Culture in Conflict: The Tragedy of the Discovery of the New World

I approach this work as a voyage of discovery: of a discovery of those men who first landed on the shores of a New World, and of a personal discovery, as well. Of course, everyone "knows" that the discovery of the New World began in 1492. Every schoolchild learns the sing-song verse "in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," in the first or second grade; but this verse begs the question of whether or not Columbus discovered America. There are many claims to earlier "discovers" of the New World, from the Vikings to the English, to the ancient Greeks and the Portuguese. Even more fundamentally, did any of these purported "discovers" really discover anything – after all, there was a thriving series of Indian nations already existent in the New World at the time of Columbus' arrival in 1492. [1]

My personal voyage of discovery began in Mexico City in October, 1992, when I witnessed thousands of Mexican peasants protest the naming of a day in the honor of Cristobal Colon. I had never heard of a man named Cristobal Colon, and wondered why the protests occurred so near to the day Christopher Columbus discovered America. This was just one of the many ironies that would be experienced on my voyage of discovery.

In the United States, October 12, 1992 was just like any other day; there was no particular significance associated with this day, no way to turn a profit on the name of Columbus, so therefore, not many people paid attention to the five-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. Of course, there were scholarly papers written, conferences planned and attended, and even a renewed emphasis on Columbus' exploits as discoverer and developer of the New World. But none of these observations seemed as visceral as the street protest in Mexico City. How ironic that in the years since that first day of

discovery and the five-hundredth anniversary of that discovery that Columbus has been viewed as savior, visionary, discoverer, proto-missionary, slaver, cultural destroyer, and profit-driven, myopic mercenary.

In my personal journey of discovery I learned that I'd already known something of a man named Cristobal Colon. For Cristobal Colon and Christopher Columbus were one and the same man, but separated as it were, by the nature of the two sides to the discovery of the New World.

Cristobal Colon or Christopher Columbus: which shall it be? Are there two ways of looking at the same event, or are we forever constrained to see the world from one or another point of view? Can we see, better yet, can we know, what it is like to witness the world through another set of eyes; to experience life in a way we never before imagined? This is the central crux of the encounter of the New World: two radically different cultures intersecting at a time when the Spanish were reclaiming territories lost to Islam, and actively looking for routes to the East, an East that promised commodities that were in short supply in Spain. At the same time, in the Americas, the culture of the Mexica was expanding through a series of conquests over other local or regional tribes. This cultural expansion produced a powerful, affluent culture that was in some respects, more advanced than that of Spain. Never before had an encounter like this occurred; and never before were two cultures so ill-equipped to handle such a meeting.

Of course, my voyage of discovery could have stopped in October of 1992; there was no particular reason for me to follow-up on any of this, it was after all, a group of peasants protesting something or other, and I had seen other peasant protests in Mexico City. I happened to ask one of my friends, Martin Vasquez, a supervisor in the factory

that I was visiting, about the protests involving Cristobal Colon. His answer struck me as intriguing, and in many ways, frames the issues surrounding the discovery of the New World. As my friend remarked, in something close to the language that follows "I am Mexican, which means that I'm Indian and Spanish. My two natures are at war with one another: a part of me is proud that my ancestors discovered the New World (with great deference to you, Mr. Ponzio, Cristobal Colon was not Italian, but as Spanish as I am, not by nationality, but by way of culture); another part of me is saddened that my Indian relations were sometimes oppressed and mistreated; after all, they were here before the Europeans. And so it is for these peasants: every time the governmental issues a ruling which seems to make things harder for them, they see it as the Spanish conquistadores all over again. To them, Colon is a symbol of the insensitivity to their needs. At the same time, they revere him, because he is part of them, as well. We are all conflicted in Mexico, which of course, is why you are here to help us (this last line was delivered with a certain degree of irony).

There have been many theories developed to explain the forces leading up to and during the conquest; too many certainly, to list in a short paper. Some of these theories seem to resonate better with my discovery of life in Mexico than others, and I will choose these to discuss. But before I begin such a discussion, it seems appropriate to step back and review the ways in which cultures have successfully crossed paths without producing the devastating effects witnessed in the Americas.

Jerry Bentley, in his book *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*, discusses the issue of cultural contact and conversion before the discovery of America. He theorizes that three forms of cultural exchange can

occur: voluntary conversions, conversions which are achieved through economic, political or social pressure and conversion which occur by assimilation. [2]

Voluntary conversions occur where the prospects of alliance with a foreign power bestows an economic or political benefit to an existing ruling class, and are usually preceded by a merchant class which establishes an "outpost" within the new culture. Of course, there are gradations to the voluntary nature of conversions, and oftentimes, a military campaign will persuade people to accept a new culture. These less voluntary means of conversion begin to take on the aspect of a conversion for political, social, or economic pressure. Similarly, differential taxation schemes, limitations on access to religious services, closure or destruction of temples, churches and shrines, all contribute to the "less voluntary" aspects of conversion. [3]

Where conversions occur due to economic, political, or social pressure, these are generally carried out at the societal level, rather than at the personal level. The reason for the conversion at the societal level is fairly easy to understand; it is more effective to convert large groups of people rather than converting people one at a time. The primary method of establishing this new culture is through societal structures, such as: new temples, places of worship, civic buildings, rules, and replacement of government officials. Despite these structures, many conversions of this type seem to lack authenticity, with people backsliding into their old habits and customs. Over time, as cultural pressures for adaptation continue, large groups can eventually adopt a new culture. [4]

The final type of conversion that of assimilation generally occurs when new groups are isolated from their original culture and are gradually subsumed into the new

culture. In point of fact, the author states that very few types of cultural conversions can be isolated as one of these three individually, but that a process of syncretism occurs where elements all three types of conversion are present at one time. Nor does the process of conversion occur seamlessly, or within a vacuum. Very often there is resistance to the conversion which takes the form of violent protests or uprisings, passivity, and attacks on new governmental structures or practices. [5]

In the most successful forms of cultural conversion, the element of time is crucial. In order for cultures to interact and merge, an extensive period of time, usually taking several hundred years, is required. Where time is not granted, conversion must rely increasingly on military force, and/or economic and political means to bring about change. [6]

With an historical background of conquest in mind, we can proceed to the conquest of the Americas. As we know, this conquest was accomplished in less than one hundred years, lending credence to Bentley's theories of successful, voluntary conversions taking place over long periods of time. The conquest of the Americas was not voluntary, and was not undertaken to gain assent from the existing culture. In addition, force was brought to bear on the native culture in the form of social, economic, and religious changes that imposed new rules the native populations. [7]

My weekends in Mexico were spent in trying to understand the people that I was seeing on a daily basis. My assignment was open-ended and would last until we successfully installed a new computer system at a location on the outskirts of Mexico City. I had time to visit various landmarks within the city, and my first stop was the Museo Nacional de Antropologica e Historio, which adjoined Chapultepec Park. The

building itself is immense, and spans several city blocks. The architecture is modern, but the building design conjures up images of a pyramid; despite this juxtaposition of old and new, it seems perfectly natural in Mexico. Looking back, I can once again see the two separate halves of the Mexican psyche – Old World and New - but this time, achieved harmoniously in the museum.

I could not experience the museum in one visit; this would have been impossible, it is built on a scale almost too vast to comprehend. It would take several visits to make it through the Mayan and Mexica exhibits, and to view some of the maps and diaries of the people I had previously read about. Walking through the museum, the names of Cortes, Diaz, Colon, Moctezuma and Cuauhtémoc seemed somehow to come alive. A drive down Paseo de la Reforma revealed a statue of Cuauhtémoc that captured the spirit of the Mexica during the height of their glory: tall, stern, powerfully built, confidently striding forward, leading his armies. In the face of the statue there was a resoluteness that would one day be replaced by bitterness, disease, and subjection.

What types of men were the leaders of the two cultures: Columbus and Cortes, Moctezuma and Cuauhtémoc? Did their personalities somehow shape the events that were to take place? Were these men microcosms of the cultures which they represented, and if so, how did their personalities influence the way in which these cultures clashed?

Cristobal Colon was a life-long seaman. He had an uncanny knack for navigation, honed over the years on trips through the Mediterranean, and in perusal of maps, navigational aids and study. He was persistent, dogged and fearless. He could inspire men to follow him, and was sagacious enough to withhold information when necessary. That he was motivated to a certain extent by the lure of fortune seems evident,

but his desire for riches to finance the recapture of the Holy Land is often overlooked by today's scholars. [8]

Tzvetan Todorov, in his book *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, believes that Columbus was a discoverer at heart: he was delighted by the new "things" that he saw in this land. Colon's diaries come alive when he speaks of the new flora and fauna; they seem less animated when speaking of the inhabitants of this New World. It is only when Columbus mentions the inhabitants as newly encountered, that they seem most alive. On first seeing the natives he remarks that "They were all very well made, stout in body and very comely of countenance," (page 36) [9] Once he has lived with them awhile, they become less important, and finally, they become almost objects "These people have the same natures and the same customs as those whom we have encountered hitherto," (page 36) [10] Ultimately, Columbus cannot identify with the Indians; they are too unlike the Europeans. We see the gradual erosion of Columbus' admiration of their physical qualities, and a sort of unconcern set in, until he can condone the slavery of these people. "The conveyors could be paid in cannibal slaves, fierce but well-made fellows of good understanding, which men, wrested from their inhumanity, will be, we believe, the best slaves that ever were," (page 47). [11]

It is as if Columbus could not bridge the gap that existed between the natives and the Europeans: the two groups were far apart in their customs, traditions, and beliefs. Because he could not bridge that gap, Columbus perceived the indigenous peoples as being somewhat less human than the "civilized" people of Europe. This attitude was adopted, unfortunately, by many of the Europeans that would arrive in the next hundred years.

Cortes was a much different man than Colon, more inclined to action than contemplation, but the attitude of viewing the Indians as somehow less than human can been seen in Cortes as well. Both Columbus and Cortes kept texts which traced their journeys in the New World. Columbus' diaries read as a travel-log at times, and are marked by a sense of discovery and wonder. When he mentions the administration of these new-found colonies, or his developing concern regarding the indigenous people, his writing becomes somewhat strained and distant. Cortes, on the other hand has a much different purpose to his writing: he seeks to justify his actions and magnify his claims to the land of the Mexica.

From the beginning of his journey, Cortes adopts an attitude that he is acting on behalf of Charles; in fact, he was acting on his own behalf, and informed Charles of his actions and decisions after the fact. Very early in his meeting with Moctezuma's agents, Cortes says that he "had come to this land by Your Majesty's commands, and the principal thing of which I had been ordered to give an account was of Moctezuma and his great city…," (pages 79 – 80) [12], which of course, was untrue, since Charles did not know of Cortes' actions. Cortes recognized early on that stretching the truth could have several benefits: on the one hand, in dealing with events at Spain, it was often better to act first, and beg forgiveness later, especially if the begging was accompanied by massive amounts of treasure. On the other hand, in dealing with the indigenous peoples, Cortes often stretched the truth to his own advantage as evidenced by his behavior to a local chieftain in the town of Caltanmi. "So as not to offend him and for fear that some calamity might befall my endeavor and my journey, I dissembled as best I could and told

him that very soon I would have Moctezuma order him to give the gold and all that he owned," (page 56) [13].

To frame this behavior as it applied to the conquest in general, we once again turn to Tzvetan Todorov, in his book *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, for explanations. Todorov believes that Cortes had a nimble mind that recognized opportunities when he saw them. Rather than having formalized plans developed for every step of the conquest, Cortes improvised, and improvised brilliantly, to enable the defeat of a seemingly invincible enemy. Recognizing that the Mexica made enemies among several of the subjugated and/or hostile tribes, Cortes constantly played one side against the other when dealing with the Indians. By playing each tribe against the other, and by his improvisational military maneuvers, Cortes gained allies in his quest to overthrow the Mexica. [14]

Similarly, when Cortes learned of myths surrounding his men and his person, he utilized these myths to keep the Mexica off-balance. We turn to Cortes' account of the meeting between Cortez and Moctezuma for validation of this idea, (pages 85 – 86), where Moctezuma says of Quetzalcoatl,

> …And he returned to his native land and after many years came again, by which time all those who had remained were married to native women and had built villages and raised children. And when he wished to lead them away again they would not go nor even admit him as their chief; and so he departed. And we have always held that those who descended from him would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals. So because of the place from which you claim to come, namely, from where the sun rises, and the things you tell us of the great lord or king who sent you here, we believe and are certain that he is our natural lord, especially as you say that he was known to us for some time. … *I replied to all he said as I thought most fitting, especially in making him believe that Your Majesty was he whom they were expecting.…* (Italics mine) [15]

Whether or not Moctezuma believed that Cortes and his men were representatives of Quetzalcoatl, or the god himself is irrelevant; what was important is that Cortes turned this belief to his advantage, and that it kept Moctezuma guessing for a long enough time that Cortes could enter Mexico City, and place Moctezuma under house arrest. Cortes' frequent route changes and demands, alternatively acting as an honored guest and then as an offended person of rank, certainly disconcerted Moctezuma and his allies.

Todorov believes that Cortes' behavior can be explained by his ability to act spontaneously, develop solutions on the fly, and seize control of a situation almost at will. This set of personality characteristics is the direct result of Cortes' ability to think abstractly, which Todorov believes is a direct result of the Spaniard's use of written language, and which fosters the use of abstract thought. [16]

The Spanish use of writing was initially puzzling to the Indians. They witnessed the ability of the Spaniards to control their troop movements and instructions across great distances. They did not originally connect the ability to control troop movements and directives to writing, but they eventually recognized that the Spanish passed pieces of paper back and forth, which somehow conveyed thoughts or commands, to one another. In Bernal Diaz' account of the conquest, he highlights an episode in the battle for Tenochtitlan, where Cuauhtémoc's ambassadors ask for a written acknowledgement of their meeting (page 393):

> Although this message was thoroughly explained to them by our interpreters, the three chieftains asked Cortes for a letter, not because it would be understood but because they knew that when we sent a message or command it was always on paper – which they call amales in their language – as a sign that it was an order. [17]

In addition, Todorov believes that the Spanish mind-set was influenced by years of war with the Muslims, which taught them to act quickly and forcefully in battle. This mindset of almost constant warfare produced another result which was to characterize the conquest of the New World: an almost fanatical belief that the souls of heathens should be converted to Christianity. The belief that the souls of Indians should be converted to Christianity was also shared by Columbus, who hoped that the conversion of the Indians would help restore the souls "lost" to the Muslims during the crusades. [18]

Todorov does not comment on a talent which Cortes possessed, and which may have contributed to the rapid downfall of the empire: that of negotiating. While Todorov points out Cortes' habits of dissembling, he does not view these habits as a form of bluff to be used in a negotiation. Cortes was, in effect, looking for weaknesses which he could exploit, which is a form of negotiation. In every meeting that Cortes had with the Tlascalans and the Mexica, he made sure that both parties attend the meeting, and encouraged both parties to vie with one another for his support. In effect, Cortes is bluffing by having both parties attend a meeting and by playing one off against the other. He then accepted the offer that best suits his needs. In his letters to Charles, Cortes comments on his tactics for dealing with the Tlascala (pages 69 – 70) "When I saw the discord and animosity between these two peoples (i.e. the Tlascala and the Mexica) I was not a little pleased, for it seemed to further my purposes considerably; consequently, I might have the opportunity of subduing them more quickly…" [19]

Similarly, Todorov does not seem to acknowledge that the Tlascalans, and to a limited extent the Mexica, were able to dissemble (albeit to a lesser extent than was Cortes). To illustrate this point, bear in mind that the Tlascala originally attacked Cortes,

and then made excuses for their behavior when it was apparent that they could not defeat the Spanish. [20]

When weekends in Mexico City were not spent at the Museo Nacional de Antropologica e Historio, they were spent at Chapultepec Castle in the park. The Castle was originally a military school where young men went to prepare for military service, or to attend a good secondary school where they could receive a classical education. During the Mexican-American War, the Castle was besieged by U.S. forces led by General Winfield Scott. The Castle was defended by a few teachers and several cadets, all under the age of eighteen years, and in the United States it is treated as a footnote in the war with Mexico. In Mexico City, the Castle is an historic landmark, a place where "los ninos" met an untimely end at the hands of a nascent imperial power. Today, the Castle is the home of the National Museum, and proudly displays artifacts which reflect the Indian and Spanish influences that make up the national heritage. Several miles away, at the downtown or "Zocalo" area is the National Palace, home to the murals of Diego Rivera. In these murals, Rivera captured the spirit of Mexico from pre-historic times, through the conquest, and into the nineteen-thirties. The final murals depict Rivera's dreams of a socialist state in Mexico. The murals are a powerful testament to a nation trying to reconcile its divergent heritage, and to forge an identity in the modern world.

Moctezuma, subject of several of Rivera's murals is portrayed as lord of the Mexica, a noble warrior, priest, and judge; a man who was both feared and respected, and who extended the rule of the Mexica to include virtually the entire central portion of modern-day Mexico, including portions of the Yucatan. Yet history remembers him as a

man who squandered away his country to a small force of men who were vastly outnumbered.

How did Moctezuma loose his empire with such an overwhelming advantage in manpower and material? That Moctezuma vacillated in his dealings with Cortes is beyond dispute. In his letters to Charles, Cortes mentions Moctezuma's almost pleading requests to remain clear of Tenochtitlan, telling him that the "land was scarce of food and the roads were bad; furthermore, the city was built entirely on the water and I might only enter it by canoe," (page 79) [21]. Each request from Moctezuma was followed by a hoard of treasure, which sent a very clear signal to the Spaniards; there is more where this came from. At other times, Moctezuma told Cortes that he should proceed to Tenochtitlan, and these messages were followed by further diplomacy, stalling, or ambush.

It is possible that Moctezuma originally thought the Spanish to be some sort of semi-divine beings, which caused some of the vacillation he displayed, although to be sure, scholarly opinion is mixed on this point. It is equally possible that his belief in the divine nature of the Spaniards changed during the course of the conquest, as his conversation with Cortes would seem to indicate. "See that I am of flesh and blood like you and all other men, and I am mortal and substantial," (page 86) [22]. It is likely however, that he was simply confused by the Spaniards and his dealings with them, and was waiting for a sign from his gods, or some advice from his priests, which was not forthcoming. It is also likely that Moctezuma understood the technological superiority of the Spaniards, and was somewhat awed by their weaponry and their horses. At the same time, Moctezuma grossly underestimated the animosity that the conquered and enemy tribes held toward the Mexica; this mistake was to prove costly.

Turning again to Todorov, we are reminded that the customs of the Mexica were based on a series of ritual practices which defined their interaction within their society, with their allies, and their enemies. These ritual practices were fairly common throughout Mesoamerica, and formed the basis for appropriate responses among the tribes. Quite simply, Cortes and the Spaniards did not play by these rules; they did not act according to the ritual methods: they improvised. This improvisation caught Moctezuma and all of the tribal chieftains by surprise. Consider for example, that Cortes not only took Moctezuma hostage within his own city, but that just weeks earlier, Cortes used the same tactic at Tascalteca. It is very likely that Moctezuma knew of this event, as well as the slaying of many of the Tascaltecan chieftains, but yet he acquiesced in becoming a hostage. He could not understand the behavior of the Spaniards; they were too "other." [23]

Todorov once again offers an explanation of this behavior, and this explanation has to do with the symbology of writing. The Mexica lacked a complete system of writing, and used a partially-developed pictographic system. The lack of a fully developed writing system caused the Mexica to think in a very literal-minded fashion, and prevented them from developing advanced abstract reasoning. For all intents and purposes, the Mexica were very literal, to the point of not dissembling, even if the situation warranted. In this respect, they were outmatched by the Spaniards, who were not averse to stretching the truth if when it suited them. [24]

Moctezuma was therefore over-matched in weaponry and tactics, thought in ritualized, predictable ways, was literal minded and unlikely to dissemble, and was

confounded by Spanish ingenuity. Unfortunately for him, Cortes was able to capitalize on each of these shortcomings. [25]

Moctezuma is recovering his reputation in modern Mexico to a certain degree; he is no longer viewed as an inept or clueless leader. In the case of Cuauhtémoc, however, his reputation has never been sullied, and he is viewed as a brave, but largely doomed, warrior. Where Moctezuma was seen as vacillating or weak in his dealings with the Spaniards, Cuauhtémoc is seen as a strong leader who led an effective resistance to the Spaniards for a period of nearly one year. Indeed, he reflected the will of the Mexica rulers, and would not surrender to Cortes until the leadership group agreed to surrender. In fact, Cuauhtémoc and his advisers rejected several previous offers of surrender from Cortes. Cuauhtémoc was seen as the embodiment of the warrior spirit by the Mexica, and adapted to the Spaniards' methods of warfare throughout the battle for Tenochtitlan. Diaz mentions that the Mexica employed new tactics during the nine months of the war, including the use of feints and ambushes on land; the continued destruction of the bridges and causeways surrounding the city; the launching of attacks from the building roofs; the use of ambushes, via canoes, in the canals surrounding the city; and the use of hand-to hand combat as a means of neutralizing the Spanish cavalry. [26]

The use of these tactics by Cuauhtémoc implies growth and development by the Mexica, and seems to discredit in some ways, Todorov's contention that the Mexica were over-matched by the Spaniard's abilities to think abstractly and react quickly to situations. In point of fact, Todorov is largely silent about Cuauhtémoc, and his abilities to react to Spanish tactics. Where Todorov does mention Cuauhtémoc, it is in the famous reply to one of Cortes' initial offers for a truce "Do not talk to us any more about peace:

words are for women, arms for men!" (page 91) [27]. Todorov takes this to mean that Cuauhtémoc is a warrior and that words (and hence) language are for women: Todorov sees this as a bit of irony that Cuauhtémoc and the Mexica are defeated by words and language. As we have seen, Cuauhtémoc, while not possessing a command of written or spoken language which is equal to that of the Spaniards, can learn from the conquistadors and change his tactics, where appropriate.

One weekend in Mexico City stands out in my mind more vividly than the rest. My wife came to town that weekend, and we planned on visiting the pyramids of the sun and moon, as well as the shrine at Guadalupe. I suppose that at the time, I didn't think too much about visiting an old Aztec site in the morning and a Christian site in the afternoon. After all, these were the kinds of tours that visitors to the city went on all the time. I imagined that they would be conducted by a tour guide who was perfunctory, at best, and would just go through the motions, hoping that the tourists would leave him some sort of tip to supplement his income.

The trip to the pyramids was uneventful: we stopped at a few pre-arranged souvenir stands so that the tour operator could make some extra money by selling cheaply made trinkets of dubious value. When we arrived at the pyramids, and began walking up the steps of the pyramid of the moon, my impression of the trip began to change. The tour operator told about the practices of human sacrifice, pointing out the troughs carved into the pyramids where the blood and heads of the sacrificial victims would tumble down. When we reached the summit of the pyramid and the guide described the tables that were used to force the victims into the proper position for sacrifice, one which allowed the chest to be sliced open, and permitted easy access to the heart, there was

absolute silence as people looked around the pyramid, as if searching for traces of those victims sacrificed so long ago.

By the time we reached the summit of the pyramid of the sun, some two hundred feet above the plain of the city, most of the tourists who decided to climb to the top were fairly tired. Our guide told us that the Mexica believed the structure of the pyramids produced a source of energy, and at that moment, the sun came out from behind the clouds and bathed the plain and pyramids in an intense corona of light. I began to think that maybe I didn't really understand the Mexica at all and that they were quite alien from these visitors to their pyramids centuries later.

We left the pyramids at approximately one o'clock in the afternoon and drove to the Northeast corner of the city, where the shrine of Guadalupe was located. The present shrine was the third such shrine built at this location, the other two having been destroyed in the nearly five hundred years since the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego, and asked him to build a shrine in her honor. The shrine houses a full-size image of Mary which was imprinted on a cactus cloth serape that was worn as a coat by Juan Diego. It is displayed at the back of the basilica, protected by glass, and hung approximately thirty feet above the ground.

The sight of the serape and the size of the basilica are impressive; so are the stories surrounding the various miracles that have occurred at the shrine. Inside the basilica, there were several thousand people viewing the shroud; and there were thousands more people waiting patiently in line for the chance to view the garment. They came with their dogs, goats, chickens, cats and pigs to view the serape; outside the shrine, people were performing pilgrimages on their knees for a three-mile distance in thanks for

favors granted to them by the virgin. Young and old, peasant and man of means, all gathered to venerate a poor Mexica peasant who somehow built a shrine because he was asked to do so. As the sunlight streamed down on this sea of people, I once again thought that I would never be able to understand Mexico and the people living there; it was all too different from my own experience.

Todorov seems to think that this sense of otherness, a sense of being alien is the reason that the conquest happened; that the Spanish and the Mexica were too different from each other, that ultimately, neither side could grasp that the other was different, yet for all that, each side was human. He further believes that the use of symbol, writing and language by the Spanish resulted in the remarkably swift overthrow of the Aztec empire. [28]

I agree with Todorov's assessment of the sense of otherness: I have witnessed this sense of alien-ness myself. But I don't think that we can attribute the fall of the Aztec empire to the superior use of symbol, writing, and language by the Spanish. Certainly, the Spaniards' mastery of these concepts played a part in the overthrow of the empire, but we must avoid the mistake of devaluing the civilization of the Mexica when formulating our thesis of the conquest.

The Mexica, like the Spanish, were the product of centuries of warfare, and emerged from this state of near-constant battle as the pre-eminent power in Mesoamerica. That their power was waning at the time of the Spanish invasion seems to be acknowledged by many scholars. The reasons for the decline were numerous: a metropolis that was dependent on continued tribute from outlying lands to supply adequate food and manufactured goods; a tributary system that was overtaxing the ability

of vassal states to produce foodstuffs in adequate quantity; the use of sacrificial victims, taken from vassal states that were surprisingly similar in religious, social, and ideological beliefs to the Mexica; and the gradual diminishment of available sacrificial victims due to their assimilation into Mexica culture, all play a role in the slow but steady deterioration of the Mexica empire. Yet for all their seeming diminishment, the Mexica Empire built cities that rivaled those in Europe, produced art that was every bit as splendid as that in the Old World, and had a culture as fully developed as that of the Spanish. And yet, for all this, they lost the conquest. [29]

It would be easy, therefore to develop a theory that portrays the Mexica as hopelessly overmatched by the Spaniards, and to see the Mexica as "noble savages." In fact, many theories developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries painted such a picture. To do so, I believe, is at once to diminish the achievements of the Mexica culture, while at the same time attempting to whitewash some of its more, to modern sensibilities, gruesome aspects. In effect, such theories tend to look at the world as a series of dichotomies: Spanish versus Mexica; culturally advanced versus culturally backward; Christian versus non-Christian religion; written versus oral. The world, however, is not composed of a series of dichotomies; it is much more complex and challenging than simple right/wrong, yes/no answers. [30]

What then, are we to make of the conquest: how can we answer this question? What caused the downfall of the Mexica at the hands of the Spanish? Ultimately, our answer must be tentative, not something that we can say definitively, and must be composed of a number of pieces, and not just one or two simple answers. The time element of the conquest was too compressed; there was literally not enough time for the

two cultures to know each other, to develop side-by-side. As we recall from Bentley's book, time is required for true cultural understanding to occur, if it occurs at all. Next, we need to look at the culture of religious and ideological intolerance, which was abetted by years of warfare by both the Spanish and Mexica cultures, as contributing to the conflict that occurred. We must acknowledge that both the Spanish and Mexica viewed the "other," as different, as somehow not fully human. Both these cultures emerged victorious over years of conflict with "others" whom they conquered, both in terms of religion and in terms of ideology. Turning to the question of language, we must acknowledge that the superior use of language and writing on the part of the Spanish played a part in organizing troop movement and communication. Closely allied to this use of language and writing was the ability of Cortes to manipulate meetings and Mexica allies to his advantage. We must also credit Cortes' unique ability to think on his feet, which is not an inherent ability in Spanish reasoning as Todorov suggests, but a personality characteristic on the part of one man, that would play an enormous part in the history of conquest. Simply put, Cortes was the right man at the right time for this conquest. We must not, as Moctezuma did, underestimate the enmity of the subjugated tribes against the Mexica. Cortes' skillful seduction of these tribes helped sway the balance of power away from the Mexica and toward the Spanish. Ultimately, this additional manpower enable Cortes' small band of men to overcome a decided advantage on the part of the Mexica. Finally, we should note the technological advantage that the Spaniards enjoyed during the conquest: iron weapons, firepower, horses, the wheel, and writing. Despite all this, the Mexica adapted and fought the Spaniards to a standstill for almost nine months.

After nearly one-and-one-half years in Mexico City, my assignment was completed. During the course of the engagement, the scope of the assignment had changed somewhat. What started as a computer systems installation had been modified to include an analysis of the entire series of processes in place at the company. We met with people in every department and working with them, changed the way that the company did business. This type of exercise was new to Mexico, and was somewhat uncomfortable, since business in Mexico was at the time, hierarchical. We proceeded by fits and starts, and eventually made a number of changes, but the process required a combination of tenacity and patience, a tenacity and patience more on the part of the people in Mexico than the "experts" brought in to help them. We were, after all, just visitors and could walk away at the end of the assignment: they had to live with the results of changing processes and a hierarchical structure that had been in place for decades.

My colleagues and I wrapped-up our findings and presented them to the management team on a Thursday; our jobs were finished and the systems were being installed. We wanted to come back on that Friday to submit our reports and say our good-byes. It is customary in Mexico for each company to have a small altar located within the facility. The altar usually has a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe placed upon it. People often bring flowers or other devotional items to the altar, as a sign of respect or thanks. On Friday morning, we brought roses to the altar and a small plaque with a prayer attributed to St. Francis engraved upon it "Lord give me the strength to change the things I can, the serenity to accept the things I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference." We walked through-out the factory and said good-bye to each person who

worked there, stopping a minute to talk to every one of the two hundred people employed at the factory. By the time we left, the prayer had been translated and hung throughout the factory and office. The plaque is still on the altar, fourteen years later, and on most days, people bring roses to be placed beside the plaque.

I think I understand my countryman, Christopher Columbus, somewhat better than I did before my time in Mexico. I understand that he was a man who wanted to do something good, but political necessity, poor decisions, and circumstances beyond his control led to something far worse than he intended. I think I also understand the psyche of the Mexican people: a psyche that is part Mexica and part Spanish, and is learning to integrate the two sides in a way that was not done at the time of the conquest. The key of course, is understanding, and understanding does not come at once, or without an effort to accept the "other" as both human and different. Looking back some years later, I wonder who was changed more by this assignment, and whether or not I was the helper or the helped?

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