ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter

Vol.11 – Issue 1 [July 2024]

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& *¿Quién conquistó México? [Who conquered Mexico], by Federico Navarrete (Debate, 2019)*

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Accepted: 24 July 2024 / Published online: 31 July 2024

Alternautas is a peer reviewed academic journal that publishes content related to Latin American Critical Development Thinking.

It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counter-balancing mainstream understandings of development.

How to cite: Mejias U. (2024), Uses and Abuses of the Conquista. Book Review of Conquistadores: A New History of Spanish Discovery and Conquest, by Fernando Cervantes (Penguin Random House, 2020) & ¿Quién conquistó México? [Who conquered Mexico], by Federico Navarrete (Debate, 2019) *Alternautas,* 11(1), 338-344. DOI: 10.31273/an.v11i1.1691.

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ISSN - 2057-4924

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Spanish people can detect my Mexican accent as soon as I open my mouth, and it's interesting to see their reactions during my travels through that country. Most Spaniards are kind and curious. But I do remember a taxi driver who convivially told me that, to be sure, Spain had done horrible things to Mexico, but that I should still think of Spain like a father — a drunk and abusive father, in his words, but a father nonetheless.

One can take such remarks about colonialism in stride and with good humor when they come from a taxi driver. But it is difficult to swallow similar arguments when they come from historians like Fernando Cervantes, author of *Conquistadores: A New History of Spanish Discovery and Conquest.*

This "new history" is an attempt to rehabilitate men who were once appreciated as "admirable adventurers", but are now seen as little more than "brutal, genocidal colonists" (p. xvi), says Cervantes. This decrease in prestige has apparently little to do with the actual historical facts of the American genocide, and more with Europe's "own sense of shame" (2020, p. xvi).

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To alleviate this shame, he simply dismisses centuries of empirical research about the brutal impact of colonialism as propaganda meant to caricature and ridicule these noble adventurers. As he sees it, even those Spaniards who accompanied the conquistadores and chronicled their depravity were merely engaged in a campaign to "horrify the Spanish court" (p. 80). Yes, the colonizers committed plenty of violence, Cervantes admits. But their belief that they could amass extreme wealth through violent dispossession, while simultaneously serving God and King, evokes a "disarming frankness" which should be celebrated (p. xviii). My taxi driver would probably agree: an abusive father, yes, but a disarmingly frank one.

Casting the blame as far away from Europe as possible seems to be a useful strategy in this project. Take Muslims, for example. According to Cervantes, kicking them out of Granada was expensive, and their expulsion meant fewer subjects were paying taxes to the Castilian kingdom. So Muslims were a primary motivation behind Columbus' voyage to look for alternative sources of wealth, and practically forced Spain to launch its colonial project.

Colonial Absolution

Once history begins to be interpreted with such flexibility, the sky's the limit. Consider Cervantes' analysis of the Requerimiento. This was a document read by the conquistadores prior to pillaging a city or village, read in Spanish to an audience that could not understand what was said to them (which is why Nick Couldry[2] and I compare it to the Terms of Service of contemporary Big Tech companies).

The Requerimiento[3] read, in part:

> "But, if you do not [submit to Spanish rule], and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can…"

Rather than recognize this as a deceitful and absurd maneuver to justify violence and theft in pseudo-legalistic terms, Cervantes astonishingly attempts to recast the

[2] See for more information: Data Grab (penguin.co.uk)
[3] El Requerimiento by Juan López de Palacios Rubios (1513) - Encyclopedia Virginia

Requerimiento as an exercise in the "recognition and protection of the rights of indigenous people" (p. 82). In his view, the document afforded indigenous people the opportunity to exercise the Spanish legal principle of *obeying without submitting* ("obedezco pero no cumplo"). In other words, they could supposedly accept colonial rule while protesting its injustice. What Cervantes elides is that this was not merely a matter of legal compliance, but of life and death. As we know, resistance and the refusal to submit were the result of a painful and often deadly process of anti- and de-colonization carried out by indigenous people. To present it as something originating in the good will and legal frameworks of the colonizers is a travesty. Cervantes in fact argues that the legislative measures instituted by the conquistadores "succeeded in creating a moral climate in which the Spanish Crown was constantly reminded of its obligations towards the indigenous peoples", a climate that collapsed when colonies obtained their independence and was replaced by modern notions of human rights that, according to him, did not serve these peoples as effectively (p. 356).

If Cervantes' project is to present us with a revisionist version of history that will allow Europeans to feel less shame about the aftermath of colonialism, he is certainly not the only one engaged in such an enterprise. We might recall a recent pronouncement by UK business and trade minister Kemi Badenoch, a black woman, who had the temerity to tell audiences[4] that the UK's wealth is unrelated to colonialism. Or Gordon Brown's declaration in 2005 that Britain must stop apologizing for its colonial past[5], and claim ideas like freedom, tolerance and civic duty as its most successful exports.

The business of absolving colonizers is as old as colonialism itself. Consider the work of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a Spanish priest and scholar, who in the early days of colonialism gave voice to the prevalent belief within the Church and the Crown that the enslavement and dispossession of Indigenous Americans were justified, because they were not fully human (Hanke, 1985). In a similar vein, we also have the recent example of authors who have claimed[6] that Zionism is not colonial but in fact represents an anti-colonial nationalist movement, even if in order to make such a claim they need to overlook the material reality of settler colonialism in Palestine.

Messy Historiographies

[4] Kemi Badenoch: 'UK's wealth isn't from white privilege and colonialism' | Kemi Badenoch | The Guardian

[5] stop apologizing for its colonial past

[6] See more at: A Dying Postcolonialism – The Abusable Past

In the context of these old and new revisionist projects, Cervantes' work might be characterized as a form of *imperialist nostalgia*: the colonizer mourning the victim he himself has killed, or the civilizing agent lamenting the decimation of other cultures as personal losses (Rosaldo, 1993, pp. 69-70). My intention here is not to single out Cervantes, who is —as far as I can tell— a white Mexican working in the Global North like myself. Instead, I am interested in questioning the way in which these nostalgic narratives are deployed, and for what purposes. Cervantes is in fact a good story teller, and weaves historical records in an engaging way; he gives a vivid account of how the soldiers who risked their lives in the name of an empire were eventually betrayed by that same empire, as they were replaced by colonial administrators with closer ties to the Crown. But his conclusion that, because of this, the conquistadores are not directly responsible for the ills that afflict present-day Latin America is too opportunistic.

What should this kind of historical manipulation be replaced with? This, of course, is a question that has preoccupied scholars for decades. Critical studies of colonialism (an umbrella which might cover disciplines like postcolonial and decolonial studies, dependency theory, new imperial histories, critical international relations, non-western epistemologies, and so on) have attempted to identify the tensions, contradictions and challenges that a critical historiography of colonialism must contend with. Following Howe (2010), these might include addressing questions about the appropriate levels and units of analysis, that is, whether historians should focus on specific bounded spaces like nations or communities, on specific types of colonialism like plantation or settler colonialism, on colonialism as a global system, or even on new forms of extractivism like data colonialism (these choices, of course, have important repercussions on the diverse and contested meanings of terms like imperialism and colonialism). Then there is the question for critical historians of colonialism of how to best manage multiple interdisciplinary theoretical influences, including cultural and literary criticism (which at one point relied heavily on postmodernism and poststructuralism), anthropology, political theory, economics (including Marxist and neo-Marxists approaches), human geography, and so on. These tensions also bring to the fore questions of modernity (Is colonialism modern? Is modernity colonial?) and culture (Is culture colonialist? Is colonialism cultural?). And they put historians in the difficult position of having to decide whether colonialism and capitalism should be considered together or separately, and whether colonialism is a more useful trans-historical organizing concept than capitalism. Finally, as Howe (2010) suggest, this raises important and complicated questions about violence (its representations and memories) as well as the possibilities of resistance.

The task of historians is made even more complicated by their propensity to fall into what Cooper calls the traps of "vaguely specified temporalities" (2005, p. 17-22). These include *story plucking*: equating two concepts or narratives despite their historical differences while assuming there is a universal essence to coloniality; *doing history backward:* "confusing the analytic categories of the present with the native categories of the past" (p. 18); and *the epochal fallacy*: taking colonial and postcolonial periods as coherent wholes, rather than as possibly contradictory and segmentary constructs.

In addition, historiographies of colonialism must contend with another important tension found in all colonial histories: the issue of native collaboration with the invaders. European colonizers did not invent coerced labor, dispossession of land, population displacement due to conflict, undemocratic governance, oppressive patriarchy or human rights abuses. They typically exploited already existing dynamics, made them worse by racializing them, and exported them to the rest of the globe. And they did so often with the help and collaboration of local elites from the colonized populations, forming alliances with them.

What conquest?

These alliances are the focus of *¿Quién conquistó México? [Who conquered Mexico?],* by Federico Navarrete (2019), a book that, in some ways, stands in inverse opposition to Cervantes' *Conquistadores*. If Cervantes' project is to rehabilitate the conquerors, Navarrete's is to examine the political maneuvering of the conquered, which problematizes the narrative of conquest itself, with its standard view of Spanish winners and Mexican losers.

The answer Navarrete poses to the question raised in the title of the book is that Mexicans conquered themselves. This seems a bit of a simplification, but not by much. In his work (which is more polemical than academic, though it is backed by the appropriate historical sources) he highlights the role of Malinche, the woman who became the cultural and linguistic translator of Hernán Cortés, as well as his mistress. And he examines how the Tlaxcaltecas, a confederacy of Nahua people who sided with the Spaniards, provided enough military aid to overthrow the Mexica empire. Without Malinche and the Tlaxcaltecas, the conquest would not have succeeded.

At the surface, these might sound like straightforward examples of alliances between the colonizers and local elites, a case of one group of colonized betraying their peers to gain a better position within the new world order. But the reality Navarrete describes is much more complicated than that, pointing to the complexities and contradictions of colonial history.

In Navarrete's view, everyone who made alliances with the conquistadores is also in some ways a victor in the conquest: by siding with the Spaniards, the locals manipulated them to gain political advantages over other local groups. It could be argued that this transaction engendered a new class of modern Mexicans who managed to survive, and just as important, managed to imagine a future that included them. Navarrete is not naïve about the actual role the conquistadores played, or the role of the geo-politics of the time. He is also not unaware of the way in which the Mexican state eventually positioned itself as the sole inheritor of the history of the 'victims', which it deployed in the creation of a nationalistic myth in which indigenous peoples (i.e., the "traitors") were made second class citizens. What Navarrete misses, of course, is that the benefits (and costs) of these alliances were not evenly distributed, so there were still many losers among these 'winners'. But in the context of his argument, the question of who conquered whom, and the use of the word 'conquest' itself, becomes productively complicated.

Present and Future Colonialisms

This level of nuance is missing from Cervantes' work, which in the end resorts to an uneasy Eurocentric paternalism. In his conclusion, he offers a visual analogy that, in his mind, should serve as our guide in interpreting the legacy of colonialism. It is the painting *Portrait of Juan de Pareja,* by Diego Velázquez. Juan de Pareja was Velázquez's slave, a man of mixed Muslim descent who obtained his freedom and decided to stay on as an apprentice to Velázquez. His portrait is unquestionably a masterpiece. But its most distinctive feature, according to Cervantes, is the look on Pareja's face. "The look is that of a man who knows his dignity because he also knows it is a gift" (2021, p. 354). This gift, apparently, can only be bestowed on the oppressed by their oppressors.

Why is any of this important to us? When faced with these narratives, we need to do more than *obey without submitting* ("obedezco pero no cumplo"). We must confront and reject these colonial fantasies as if lives depended on it, because when it comes to the legacy of colonialism, they do. As Weld (2020) reminds us, the recent rise of Latin America's far right is directly tied to these issues, and has a lot to do with the region's colonial past. Despite what nationalistic narratives would have us believe, most of the struggles for Latin American independence and liberation in the nineteenth century were carried out by a half-white elite who obviously sought not to hand power to black, brown and indigenous populations, but to keep it for themselves, along with the infrastructures of dispossession.

When their efforts were challenged, ruling classes fell back on a nostalgia for the 'uncomplicated' order of colonial days.

Whiteness, manifesting as Hispanidad or "Spanishness", was an important aspect of this nostalgia, particularly when used to reference Spain's Conquista and Re-Conquista — the history of expulsion, extermination, or assimilation of racialized others. That previous dictatorships and governments in Latin America made used of this rehabilitation of colonizers to rationalize the brutal elimination of their opponents, and that they may do so again (inspired perhaps by narratives such as Cervantes'), is a project we must reject.

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