



## **Columbus from the Native American Perspective: What Have We Learned in 500 Years?**

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Is the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus a non-event? As a native person, my guess is the discussion about Columbus will be like rain in the desert. It will be very noticeable for a while, perhaps even hopeful, but it will quickly disappear as we get back to business as usual.

This is unfortunate because the quincentennial is probably one of those historical hinge points that scholars like to point to and say “what if?” What if people took it seriously? What if church and society saw this as a critical year of reflection, repentance, and renewal? What if a new movement emerged from 1992 that actually changed the direction of life in the Americas for the next century? Would that be too much to hope for? Would that be possible?

Given the non-event nature of 1992, it seems very unlikely. What is more plausible is that a public debate will be held with fairly predictable participants whose opinions will crisscross the media like summer lighting. There may be some flashes of insight or enthusiasm, but in the end the national discussion will drift away without making a lasting impression on the masses of people in the United States and Canada.

Part of the reason is the absence of any real concern for Native issues in North America. Since the days of Geronimo, prior to World War I, Native issues and personalities have very rarely captured the front page on this continent. Other than a brief period of civil unrest in the 1970s when the American Indian Movement occupied Wounded Knee in South Dakota, there has been minimal exposure of the

Native perspective. And while this is true for the popular culture, it is even more true for the academic. North America’s indigenous culture is still relegated to the field of anthropology, which means it is a thing studied (past tense), not listened to (present tense). In Central and South America, where Native populations are large (even majority populations), concern is almost negligible given the totalitarian realities under which these indigenous peoples exist. The Columbus legacy continues to thrive in the southern part of the hemisphere with a vengeance.

In North America, where extermination practices reduced the Native community to around only 1% of the total population in the United States and 2% in Canada, the neglect is far more benign. Having largely erased Native people from the national consciousness, the larger western culture can usually ignore them. This complacency may be pricked by the discussion of 1492, but it would take a major effort to shift it into anything resembling active involvement. Most Americans will allow the quincentennial to pass as a minor footnote to our current history where unemployment and the outrageous cost of staying healthy seem far more important.

The irony is: growing unemployment and inequitable health care in 1992 are directly related to colonial involvement and western values introduced to the Americas in 1492. While the majority of Americans are looking at the symptoms, they are missing the causes. These connections elude the dominant society, but they are abundantly clear to the indigenous survivors of western colonialism. Perhaps because Native people exist in the basement of contemporary colonialism, they have a starkly different perspective. Their vantage point allows them a certain experience that European Americans have long forgotten: while 1492 is an historical artifact for most Europeans, it is a daily living reality for most Native people. For them, Columbus arrived only yesterday. The immediacy of all that Columbus stands for is ever present in Native life. It defines us. It surrounds us. It haunts us.

While the quincentennial is something long ago and far away for the majority of Americans, it is something “right now” for Native people. That something is the continuing struggle of our people to assert their way of life over against the culture imported by the colonizers. In the western mind, of course, that struggle is over. It is a dead issue. But for Native America that struggle goes on. It has never been settled, nor is it likely to be until western people are willing to become full partners in its resolution. The problem is, from the Native point of view, western people are historical sleep-walkers. They move through the realities of their own history as though they were living in a dream. What is real, they often ignore. What is fantasy, they often treat with absolute seriousness. For example, the reality that competition can destroy the social fabric of a people is ignored while the “threat” of not being competitive enough is taken as a fact of economic gospel. From the Native perspective, westerners expend enormous amounts of energy grappling with illusions, but have trouble focusing on the source questions of their lives. When Europeans stepped off the boats 500 or 400 years ago, they seemed bizarre to Native communities for this same reason. They would agonize over intangible conflicts that seemed to be self-destructive of their own social structures. They would chase mirages. But they would learn practical lessons from Native people only slowly and after much patient interaction. And once those lessons were

learned, Native people often became expendable as the dominant culture rolled across the Americas searching for fountains of youth or cities of gold.

The relationship between Native and European peoples in the Americas embodies the longest religious war in human history. Two very different cultural systems encountered one another 500 years ago. They came into conflict. One possessed superior fire power and slowly, inexorably decimated the other. But the survivors of that catastrophe, the remnant of the tribes, continued a guerrilla war of cultural integrity over generations. That guerrilla action continues today, 500 years later, in the cities and on the reservations of colonial America. Despite poverty, neglect, isolation, and disease, Native America still stands free and still asserts its right to exist outside the cultural value system of the conquering Europeans. Although I can't prove it, I strongly suspect that this single fact is something very few European Americans really understand or would even believe if they were told.

Why? Because Native America has simply ceased to exist in the popular imagination of the descendants of the colonizers. That this is true because of an intentional effort to wipe western cultural memory banks clean is a given for most Native people, but another point of

radical disbelief for most Europeans. To the average North American, it sounds vaguely paranoid and conspiratorial. After all, how could anyone really believe that there has been a systematic attempt to forget a whole race of people?

Three simple clues come to mind. First, Native people are the only ethnic community in North America to have been described in educational textbooks as having “vanished.” Second, Native nations are the only racial community to have been officially “terminated” by the federal government. Third, Native communities are the only peoples to have been targeted for official government programs of “assimilation.”

While some can argue that these are all just historical mistakes or well-intentioned errors, for the Native community they are clear indications that our struggle for cultural integrity goes on. Even more clearly, our efforts to survive physically are constant reminders of that five-century-old conflict. When we say that Columbus is directly connected to issues such as unemployment and health care, we are speaking from first-hand experience. The price for cultural identity has been high. Today Native people in North America live on the economic underside of western consumerism. In Central and South America, they live in abject poverty.

Which brings us back to why 1992 is such a “what if” moment for the Americas. If the consciousness of the dominant population could be raised, if they could see clearly the effects of colonialism in modern terms, if they could relate their own deteriorating economic and political condition to it, could they then rouse themselves to make changes before it is too late? Could they wake up from their sleep and see the signs of the times gathering around them? These are the powerful questions that Native people are trying to raise by interrupting the celebration of Christopher Columbus and gate-crashing his anniversary party. The goal is not to blame European Americans. The goal is not to make them feel guilty for events of the past. The goal is to sound an alarm that will shake them from the dream state of western colonialism. It is ultimately to recruit them as free and equal

partners in shaping a new reality for all of the people in the Americas. It is to take hold of our common destiny and turn that future toward peace, equality, and balance in the next century.

Native people have a far larger agenda in 1992 than simply wanting to spoil a national holiday. The protest against Columbus is a cry for help. It is a bell ringing in another room while America sleeps on the couch. It is an appeal to the dominant culture to wake up and see the effects of 500 years of colonialism, not just on Native communities, but on the whole fabric of life in the Americas. The spoils of colonialism may have succeeded in creating a comfort zone in North America, but that pleasure dome rests on the foundation laid five centuries ago, a foundation that is unstable, deteriorating, and historically self-defeating. If humanity has learned any lessons from the colonial experience of Africa and Asia, it is that the veneer of “the good life” is paper thin; in time it will crack and peel, exposing the injustices and inequalities which run through the whole structure like fault lines of shoddy construction. The United States and Canada are powerful and rich nations. They have grown that way by existing on the natural wealth of the Native homeland. But as they round the corner to the 21st century, the cracks in their colonial system are starting to show. It is unpleasant to point them out. It is irritating and alarming. And as the messengers bearing bad news, Native people can either be ignored or blamed themselves for trying to spoil a good time. The realities, however, from the Native

perspective, are there. Five hundred years ago we entered this relationship on the tide of greed that swept over the Americas. That competitive greed known as colonialism has thrived and created a very impressive superstructure. Moreover, the institutions supported by it may continue to last, even for another 500 years. But they will not endure. In time, they will collapse because they have no moral foundation. Colonialism is an illusion. It is a house of cards.

The year 1992 can be a catalyst for profound change, if we only have the resolve to see it as such. We, meaning both European and Native peoples, can make a radical breakthrough in our ability to communicate and understand one another at last.

And why is this so critical? Why should the vast majority of people in North America be so concerned to hear the voice of the 1% ? Because that 1% knows something that can save the other 99%.

If this sounds overly dramatic, then so be it. It is overly dramatic. It is prophetic. Even apocalyptic. After all, people who have seen their whole civilization upended by the cataclysm of western colonialism can be excused for using apocalyptic language. The essential message of Native experience is this: colonialism is a parasite that ultimately kills its host. That's what we have seen over 500 years of direct experience on the receiving end of colonial oppression. That's what we know to be true by the evidence of those cultures where colonialism remains in effect. That's also what we believe is accelerating in the host societies of North America. In the most graphic image, Native people would say that western colonial capitalism is starting to eat its own young. Descendants of the first immigrants are beginning to be colonized themselves, colonized by the very process set in motion 500 years ago.

Look at North America through Native eyes. We see a very fragile colonial structure teetering on a set of flawed assumptions. For example:

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(1) That western capitalism really can maintain a North American "standard of living" for the masses of its people. The reality, from the Native experience, is that it can maintain this artificial standard for an ever decreasing number of persons while the vast majority of the world's population goes hungry.

(2) That natural resources solve problems. The constant search for more fuel and the willingness to kill to get it symbolizes the inherent instability and volatile nature of late twentieth-century colonialism. From the Native viewpoint the hunger for more resources from the earth, coupled with the western mythology of this planet as an inexhaustible reservoir for fuel, is a prescription for disaster.

(3) That technology is synonymous with civilization. Technology does not "civilize" people nor will it save them. The addiction of western society to consumerism is a critical weakness. From the Native perspective, the true strength of any culture is its spiritual quality.

Five hundred years ago, Christopher Columbus inaugurated a pattern of colonialism that divided society into classes along the lines of economic standards that segregated rich and poor, especially in Central and South America. At the same time, the exploitation of the earth fed the growing consumerism that characterized colonial society in North America. Finally, the technology that allowed Europeans to destroy Native culture became an end in itself, eroding the ethical ground of the west and weakening its spiritual base.

These are the factors that are cannibalizing western people as we enter the next century.

They are only surface symptoms of a much deeper crisis in western culture. The core of the problem is the inability of our society to entertain alternatives to business as usual in the western mode. What began 500 years ago is still operating, although it has created enormous human suffering, vast ecological destruction, and is predicated on assumptions that are rapidly going bankrupt.

Native America offers one positive alternative. Having lived through this kind of colonial experience, it can see clearly the prognosis for our hemisphere if we continue following the path of Columbus. Native people have learned valuable lessons about how to survive even under the full weight of colonial oppression. Given a chance, they could teach our society a great deal about social justice, economic equality, and ecological sanity.

This quinentennial may be a non-event for most Americans, but it is a turning point whether we recognize it or not. In 1492, Europeans brought powerful technological tools to Native America. But what they failed to see was the equally powerful social and spiritual tools that Native people offered in return. Had we worked together, we could have altered human history—not through suffering and exploitation, but through peace, prosperity, and environmental balance. Now, those of us who are the descendants of both the colonizers and the colonized have a second chance. If we choose to, we can overturn the control of colonialism in our lives and change the course of our destiny for generations to come. We have that opportunity before us. We have that power in our hands.