valorization, where labor is sold, when commodities are exchanged and wars are fought to control more of all this, it is capitalism, and it began with the first nation states.

There was the inherent tendency, in fact, a necessity, to expand capital's domination wherever possible for the different nation states of Europe, most of which were in constant conflict with one another for trade, resources, and goods. By Columbus's time, Portugal, Spain, England, Holland, and France had begun a frantic world-wide search for wealth outside the boundaries of their continent.

Readers with an even scant historical knowledge of the political, environmental, and cultural circumstances in Europe during the period of the so-called Great Discoveries—the heroic sea voyages of Columbus, Magellan, Cabot and others—already know this story. However, it's important to describe what was occurring at the time to understand why expanding beyond their borders was a necessity for European nation states if they were to continue their culture as it was constituted.

Most of the regimes of medieval Europe were broke by the end of the 15th century; wealth creation was stagnant, constant wars drained treasuries, and feudalism was collapsing. It's a charming little tale that Queen Isabella of Spain pawned her jewels to finance Columbus' journey in hopes his discovery of gold would refill the country's coffers, but it is more indicative of the precarious economic situation the rulers faced.

The continent was environmentally ruined, in good part, through the destruction of its forests which were toppled to supply the basic materials of daily life. Wood was used for heating, cooking, construction, and fuel for metal smelting and rudimentary industrial energy. Deforesting of many regions occurred early on in the metal ages—Cyprus cut down its forests so completely to supply metallurgic centers with fuel that the island remains treeless today, 2,000 years later. In his book, *Internal Combustion*, author Edwin Black reports that on the shores of the Mediterranean, there “are some seventy to ninety million tons of slag from ancient smelting.”

So deforested was western Europe by the reign of William the Conqueror beginning in 1066, that the new king of England ordained the repressive Forest Law which forbade commoners from using wood for any purpose. Violation was punished with severe torture. The mythical Robin Hood, who was said to have lived and taken sanctuary in King John's Sherwood Forest, was a powerful legend of resentment by the common people to this restriction. The prohibition is usually put forth as an example of kingly arrogance and selfishness, but, in fact, was motivated by the extreme scarcity of wood. Wood and timber scarcity only worsened in Europe by the 15th century.

Rivers were heavily polluted from human and industrial waste, and food was often adulterated by unscrupulous merchants. With the use of wood suppressed by the elites, and the newly discovered energy source of coal becoming the fuel used by common people (in England, peat), the unrestricted burning by an increasing urban population produced a palpable smog that was one of the contributing factors to plummeting quality of life and health standards and diminished life expectancy.

As great numbers of peasants, freed from feudal bondage, streamed into cities, what had been small towns swelled to unmanageable, filthy, polluted, crime- and disease-ridden metropolises. The great cities of Medieval Europe became the spawning ground for the great plagues of the era. Bubonic Plague, the Black Death, produced three major epidemics in the 6th, 14th, and 17th centuries causing the death of an estimated 137 million victims.

Religious fervor was rampant, frequently to the point of mass hysteria, beginning with the Crusades in the 11th century; ostensibly with the goal of freeing Jerusalem from Muslim control, but in actuality it was more about looting Middle Eastern and Asia Minor territories, and forcing open new trade zones. The succeeding centuries were

followed by incessant, decades-long internecine warfare among the European powers that impoverished nations and created a permanent class of maimed battle casualties and in deaths that significantly decreased the number of able-bodied men.

Pogroms against Jews were frequent, often encouraged by the authorities, both secular and religious, including Martin Luther. Jews, who were the money lenders of Christian Europe, were often expelled from their host nation, such as Germany and Spain, when royal debts to them got too high.

Christian worship obsessively pervaded almost every aspect of daily life although the Catholic Church, the largest landholder in Europe, was rife with corruption and hypocrisy.

Authoritarian monarchies constituted political rule across the continent which was always arbitrary and often incompetent. The culture, both official and convivial, exhibited intense cruelty marked by institutions such as the Inquisition, whose innovation of water boarding (or, “the Water Cure” as it was known for centuries) was utilized to extract confessions of devilry.

Beginning in the mid-14th century and continuing for three centuries, nations were consumed by a panic over witches, mostly women, in their midst. Witch-hunts, especially in Central Europe, resulted in the trial, torture, and execution of tens of thousands of victims during the period described as the “Burning Times.”

Capital punishment was inflicted for even minor transgressions, particularly as an element of State terror to instill in the disrespectful rabble the sanctity of the property rights of the emerging bourgeoisie. Hideous tortures were exacted upon prisoners, brutal sports which included animal fighting were popular, such as bear baiting and dog fighting, and constant clashes between people at any public gathering marked the era.

Madness and mass hysteria was common particularly as feudalism imploded and no alternative communal social structure was allowed to arise that could encompass the peasants set adrift by its breakdown. Outbreaks of mass, collective dancing such as the tarantella, swept parts of Europe where populations of entire villages whirled manically for hours until collapsing in fits of exhaustion. (This phenomenon has interesting and positive qualities to it such as outlined in Barbara Ehrenreich’s recent *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*).

As Michel Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, insanity and cruelty were commonplace, and as leprosy disappeared, the mad were herded into the former leprosariums. Ehrenreich reports that an epidemic of “melancholy”—what we now call “depression”—arose during that period.

Crime, banditry, brigandage, assaults, murder, and robbery were all endemic, on the common level, and corruption, bribery and payoffs defined every government on the Continent. Even undertakings on the part of royal houses, such as provisioning the ships of the first great explorers weren’t secure from the most corrupt practices. Naval historian Stephen Morrison, in his classic *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages, 1492–1616*, relates how the merchants of Seville shortchanged Magellan’s ships as they set out on what they supposed would be a year and a half’s journey to Asia. Upon arriving at what the Captain-General dubbed “Tierra Del Fuego,” it was discovered they had only been given less than half the rations they thought had been stored aboard, and much of that was spoiled.

And so we return to that moment in 1492 when two peoples stared across a great cultural divide—one at peace with themselves and their environment, and the others, representatives of a toxic culture that was in the throes of disintegration and which lacked the ability to live harmoniously with each other or the planet. Columbus and his men had the option of throwing off their armor and their restrictive clothing, feasting on the abundance of the island, and adopting the ways of a free and happy people, but we know what they chose—“They would make fine servants”—and the world has suffered for it since.

Had the terra incognita of the New World not become available as a source for expansion and looting, Europe would have been forced to deal with the rot at the core of their society at home. Instead, they were able to gain a new lease on life by resuscitating only one aspect of what confronted them—their economic dilemma; all else remained the same until other social forces were unleashed in the next few centuries.

We are at the point where the extended life of that toxic culture 500 years later has invaded and dominated all continents and defines planetary consciousness. The conditions that characterized the Middle Ages appear in the modern era with a similar destructive ferocity and threatening potential, and in most aspects, even worse.

What now? Maybe we should be heartened by the recent news reports that Russia may beat the U.S. to Mars? A colony in space now that we’ve ruined this planet? At least there are no native inhabitants to enslave or kill.

Or better yet, how about fixing what we already have?

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