

Five Hundred Years of Genocide, Repression, and Resistance

Editors

WITH THIS ISSUE OF *SOCIAL JUSTICE* THE EDITORS WISH TO ADD OUR VOICES TO the millions that are reclaiming the true history of this continent over the last five centuries and celebrating its indigenous people as part of “500 Years of Resistance.” We do this not only out of revulsion at the crimes of genocide that began with Columbus’ arrival in 1492, but also because both the genocide and native resistance to it continue today. We do this not only in tribute to the indigenous peoples, but also because their cultures and values represent a planet-saving alternative to contemporary capitalist society. We do this because understanding the global meaning of 1492 is a crucial step in making the next 500 years better than the last.

Columbus and subsequent invaders set in motion a world-historic process of European colonization, by which a nascent capitalist system expanded monumentally across the earth — in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. It was a process based on human and environmental exploitation, the legacies of which continue to this day. The merciless assault on indigenous peoples served as the bedrock upon which Western culture and the capitalist economy were built in the Americas. Indeed, Europe also semi-enslaved its own for gain, beginning with the indentured servants who came to the Americas early on.

Human society had seen racism before, but nothing could approach the forms it took on this continent as the capitalist process unfolded. The destruction of indigenous societies, the enslavement of Africans, and the theft of the mestizo homeland in today’s Southwest were logical steps. All served primitive accumulation, as did the later importation of Asian labor.

We can also say that the planet had been mistreated before, but nothing could approach its post-1492 fate. Whether we think of global warming, deterioration of the ozone layer, destruction of the rain forests, or all the effects of environmental abuse on human communities, especially those of color, we know that disaster now faces life on this earth. Simply put, today’s environmental crisis results from 500 years of unbridled capitalist exploitation. “Progress” has not come without a staggering price, if it can be called progress at all.

The full meaning of the European invasion of the Americas would have been unimaginable to Bartolomé de Las Casas, our best-known eyewitness.

Nonetheless, he described with devastating clarity what was to become a model for such imperialist expansion. Originally a soldier with the invaders and later a priest, de Las Casas left us an account of events, *The Devastation of the Indies*, published in 1552, describing the atrocities and suffering that attended the Spanish invasion as it proceeded province by province. He apologizes repeatedly for not including every incident of horror, stating: "Were I to describe all this, no amount of time and paper could encompass this task."

What is there is enough. One hesitates to turn the page for fear of discovering another way that one human destroyed another: stabbing, dismembering, burning, beating, throwing against rocks, feeding to dogs, torturing, starving, raping, enslaving, and working to death. As described by de Las Casas, the invaders behaved like wild animals in a frenzy of blood lust — and the Spaniards were not alone among Europe's colonial assassins.

Never in history has there been such systematic destruction of an entire continent, and in so short a time. The genocide against the native peoples of Latin America was accomplished in less than 50 years. De Las Casas reports that in New Spain (Mexico), "the Spaniards have killed more Indians here in 12 years...than anywhere else in the Indies...some four million souls." Regarding the islands of San Juan (Puerto Rico) and Jamaica, he said, "I believe there were more than one million inhabitants, and now, in each of the two islands, there are no more than two hundred persons." A total of 25 million victims across the continent does not seem exaggerated and, in the opinion of some scholars, would be too low a figure.

De Las Casas' appeal to Spain's King Charles I to end the massacres produced royal edicts that went ignored by the invading soldiers and officials. Yet de Las Casas' "Brief Account" stands as an example of speaking out against injustice. It stands as a call for people today, 500 years later, to tell the truth about the history of this continent and to redress the legacy of racist violence that continues against both land and people.

Hans Koning takes up the call in this issue of *Social Justice* by exposing the myth of Columbus as navigator, hero, discoverer. "We find ourselves in a fight," he declares, "to establish the truth about our past, *finally*; a fight about how we teach our history to our children.... It is high time to *overcome* the Columbus legacy." Ward Churchill takes on "Deconstructing the Columbus Myth" with penetrating observations about Columbus as proto-Nazi and the resemblance of "New World" settlements to Nazi rule. In another article, Bill Bigelow offers an insightful exposé of Columbus as he is presented to children, describing how an entire worldview is developed from the assumptions and historical inaccuracies of the Columbus legend.

In answering that call from de Las Casas, we must look at certain underlying issues raised by the invaders' devastation. We must ask ourselves if a profound immorality was fundamental to all Western/non-Western relations

from the beginning. One answer is unavoidable: the ideological foundation of genocide is dehumanization, as the story of physical and cultural genocide in the Americas demonstrates. The native peoples were not “Christians,” therefore not human. With industrialization, the denial of humanity intensified as more and more people became objects to generate profit. In their book on Brazil, *Fate of the Forest*, Susanne Hecht and Alexander Cockburn comment that because of massive destruction in the Amazon, “the extinction is not only of nature but of socialized nature.”

Today we see an intensification of racism in the United States and around the world based on this same process of defining people as “the Other.” African Americans, Chicanos, and other Latinos, Asian Americans, immigrants in general, and, of course, today’s Native Americans — all people of color — are feeling the brunt of contemporary dehumanization. This is one reason why the fight for multiculturalism that Tony Platt analyzes in this issue is important. Poet-essayist Luis Rodriguez offers a vision of culture with room for both people of color and European strengths, while reminding us that we had “better be prepared to remake our continent with the full and equal participation of all.” Such perspectives suggest the aggressive campaign to demand social justice that is so needed today. For both physical and cultural genocide continue; we cannot file them away as distant history, a lamentable white man’s burden.

Resistance Also Continues

As Rigoberta Menchú states in this issue, “we are a people who refuse to be annihilated.... We know our struggle is just — it’s the only reason we still exist.” Resistance by indigenous peoples, as de Las Casas confirms, goes back 500 years and it continues today in many arenas: treaty and land rights, education, culture, language and traditional ways, repression and harassment of activists, drugs and alcohol in Native American communities, racism and exploitation. Odessa Ramirez’s articles in this issue review some of those struggles and this year’s anti-Quincentennial actions. The longstanding campaign to free Leonard Peltier, described in the review essay by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, offers an especially powerful symbol of the Native American resistance movement and its efforts to free political prisoners.

Native Americans are not the only people fighting the ravages of 500 post-Columbus years. Puerto Rico, whose indigenous peoples were wiped off the face of the earth within a few years, remains a full-fledged colony today. In this issue, Suzie Dod and Piri Thomas remind us of the healthy, thriving, cooperative, ecosystemic Taino people, who typify the Caribbean societies that Spain destroyed, and the very different life facing today’s Puerto Rican people. There and elsewhere, respect for what we call the environment is crucial to people of color for reasons of human as well as planet survival. A move-

ment against environmental racism has begun in the United States to combat the disproportionate presence of toxic wastes in poor and minority communities. Elizabeth Martínez's article on a current grass-roots struggle by a multiracial network to make the U.S. Environment Protection Agency do its supposed job shows that small but significant victories can be won with creative organizing and smart tactics.

Toward a Different 500 Years

No condemnation of the European invasion and colonization of the Americas can be too strong, as even the smallest study of indigenous history confirms. Yet along with righteous anger and an insistence on listening to silenced histories, the quincentennial year offers a unique chance to put forth radical alternatives to the Western expansionist model.

In her groundbreaking essay, Annette Jaimes makes a strong case for "re-visioning native America," which she begins by challenging claims that indigenous peoples were "backward" in areas ranging from agriculture to medicine. She also questions the concept of all indigenous life as unending drudgery to achieve minimum survival by pointing to societies where many have subsisted adequately or better on a few hours of work per week. What does that say about how we assess quality-of-life in relation to labor process?

Jaimes affirms that "the conceptual key to liberation of native societies is...also the key to liberating Eurocentrism from itself, unchaining it from the twin fetishes of materialism and production...." She believes that "the reemergence of a vibrant and functioning Native North America in the 21st century would offer a vital prefiguration of what humanity as a whole might accomplish." Only by recognizing the wisdom and values retained by "Stone Agers" of the modern indigenous world, she argues, "will we be able to forge a multifaceted but collectively held worldview that places materialism and spirituality in sustainable balance with one another."

With this hope of liberating modern capitalist society from itself, and thus transforming the world as shaped by European expansion 500 years ago, we can dream of a new and different 500 years to come. Nor can it be merely a dream. As María Elena Ramírez says in her "Resistance Rap" the issue is "insistence on our very existence — on our planet's existence."