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One of the most difficult parts of the transition from secondary school to higher education has been having one's previous understanding of history torn apart and exposed as flawed, biased or indeed entirely incorrect. The study of American history exemplifies this flawed understanding, where a sense of mythology, fed by popular culture and society has evolved over previous centuries to promote American exceptionalism. Only in more recent years has the dichotomy between the common narrative of American history and the reality been examined, showing that it has been constructed, particularly by the United States, fuelling a legacy of division that continues to negatively impact American societies.

This view will be explored by focusing on one of the most famous names associated with the history of the Americas, Christopher Columbus: a fifteenth century Italian sailor who never set foot in the modern-day USA yet now has a national holiday dedicated to him. Columbus' centrality in the history of the US begins with the American Revolution. As "the need to develop a national history with no discernible connection to Britain arose during the Revolution, early Americans seized upon him" (Burmila, 2017), and over the following years reality was overtaken by myth to create the legend of Columbus. In her poem 'His Excellency General Washington', Phillis Wheatley wrote in 1775 "*Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light, Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.*" (Wheatley, 1990, pp.7–11). This is one of the first recorded instances of America being referred to as 'Columbia', which appears to be applying Columbus' sense of exploration and desire to expand horizons as the personification of their new nation. The angel-like qualities of Columbia being "enthron'd in realms of light" only adds to the positive connotations and this allegory was then fed into popular culture. Works such as Barlow's 'The Vision of Columbus', describe an elderly Columbus being greeted by an angel who transports him to the United States to show the "fruits of his cares and the children of his toil" (Barlow, 1820, p.151), raising Columbus' profile to the wider

public. The importance of this is that from an early stage in United States history, Columbus' name became associated with a romanticised myth, enabling to disappear from mainstream public consciousness the reality that Columbus was a man who enslaved people and committed what some (see Tinker & Freeland) label as a genocide against indigenous populations.



Figure 1



Figure 2

This pattern endured for centuries, with John Gast's 1872 painting 'American Progress' in Figure 1 (Croft, 1873), portraying the same Columbia that Wheatley wrote about, bringing enlightened thought and modern tools from the brighter east to the darker west. This is a commonly found example of Columbia being used to embody manifest destiny, an idea which as Langley attests, "served principally as the means of extending U.S. territory and power at the expense of its neighbours and the vulnerable Indian peoples who lay in the country's path" (Langley, 2010, p.2). The army recruitment poster in Figure 2 shows Columbia's continuing mainstream use in the 20th century, suggesting that ultimately Columbus was a blank canvas which revolutionaries used to establish the American identity they wished to portray; disregarding facts to paint their own patriotic version of history. This portrayal of Columbus as the allegorical personification of the spirit of America and its destiny meant he became a central figure in US history, despite never setting foot in the country. The danger of this narrative is then seen today when we explore the facts of what Columbus has come to represent and the political and societal divisions they create.

These divisions are perhaps most obvious on Columbus Day, the national holiday in the Americas on the second Monday of October, established to celebrate Columbus's discovery of the Americas. For some, that day is not about celebrating Columbus, but is about highlighting the wrongs that he inflicted that have caused damage for generations. For example, on Columbus Day 2019, Latino comedian Mr Nuevayol posted a video on social media depicting a man accused of stealing a car by a police officer:

Thief: "Officer, I discovered this car, I'm discovering this car".

Officer: "Sir, you can't discover a car".

Thief: "What you mean? It's here, it's open, I get inside, I discover it, it's my car now"

"What day is it today?"

Officer: "Today is Columbus Day."

Thief: "Okay and what did he do?"

Officer: "He discovered America"

Thief: "Bullshit! because somebody was already here"

(Mambo, 2019)

This satirisation of how Columbus "discovered" America highlights the reality that when Columbus landed on the shores of Hispaniola, millions of people already lived across the region, yet much of American history only seems to begin from 1492 and depicts the manifest destiny of Americans to expand into and dominate the region. Representative Derrick Lente, who grew up on the Sandia Pueblo Reservation summarises this neatly by saying "Christopher Columbus didn't find us ... We have our own creation stories, our own language, our own history." (Mercer, 2019). It is here that the dichotomy between the realities of American history and the narrative that has been created is being increasingly scrutinised and exposed. In his paper *Once upon a Genocide*, Bigelow explores how children's books and songs for Columbus "teach youngsters to accept the right of white people to rule over people of colour, of powerful nations to dominate weaker nations" (Bigelow, 1992, p.2).

Some people are now making a conscious effort to change the narrative, for example hundreds of students in 2014 staged a walk-out protest after a “conservative-led school board proposed to focus history education on topics that promote citizenship, patriotism and respect for authority” (Associated Press, 2014) which are the same very topics that underpin the idea of manifest destiny. This fake narrative demonstrated by a school board attempting to pick and choose history, arguably drives polarisation with some people demanding acknowledgement of the realities of what Columbus did versus those who continue to ignore history and believe in the Columbian spirit.

Columbus’ legacy is in fact contentious across all of the Americas, with what to call “Columbus Day” an issue in itself. Evo Morales, the former president of Bolivia and the first indigenous leader of the country, renamed it the ‘Day of Mourning for the Misery, Diseases and Hunger Brought by the European Invasion of America’, and in Venezuela it is the ‘Day of Indigenous Resistance’. The current political situation in these countries shows why there is such controversy over a day celebrating one of the most famous colonisers. In Ecuador, for example, the day is known as the “Day of Interculturality and Plurinationality”. ECUARUNARI's Floresmilo Simbaña in an interview declared “There is no definition [of Interculturality]” adding that it’s “More than a social theory, it is a political project.” (Altmann, 2014) highlighting that interculturality is a charged political topic. To evidence this, Ecuador saw sweeping protests in October 2019 as a result of newly enforced austerity measures, particularly the removal of a fuel subsidy. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAI) claimed these measures emphasised the marginalization of and discrimination against indigenous groups, who would be disproportionately hit hardest due to their requirement for greater amounts of fuel to navigate their rural habitations. What was originally a day to celebrate Columbus has, for Ecuador, become a day to highlight Interculturality: needed because of the ongoing marginalization of indigenous groups.

The plight of indigenous groups across the Americas shows that the narrative established early in the colonial period perpetuates today, with indigenous peoples still suffering higher levels of discrimination than many others. This is particularly evident in Mexico, where under the *encomienda* system established by Cortes, “the indigenous population was forced into slavery under the rule of the landowning *finqueros* who operated massive plantations” (Ross, 1995, p.68). During the wave of independence movements across nineteenth century Latin America in the nineteenth century, many of these systems were wiped out but they left a legacy of continuing stark inequalities. Following the Mexican revolution of 1910–1919 the government enacted the *Reparto*, a programme of land distribution. The aim was to give Mexicans the land upon which they laboured. However, “the *Reparto* was never implemented in Chiapas, as local power brokers convinced Mexican federal authorities to exempt Chiapan estates from distribution” (Ross, 1995, p.69).

Human Development Measure	% of population	State Ranking (of 31 Mexican states)
Illiteracy (over 15 years)	30.12	1
Population over 15 not having finished primary education	62.08	1
Population without electricity	34.92	1
Population without running water	42.09	4
Population living in overcrowded housing	74.07	1
Population making less than twice the minimum wage	80.08	1

Figure 3 – Living Conditions in Chiapas (Russell, 1991, p. 17)

Figure 3 demonstrates the abject living conditions for the Chiapans, where they are the poorest performing state by most metrics and they are also the state where the indigenous people were not afforded the lands upon which they laboured. While they may no longer be under an encomienda system, many Mexicans continue living in desperate poverty: “approximately 18 % ... are food insecure, an overwhelming majority of them in the rural areas, with a disproportionate number of indigenous peoples among them” (UNHR, 2011) In addition to economic poverty there is physical violence, with the Mexican government apologising last year for torturing indigenous Mexicans (Lakhani, 2019), and an indigenous activist being shot in his own home after protesting against the planned building of energy plants and gas lines on indigenous land (teleSUR, 2019).

These examples show how the actions of people from centuries ago still divide the region today. Leon-Portilla quotes an excerpt from an Aztec poem; “*Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow, Are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco*” (León Portilla, 1992), and although spoken during the conquests, it eloquently describes how many people in Chiapas likely feel now. The systems of economic extraction and limited political rights that Cortes established during the initial conquests, appear to continue to be the reality today and the examples of sacred land being ignored for foreign investment opportunities and indigenous people being shot when protesting only serve to underscore this point, with an apparent unwillingness of many to acknowledge the history behind these schisms only serving to increase them. Last year the Mexican president demanded an apology from Spain for the historic wrongs, but whilst some supported the president, others argued he was “focusing on events 500 years ago in an effort to distract from the economic and insecurity problems his government faces today.” ... “It’s the Mexican government, the post-revolutionary government, they are the ones who have maltreated the Indigenous. ... Forget the crown, the

Pope, the President," (Nolen, 2019). Clearly, much as the US grapple with their past, Mexico is still struggling to reconcile its history with a current society that could heal the divisions.

Ultimately, a year of study has opened my eyes to the reality that the actions of explorers and colonisers over 500 years ago continue to fuel the social, political and economic issues faced by many in the Americas today. Each country faces the difficult decision of whether to maintain the pretence that the past is the myth that has been spun for years, or to accept the true reality of what happened. Columbus Day exemplifies this dilemma played out across nations, with indigenous groups increasingly challenging the celebration of a controversial figure, much to the frustration of traditionalists who revere him. This quandary has spread throughout the Americas, as many countries try to figure out what they actually wish to celebrate on October 15th and the events in Mexico and Ecuador underscore how this narrative has contributed to divisions and is also increasingly being challenged.

Addendum

I wrote this essay in mid-May, prior to the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests that have engulfed the United States of America and the wider international community. While the protests and the entire Black Lives Matter movement are incredibly complex topics that have a multitude of factors behind them, some of the issues referenced in this essay are certainly relevant. The manifestation of inequity, with a failure to deal with the systematic disenfranchisement of minority groups over hundreds of years, has played a critical role in this eruption of anger. The reluctance to revise revered historical figures such as Christopher Columbus, who two days before submitting this essay had a statue of his beheaded in Boston, only serves to fuel the frustration.

To conclude the essay, I suggested that “Each country faces the difficult decision of whether to maintain the pretence that the past is the myth that has been spun for years, or to accept the true reality of what happened”. While the current protests only serve to underscore this point, I now believe that statement could even be taken further. Rather than “each country” being faced with the choice to challenge their understanding of history, it is now “each individual”. Every individual now has a responsibility to educate themselves on the events of history and how these events impact on our political climate today. It will be fascinating to see over the coming months how each country approaches this issue, and whether or not this movement can sustain the momentum it currently holds to help enact the required changes in our societies.

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