1491

New Revelations of the Americas
Before Columbus

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NATIVE AMERICA, 1491 A.D.
In 1950, Allan R. Holmberg wrote a book called Nomads of the Longbow, which became one of the main sources for the outside world's image of South American Indians. His "mistake," according to Charles Mann, was describing the Indians as backwards and primitive and not recognizing the complexity of their communities.

Another historian, George Bancroft, wrote that before Europeans arrived, North America was "an unproductive waste... its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce and political connection."

The excerpts below refer to them both.

"EMPTY OF MANKIND AND ITS WORKS"

The Beni was no anomaly. For almost five centuries, Holmberg's Mistake—the supposition that Native Americans lived in an eternal, unhistoried state—held sway in scholarly work, and from there fanned out to high school textbooks, Hollywood movies, newspaper articles, environmental campaigns, romantic adventure books, and silk-screened T-shirts. It existed in many forms and was embraced both by those who hated Indians and those who admired them. Holmberg's Mistake explained the colonists' view of most Indians as incurably vicious barbarians; its mirror image was the dreamy stereotype of the Indian as a Noble Savage. Positive or negative, in both images Indians lacked what social scientists call agency—they were not actors in their own right, but passive recipients of whatever windfalls or disasters happenstance put in their way.

In different forms Bancroft's characterization was carried into the next century. Writing in 1934, Alfred L. Kroeber, one of the founders of American anthropology, theorized that the Indians in eastern North America could not develop—could have no history—because their lives consisted of "warfare that was insane, unending, continuously attritional." Escaping the cycle of conflict was "well-nigh impossible," he believed. "The group that tried to shift its values from war to peace was almost certainly doomed to early extinction." Kroeber conceded that Indians took time out from fighting to grow crops, but insisted that agriculture "was not basic to life in the East; it was an auxiliary, in a sense a luxury." As a result, "Ninety-nine per cent or more of what [land] might have been developed remained virgin."

Four decades later, Samuel Eliot Morison, twice a Pulitzer Prize winner, closed his two-volume European Discovery of America with the succinct claim that Indians had created no lasting monuments or institutions. Imprisoned in changeless wilderness, they were "pagans expecting short and brutish lives, void of any hope for the future." Native people's "chief function in history," the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, Baron Dacre of Glanton, proclaimed in 1965, "is to show to the present an image of the past from which by history it has escaped."

Textbooks reflected academic beliefs faithfully. In a survey of U.S. history schoolbooks, the writer Frances Fitzgerald concluded that the characterization of Indians had moved, "if anything, resolutely backward" between the 1840s and the 1940s. Earlier writers thought of Indians as important, though uncivilized, but later books froze them into a formula: "lazy, childlike, and cruel." A main textbook of the 1940s devoted only a "few paragraphs" to Indians, she wrote, "of which the last is headed 'The Indians Were Backward.'"

These views, though less common today, continue to appear. The 1987 edition of American History: A Survey, a standard high school textbook by three well-known historians, summed up Indian history thusly: "For thousands of centuries—centuries in which human races were evolving, forming communities, and building the beginnings of national civilizations in Africa, Asia, and Europe—the continents we know as the Americas stood empty of mankind and its works." The story of Europeans in the New World, the book informed students, "is the story of the creation of a civilization where none existed."
Complex as it is, this map of Indian effects on the environment is incomplete; no single map could possibly do justice to the subject. The most important omission is fire. I have highlighted some areas where fires deliberately set by Indians effectively controlled the landscape, but this practice played an important ecological role throughout the hemisphere as well, except in wettest Amazonia and northeastern North America. Similarly, scattered clearing, burning, and earth movement for drainage occurred in all agricultural areas—the map indicates only where these factors were especially concentrated. (My depiction of fire-dominated regions in the southern Amazonian highlands is highly speculative, unlike the rest of this map. Researchers have not established where such burning occurred—only where it seems likely.)

Berkeley researchers Cook and Borah spent decades reconstructing the population of the former Aztec realm in the wake of the Spanish conquest. By combining colonial-era data from many sources, the two men estimated that the number of people in the region fell from 25.2 million in 1518, just before Cortés arrived, to about 700,000 in 1623—a 97 percent drop in little more than a century. (Each marked date is one for which they presented a population estimate.) Using parish records, Mexican demographer Elsa Malvido calculated the sequence of epidemics in the region, portions of which are shown here. Dates are approximate, because epidemics would last several years. The identification of some diseases is uncertain as well; for example, sixteenth-century Spaniards lumped together what today are seen as distinct maladies under the rubric "plague." In addition, native populations were repeatedly struck by "cocoliztli," a disease the Spanish did not know but that scientists have suggested might be a rat-borne hantavirus—spread, in part, by the postconquest collapse of Indian sanitation measures. Both reconstructions are tentative, but the combined picture of catastrophic depopulation has convinced most researchers in the field.
Deganawidah was a leader of the Haudenosaunee (a loose military alliance among the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora). The following excerpt describes its system of government.

In the same sense, it was also a feminist dream: the Five Nations were largely governed internally by the female clan heads, and the Great Law explicitly ordered council members to heed “the warnings of your women relatives.” Failure to do so would lead to their removal. The equality granted to women was not the kind envisioned by contemporary Western feminists—men and women were not treated as equivalent. Rather, the sexes were assigned to two separate social domains, neither subordinate to the other. No woman could be a war chief; no man could lead a clan. Like other “separate-but-equal” arrangements, one side was less equal than the other.

Still, the women of the Five Nations under this regime were so much better off than their counterparts in Europe that nineteenth-century U.S. feminists like Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, all of whom lived in Haudenosaunee country, drew inspiration from their lot.

As Franklin and many others noted, Indian life—not only among the Haudenosaunee, but throughout the Northeast—was characterized by a level of personal autonomy unknown in Europe. Franklin’s ancestors may have emigrated from Europe to escape oppressive rules, but colonial societies were still vastly more coercive and class-ridden than indigenous villages. “Every man is free,” the frontiersman Robert Rogers told a disbelieving British audience, referring to Indian villages. In these places, he said, no other person, white or Indian, sachem or slave, “has any right to deprive [anyone] of his freedom.” As for the Haudenosaunee, colonial administrator Cadwalader Colden declared in 1749, they had “such absolute Notions of Liberty, that they allow of no Kind of Superiority of one over another, and banish all Servitude from their Territories.” (Colden, who later became vice governor of New York, was an adoptee of the Mohawks.)

So accepted now around the world is the idea of the implicit equality and liberty of all people that it is hard to grasp what a profound change in human society it represented. But it is only a little exaggeration to claim that everywhere that liberty is cherished—Britain to Bangladesh, Sweden to Soweto—people are children of the Haudenosaunee and their neighbors. Imagine—here let me now address non-Indian readers—somehow meeting a member of the Haudenosaunee from 1492. Is it too much to speculate that beneath the swirling tattoos, asymmetrically trimmed hair, and bedizened robes, you would recognize someone much closer to yourself, at least in certain respects, than your own ancestors?