



Reassessing 1492

Author(s): Alfred W. Crosby

Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Dec., 1989), pp. 661-669

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713097>

Accessed: 18-06-2015 15:03 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ESSAY

Reassessing 1492

ALFRED W. CROSBY
University of Texas, Austin

TWENTY YEARS AGO I FINISHED A BOOK ON THE IMPACT OF THE COLUMBIAN voyages on the peoples of the world, a book which I hoped would attract enough buyers so that the publisher would at least break even and I would survive the tenure cut.¹ I had a hard time finding a publisher, and almost gave up on the book before Greenwood Press spontaneously wrote me to ask if I had anything publishable on hand. The trouble I had before Greenwood's query clearly indicated that most people who were experienced with what the reading public wanted to read and with what the scholarly community would accept as possibly valid were of the opinion that my book was neither. Greenwood took a chance on me, and to the delight of Greenwood and myself, the book sold and continues to sell modestly but steadily, three thousand or so a year for a total that must be upwards of forty or fifty thousand by now.

The chief market has been academic. It has been professors of anthropology and American history who have assigned the book to their classes, as one would expect, considering its subject matter; but a few years ago I met someone who was using the book at the University of Wisconsin for a seminar on the history of the concept of progress. I asked him what in the world my book had to do with progress, and he answered, "Oh, I assign it at the end of my course as an illustration of the death of belief in progress."

That shocked me, so I went back and, for the first time in many years, looked at the book—my book!—which, to my knowledge, had nothing to do with progress, pro or con. The last paragraph reads, "The Columbian exchange has left us with not a richer but a more impoverished genetic pool. We, all of the life on this

Alfred Crosby is a professor of American Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. Specializing in environmental history and historical epidemiology, he serves as the editor of *Studies in Environment and History*, Cambridge University Press. His most recent project is entitled "Renaissance Europeans, the People Who Counted."

planet, are the less for Columbus, and the impoverishment will increase." I have to admit that is a bit dreary.

I am, as a Euro-American, shocked at the self-laceration implicit in those two sentences, and I am inclined to blame (or credit) some of that to the anger and disillusionment of the 1960s, when they were written. But I am also sure that they are a product of more than ephemeral attitudes because the book keeps selling, though the longhairs who earned their degrees in that period have long since cut their hair and are at present worrying about their waistlines.

My dour view of the biological side of European imperialism is, of course, not popular with the mass public and certainly does not express what European and Euro-American politicians will be proclaiming at the Columbian Quincentennial in 1992. Yet as I look around at a rising tide of gloomy articles and books on Amerindian demography, on the rate of suicide among Amerindian adolescents and young adults, and on the rate of New World species extinctions, I am strengthened in my belief that I was, two decades ago, mouthing attitudes characteristic of a rising *zeitgeist*, as the University of Wisconsin professor suggested. (Apropos, the *de rigueur*, scholarly title for the most important event of 1492 is no longer "Columbus-discovered-America." That event is the "Encounter," with all that word's connotations of equality between the participants, unpredictable results, and, quite possibly, of injurious collision. The word is capitalized, which makes it even more dramatic.)

The old Columbian paradigm of purposeful discovery engendering new and healthy societies provided a setting which was satisfactory for most scholars, as well as to the general public, satisfactory all the way from the time of Cortes's secretary, Francisco López de Gómara to that of Samuel Eliot Morison. López de Gómara ranked the European discovery of the Americas as one of the two best things to happen since Creation, the other being the Incarnation of the Savior.² Four hundred years after Gómara, Morison ended his magnificent *The European Discovery of America* thus: "To the people of the New World, pagans expecting short and brutish lives, void of hope for any future, had come the Christian vision of a merciful God and a glorious Heaven."³ How did we get from that to our current assessment of the Encounter as, in Francis Jennings's words, *The Invasion of America* or, as Russell Thornton has entitled his new book, *The American Indian Holocaust? Revision with vengeance is afoot, and the new historians are not taking prisoners.*

What is the source of the new *zeitgeist*? New data? In part, yes, but new questions have had more impact than new information. What inspired the new questions? A lot of things, of course: Marxism, and the not entirely unfounded claim that the capitalism of the First World survives by exploiting the Third World; the end of the European empires, excepting only the Soviet Union (and it has been creaking lately); the revival of China; the rise of what Hispanics call *Indianismo*, with its North American proponents like Russell Means. These are obvious sources, but

let me offer the thought that an underrated factor behind our reassessment of the Encounter is a general reassessment of the role of rapid change, even catastrophe, in the history of humanity, the earth, and the universe.

At the beginning of our century Karl Kautsky achieved one of those annoying Marxist insights, an oversimplification, yes, but a thorn that sinks too deep to ignore:

While the bourgeoisie were still revolutionary, the catastrophic theory still ruled in natural science (geology and biology). This theory proceeded from the premise that natural development came through great sudden leaps. Once the capitalist revolution was ended, the place of the catastrophic theory was taken by the hypothesis of a gradual imperceptible development, proceeding by the accumulation of countless little advances and adjustments in a competitive struggle. To the revolutionary bourgeoisie the thought of catastrophes in nature was very acceptable, but to the conservative bourgeoisie these ideas appeared irrational and unnatural.⁴

The intellectual leaders of the eighteenth century dabbled heavily in radical theory and even in actual revolution, but for more than a century afterward, from Napoleon to, if you will, Calvin Coolidge, the ideas of most of their successors harmonized with the tempered views of what the most “successful” people in the world—that is to say, the middle and upper classes of western Europe and North America—believed to be normal and natural. Ironically, the successes of these classes were in large part the result of such violent events as the American Revolution, the French Revolution and—above all—by the anomic acceleration of the Industrial Revolution. But abrupt change was not a concept with which they, in the presence of the discontented and dispossessed, were happy. Jacobins, Chartists, Socialists, Molly Maguires, Ghost Dancers—even such moderate types as Populists and trade unionists—struck them as demanding rapid, disconcerting, and therefore unnatural, destructive, and sterile change. No wonder so many of the finest minds of the ruling classes (among the finest which any group has ever produced) gloried in slow, slow change. No wonder Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin “discovered” that the present world and its inhabitants were not, as Georges Cuvier and his follower, the retroverse Louis Agassiz of Harvard, claimed, the products of multiple beginnings divided and punctuated by abrupt transformations (a theory called, too sensationally, catastrophism), but of majestically slow and steady change. Lyell, the geologist, called his version “the new paradigm uniformitarianism, according to which changes in the crust of the earth were driven by the stately forces of tectonic uplift and erosion. Darwin’s version was biological evolution, driven by what Herbert Spencer, the philosopher *par excellence* of Victorian capitalism, preceded him in calling “the survival of the fittest,” an admittedly nasty but slow and steady business.

“Steady as she goes,” the oft repeated command of the sailor who doesn’t want to capsize, was the slogan of most of the best minds of the nineteenth century. Then came the incorrigible twentieth century: the two worst wars in history, the

worst depression in history, the instantaneous demise of empires and dynasties that had seemed immortal; the two most enormous revolutions, Russian and Chinese, in history; bombs more destructive than Jules Verne had ever begun to imagine; slaughters so vast that we have been obliged to invent a new word, genocide. Atomic war, followed by nuclear winter, and the extinction of most species has become a talk show topic. The thinning ozone layer and the greenhouse effect ride tandem through our nightmares. Rapid, massive, and not necessarily benign change has crashed back into our minds as a crucial factor in our lives, societies, world, and universe.

Catastrophism—that is, large-scale change within narrow time limits—was in its dotage by the time of Cuvier’s death, 150 years ago, and was supposedly dealt the *coup de grâce* by Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859. But it is back, thanks to Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Einstein, Fermi, Oppenheimer, and others of similar propensities for violence in practice or theory. “The Big Bang” has usurped “steady state” among cosmologists. Astronomers commonly talk about galaxies in collision, and astronomers, geologists, and paleontologists gather together to confer about asteroids and comets raining down on earth every 26 million years or so, wiping out most species, and thus providing room for a Cuvieresque surge of speciation.

Abrupt change is back as a respectable concept. Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault have recommended looking not for slow and steady growth in the history of science, but for sudden flip-flops in the way scientists view their subject matter. Even the paleontologists, who owe so much to Lyell and Darwin, are assessing catastrophism in a new version called punctuated equilibrium.⁵

The rapidity and magnitude of change in our century has prepared us to ask new questions about history and, specifically, about the Encounter of Amerindians, Europeans, and Africans. I think ours are better questions than were asked a century ago, simply because we are equipped by our twentieth-century lifetimes to see and recognize changes as great as those that the Encounter unquestionably did cause. A century and a half ago William Prescott of Boston, Massachusetts, carefully examined all the sources on the Spanish conquests of Mexico and Peru that he could find. He read the same primary reports as we read on the smallpox pandemic that accompanied Cortés in Mexico and preceded Pizarro into Peru, killing many, many thousands of Amerindians, and yet Prescott granted smallpox oblique mention in only a few paragraphs. He lived in a society troubled with infectious diseases, but not massively endangered by them. The Black Death had disappeared from western Europe more than a century before, and, as far as he knew, had never appeared in America. Yellow fever had disappeared from the northern states of his country while he was a young man. The American sanitationists were bewildered by the appearance of cholera in the 1830s, but were still optimistic about controlling future epidemics of whatever kind by means of techniques immediately at hand and easily understood. Smallpox was circulating, but

many Bostonians were effectively defending themselves against that infection by means of vaccination, a technique discovered by Dr. Edward Jenner about the same time Prescott was born. Let me propose that Prescott simply was not equipped to “see,” so to speak, what the primary sources had to say about smallpox and the conquest of the great Amerindian empires. We, on the other hand, have written and read a great deal of demographic history and related epidemiological history in the 140 years since he wrote about Montezuma and Atahualpa, and AIDS has recently snatched away the rose-colored glasses we inherited from our parents and ground them beneath its heel.

Our predecessors among Euro-American scholars believed that 1492 was an extremely important year. Those who lived and wrote north of the Rio Grande tended to believe that representative government, the United States Declaration of Independence, and the British North American Act became probabilities in that year. The Euro-Americans south of the Rio Grande, the Creoles, had similar beliefs pertaining to their several national histories. Amerindians and blacks probably held different views—their lives did not leave them much time for academic opinions—but we know little about their thoughts. The one characteristic shared by all the traditional assessments of 1492 is that they were ethnocentric and species-centric, and, therefore, far underestimated the true significance of the Encounter.

The significance of the Encounter towers above the origins of this or that kind of government or even the fate of this or that group of humans. The Encounter marks one of the major discontinuities in the course of life on this planet. The measuring of its influence requires reference to a scale of time far greater than historians or archeologists normally consult, that is, reference to the “deep time” discovered by the great geologists, biologists and thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶ To find changes comparable to those wrought by Columbus and friends we have to go back beyond recorded time to the divisions between the periods of geological history. These were characterized by great geological changes—the meeting or separation of continents, the rising up of mountains, the draining or filling of inland seas,—and sometimes by large numbers of extinctions and the proliferation of new species.

Of course, Columbus brought about no geological or oceanographic changes *de jure*, but did he not do so in a *de facto* sense? He reversed several score million years of continental drift by bringing continents back together again. To illustrate: horses originated in the New World and died out there, but, before they did, migrated to the Old World via a land connection between Alaska and Siberia which the accumulation of water as ice in the great continental glaciers had left bare. Columbus brought horses back from the old to the new not via a land bridge, but on shipboard, and they have propagated in the New World by the tens of millions. How was the latter sailorly transfer different in effect from the transfers of horses and various other creatures via the several land connections of Siberia and Alaska in the deep past?

The rate of extinctions of species in the Americas has speeded up considerably since 1492, and so has the advent in the Americas of new species, that is, the arrival and proliferation here of Eurasian and African species. How do these events, as a practical matter, differ in kind from what happened at the end of the Cretaceous or other geological “moments” of rapid change in the deep past? The driving force of the post-1492 changes happens to be not continental drift nor the advance and retreat of glaciers nor the impact of comets, but only the actions of one species, *Homo sapiens*; but the actual result is much the same: extinctions and vast changes in the distribution of life forms. In time, providing we have time, there will truly be new species, descendants, in a matter of speaking, of Christopher Columbus.

Let me describe a geological moment of extreme discontinuity in the deep past to which we may want to refer when measuring the full significance of the Encounter. About 220 million years ago, at the end of the Permian Period, there was a great die-off, perhaps the greatest of all time. Nearly one-half of the known families of animals disappeared, including 75 percent of the amphibians and 80 percent of the reptiles. The cause for the die-off was perhaps something like a rain of comets or the arrival of an asteroid, but such *deus ex machina* devices are still a matter of speculation and research.⁷ What did happen, we are certain, was that the several large continents united to form a super continent, which the geologists call Pangaea. Paleontologists propose that massive event as the cause, at least in part, of the extinctions: “As the elements of the supercontinent were assembled, these separate biota from each element were forced into competition. The number of sets of niches was drastically reduced and many species must have become extinct from competitive exclusion.”⁸ Surely we can interpret what Columbus and the sailors of Europe started in the fifteenth century in much the same way. They drew the continents together and their successors are continuing to do so, lately with the assistance of aviators, to produce what is not geographically, but certainly is politically, socially, economically, botanically, zoologically, and bacteriologically a supercontinent. Peru and Chad, for instance, are “closer” together today via human transportation systems than they were when those lands were parts of continents that were actually fused together.

The changes in the biota of our new, cobbled-together Columbian supercontinent have been enormous, despite the brief duration of its existence. It is unlikely that so much of the world’s land surface and waters, and its flora and fauna, macro and micro, have ever been altered so abruptly before, unless indeed we have had cataclysmic visitations of asteroids or comets. The effects on human society certainly have been proportionally as vast. The coming together of the continents was a prerequisite for the population explosion of the past two centuries, and certainly played an important role in the Industrial Revolution. The transfer across the oceans of the staple food crops of the Old and New Worlds made possible the former. (Please note that I said “made possible,” not “caused.”) The enormous accession of capital gained by Midas Europe through its domination of the Amer-

icas supplied quantities of capital as fuel for the Industrial Revolution. The relative numbers of the various divisions of the world's human population have drastically altered, with Amerindians plummeting in relation to Euro- and Afro-Americans, and there have been similar changes among other species. To mention just one, in North America there were once 60 million buffalo, and there are now 100 million cattle. The frighteningly large number of extinctions of species in our era is nothing to compare with the Permian die-off, of course, but before we take comfort from that, we must realize that the full effects of the Encounter have not materialized yet.

Let me anticipate criticism by admitting that many thousands of years, tens of thousands of years, must pass before the Permian die-off and the Encounter can be usefully compared. My point is not the comparison *per se*, which is admittedly dizzyingly premature. My primary subject and my argument's point pertain to the Encounter. I propose that its impact has been and is so massive that we should consider it with the same kind of awe and sense of scale as we do events connected with the endings and beginnings of the geological periods and eras, and their influence on the direction of evolution on the planet. We must step back from the specific happenings of 1492 and such trivia as the exact identification of Columbus's first American landfall. We need to look upon the changes that he initiated with the same consciousness of their manifold consequences as we do the changes associated with the end of the Permian. Otherwise, we will lose sight of the forest for the trees, or—following my own advice about scale and utilizing an image proportionate to the subject—we will lose sight of the biosphere for the photo opportunities.

As our ancestors learned more and more about history, filling in gaps, pushing further and further back from the present, they were obliged to expand their concept of time and to “re-periodize” the past. They have needed chronological systems that would enable them to estimate with some accuracy how long it took Middle Easterners to invent the alphabet after they invented cuneiform, and to discern what was going on in China when—to choose an obvious example—Columbus first crossed the Atlantic. They have needed chronological systems that would enable them to date events that happened eons before the earliest human record.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, Europeans still dated time according to such ephemera as the reigns of kings and magistrates, and such trivia as the founding of Rome. For instance, the Synod of Hatfield (A.D. 680) took place in England “in the tenth year of the reign of our most devout lord Egfrid, King of the Northumbrians; in the sixth year of the King Ethelfrid of the Mercians; in the seventeenth year of King Aldwulf of the East Angles; in the seventh year of King Hlothere of the Kentish people.”⁹

As the centuries and events accumulated after God's entry into time, the Incarnation, Christians came to realize that they, as a body of believers, needed a

way to count time since and in relation to that event. During the waning of the Roman Empire and the early Middle Ages Dionysius Exiguus and the Venerable Bede devised a new system of chronology, dating events from the Incarnation, that is, A.D. (*anno domini*). Their system finally caught on in the eleventh century, and we have been using it ever since. It only applies to A.D., but medieval Europeans knew very little about events before the year one. During the Renaissance, literary and historical scholarship revived in Europe, and archeology was born. By Columbus's lifetime, the literate classes of Europe knew more about the centuries prior to the Incarnation than Dionysius Exiguus and Bede had known about those afterward. An extension backward of the A.D. system was necessary, and, in the early seventeenth century, a Jesuit, Domenicus Petavius, a contemporary of Galileo and Kepler, supplied it: the Before Christ or B.C. system. The B.C.–A.D. system is one that devout Christians find very easy to justify, for obvious reasons, and the rest of us all over the world have accepted it for its convenience. We sometimes emasculate it of its religious elements, substituting B.C.E. and C.E. (Before Common Era and Common Era) for B.C. and A.D., but even so we pay our respects to the ancient Christian problems of coping with time sacralized by the birth of God and growing ever longer and deeper whenever we cite a year numerically.

Let me suggest that the Encounter was as important in the history of material life as Christians claim the Incarnation was for spiritual life. Amerindians had no hesitation in realizing they were the prime victims of the Encounter, and found the experience unprecedented and full of agony. In the seventeenth century the Peruvian Amerindian, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala called it a *pachacuti*, by which he, in spite of his probably sincere Christianity, meant a catastrophe. He referred to the social order and the course of events that followed the catastrophe the *mundo al rreves*—"the world upside down."¹⁰ The benefactors of the Encounter have viewed it approvingly and have been inclined to consider it as perhaps the most important event in the working out of the Manifest Destiny of western Civilization, but not as a major disjunction in the history of the planet. To that extent they have missed its significance, and their system of periodizing history is inadequate. Historians would be justified by the evidence and the requirements of their craft if they invented a B.C.–A.C. system (Before Columbus, After Columbus) and imposed in on the rest of humanity. That, however, would lead to fighting in the streets, as did the accurate and reasonable calendar offered to Christendom by Pope Gregory XIII a century after the Encounter. But do let me suggest—no, insist—that we should endeavor to *think* in a Before and After Columbus fashion. The Encounter may have been the most influential event on this planet since the retreat of the continental glaciers, and we must pay it its proper due.

NOTES

1. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, 1972).
2. Francisco López de Gómara. *Historia General de las Indias y Vida de Hernán Cortés* (Caracas, n.d.), 1:7.
3. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: the Southern Voyages, 1492–1616* (New York, 1974), 737.
4. Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*, trans. A. M. Simons and May Wood Simons (Chicago: 1903), 12. See also Stephen Jay Gould, “Toward the Vindication of Punctuational Change,” *Catastrophism and Earth History, the New Uniformitarianism*, eds. W. A. Berggren and John Van Couvering (Princeton, 1984), 27–29.
5. Gould, 9–34; Barry Cooper, *Michel Foucault: An Introduction to the Study of his Thought* (New York, 1981), 3.
6. Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time* (Chicago, 1984).
7. Ben Patrusky, “Mass Extinctions: the Biological Side,” *Mosaic* 17 (Winter 1986–87): 2–13.
8. Don L. Eicher, A. Lee McAlester, and Marcia L. Rottman, *The History of the Earth’s Crust* (Englewood Cliffs, 1984), 116–17. See also William Lee Stokes, *Essentials of Earth History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1982), 503.
9. Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1968), 234
10. Sabine MacCormack, “Pachacuti: Miracles, Punishments, and Last Judgment: Visionary Past and Prophetic Future in Early Colonial Peru,” *American Historical Review* 93 (Oct. 1988): 966, 968, 981, 987; see also *From Oral to Written Expression: Native Andean Chronicles of the Early Colonial Period*, ed. Rolena Adorno (Syracuse, 1982); Rolena Adorno, *Guaman Poma Writing and Resistance in Colonial Peru* (Austin, 1986).