

America five hundred years later

*Leopoldo Zea **

America, a projection of Europe

"Are the Americas a periphery, a cortex of Europe?" asked Fernand Braudel. Both notions reflect how since 1492 the New World's goods and people gradually entered the European arena of thought, past, present and future. Thus it was that the New World became integrated into Europe and achieved a wonderful new significance.

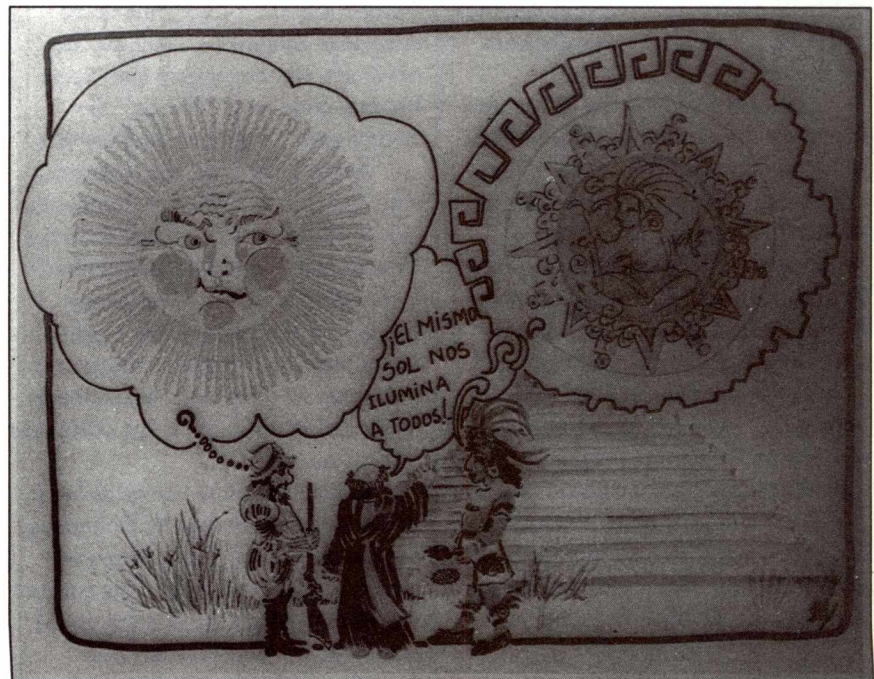
Was America, which Wallenstein never hesitated to include in the economic world of 16th century Europe, not the fundamental explanation of Europe? Surely, America was discovered and invented by the same Europe that regarded the voyage of Columbus as the most important historical event since Creation. America is the work of Europe, patiently constructed in its image to respond to its desires.

America was like an open space in which Europe could fulfill its desires, a fallow, Utopian, land of dreams. But to remain so, added Braudel, the men of the region had to remain solidly "shackled to it, imprisoned in its mission; servitude and slavery, those ancient self-perpetuating chains, rising again like a need or curse imposed by the excess of space. But it represented freedom and temptation as well."¹

In 1492 Christopher Columbus departed westward to fulfill a European dream born in the rich and splendid lands of the Great Khan: Cathay and Cipango, wondrous places brought to life by the tales of Marco Polo. On October 12 of that year Columbus invented the Asia of Marco Polo. He also created the object of his quest, "The Indies", which he would later have to see labelled "The West Indies." This discovery, accident or invention led to the universalization of history. In the European mind the histories of Europe, Asia, Africa and the New World became one, a universal history.

George William Frederick Hegel would give meaning to this history in the early 19th century, a meaning that was intrinsically European and Eurocentric. In it, Europe was both the culmination and conclusion of universal history. Asia was the unrepeatable past of a history that culminated in Europe. America and Africa were mere spaces for Europe to fill in order to fully realize its mastery of history.

Hegel was never so naïve as not to believe that those regions would some day be protagonists in that same history. But they represented the future of a history that was reaching its conclusion to advance itself in infinite progress. "America," said Hegel, "is the nation of tomorrow. In the future it will reveal its historical importance, perhaps in a war between North and South America." But in order to achieve this, "America must distance itself from the land on which universal history has unfolded until today. What has happened there so far is little more than the echo of the Old World, the reflection of a strange way

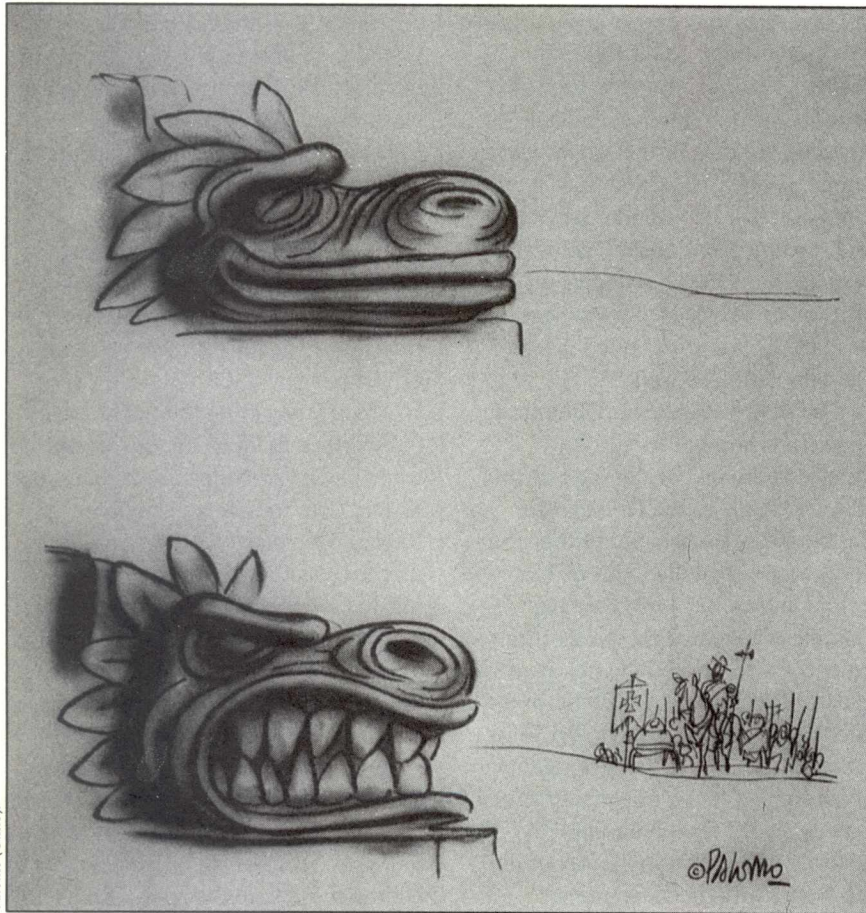


The same sun shines on us all.

Julieta San Román (Argentina).

¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilización material, economía y capitalismo. Siglos XV-XVII*. 3 volumes, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1984.

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Palomo (Chile).

A meeting of two worlds.

of life. We have no interest in America as a future, the philosopher does not prophesy.”²

But what was growing in America to make it the land of the future? What was it creating that would, when the time came, revert upon the world that made it? To conquer and colonize America went the peripheral peoples of Europe, the Spanish, Portuguese and British. In Spain, in that year of 1492, Granada fell, ending almost eight centuries of Islamic domination imposed by the Arab world, during which time the Iberian peninsula experienced racial and cultural mixture.

An accident of history made the Spanish King, Charles I, the Fifth Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Whereas this Spanish hegemony of

Europe was short-lived, not so the American Empire on which the sun never set. Her hegemony lost, Spain became peripheral. “Africa,” the saying goes, “begins at the Pyrenees.”

At the same time, the Normans, who had shaken Christian Europe, the heir to Rome, were expelled from the Continent at the end of the Hundred Years War. Under their influence England would become the island realm that Shakespeare immortalized in “Henry II”. England was no longer interested in what lay on the other side of the Channel.

England’s future lay in the West, in the lands discovered by Columbus, contesting Iberian domination and with it global hegemony. This conflict would materialize in America, in the war of which Hegel spoke. Two Americas with two concepts of the world emerged on the continent

discovered in 1492. Two utopias, two inventions that would eventually revert upon Europe.

The double American utopia

On one hand there is a “White America,” Anglo-Saxon and Puritan, with a mentality as insular as its origins in Great Britain. Thomas Jefferson spoke of this America, saying, “Fortunately separated by nature and a broad ocean from the destructive chaos of a quarter of the globe; of a spirit too elevated to tolerate the degradation of others; possessors of a country chosen as fit space for our descendants for a thousand generations.” Fashioned by honorable men, sincere, temperate, lovers of their fellow beings, “worshipping a Higher Providence, that with all its blessings shows that the happiness of man in this life and his good fortune in the next pleases it. What more do we need,” he asked, “to be a happy and prosperous nation?”³

A nation time and again blessed by its leaders. A nation that gave the world its most extraordinary declaration of liberty and democracy: “All men are born equal and their Creator has granted them certain inalienable rights. To guarantee these rights men form governments that derive their powers from the consent of the people. A nation with the right to reform or abolish, to institute a new government founded on these principles that in their judgement better guarantee its security and felicity.”⁴

Paradoxically, these rights are not universal. Their insular, and even selfish, conception restricts them to one nation that embodies all virtues and leaves the rest of the world to its defects by which to judge it.

On the other hand, there is the America labelled Latin so as to

² Hegel, “Lectures in Philosophy”, in *The Philosophy of History*.

³ Thomas Jefferson, *First Inaugural Address*. March 4, 1801.

⁴ *Virginia Bill of Rights*. June 12, 1776.

contrast it with the Saxon. Simón Bolívar, Father of Nations, wrote: "We are a small people; we inhabit a different world, surrounded by vast seas, new in almost all the arts and sciences, yet in a way old in the practice of civil society."⁵

Bolívar coincides with Jefferson in his awareness of insularity, but distinguishes himself by making this the point of departure for universality. The people in this region of America differ from the people of the United States. "Our nation," Bolívar continued, "is neither European nor North American, it is a combination of Africa and America rather than a product of Europe. Even Spain herself, with her African blood, her institutions and her character, ceases to be European. Here everything is mixed: European, Indian and African. This difference brings with it a most important challenge."⁶

Here Bolívar does not concern himself with insularity but rather with the capacity to integrate diverse races and cultures. Consequently, "it is a grand idea, this aspiration to unite the New World in a single nation with a solitary bond that links its parts to the whole. In the course of the centuries," added Bolívar, "we could find a single nation spanning the universe."⁷ Another utopia, another American invention, a race of races, a culture of cultures, a nation of nations; a race, culture and nation purely and simply of men.

The US, however, affirmed its insularity. In the words of George Washington, "A free people must be

constantly alert to the cunning of foreign powers since history and experience show that foreign influence is one of the most dangerous enemies of the Republican Government. Our real policy is the avoidance of permanent alliances with any part of the outside world."⁸

The primary concern of the US was to be the preservation and security of its liberties and democracy. Paradoxically, to that end they would implement the frontier policy of which Frederick Jackson Turner spoke. They pushed forward their frontiers so that their barriers would impede foreign interference. In this way they would extend the frontiers of liberty, but an exclusively United States liberty. They would thus fill the spaces of which Braudel spoke, pushing their walls forward in a policy of conquest distinct from the European version identified by Hegel. The conquest of space as a defense of US liberty and democracy.

In Bolívar's America there is a different conception of liberty and democracy. They are generalized,

accessible to all men and all nations. Consequently, conquerors cannot arise in this region, only liberators. For Hegel the great men of universal history, those who liberated the spirit through conquest, were the Alexanders, Caesars and Napoleons. Hegel wrote of these heroes: "Perhaps achievement of their goals was bitter, for at the very moment of accomplishment, they either died young like Alexander, were assassinated like Caesar, or were exiled like Napoleon."⁹

Simón Bolívar replied: "According to those gentlemen the only way to be great is in the manner of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon. I do not wish to be like them. I want to surpass them all, in my own way, for I cannot surpass their feats. Liberator or dead! Only liberators can arise from this region that history entered with the Conquest. The examples of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon seem unworthy of my glory. The title 'Liberator' is superior to all those bestowed on human pride. Therefore, it cannot be degraded."¹⁰

⁵ Simón Bolívar, *Letter from Jamaica*. Kingston, September 6, 1815.

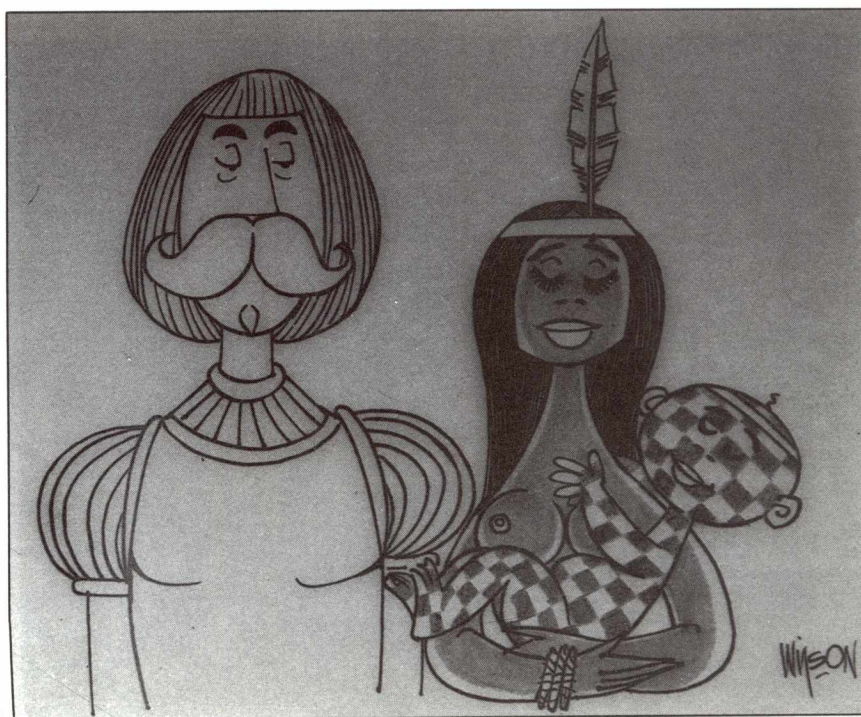
⁶ Simón Bolívar, *Angosturan Address*. February 15, 1819.

⁷ Simón Bolívar, *Letter from Jamaica*.

⁸ George Washington, *Farewell Address*. September 17, 1796.

⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*.

¹⁰ Simón Bolívar, *Letters to Generals Santander and José Antonio Páez*. February and May, 1826.



Wilson (Cuba)

American expansionism

The US' insularity, justified by its puritanism, led its people to a view of themselves as a nation predestined to impose its own, exclusive brand of liberty on the world, for the very protection of that liberty. They were a predestined nation, with a manifest destiny, expressed by their victories over American barbarity west and south of their frontiers. In 1847 the US tore more than half its territory from Mexico, and in 1855 the pirate William Walker intervened in Central America on her behalf. "The US," wrote Bolívar, "seems destined by providence to plague America with miseries, all in the name of liberty."¹¹

From this same insular conception rose the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which, put simply, called for "America for the Americans," that is, for US Americans. This is the same US that in 1776 achieved independence from Europe and became the first nation in America, and the world, to break out of colonialism.

With the West and Mexico's former territories assimilated, the US

began its colonialist policy. Europe would have to be expelled from the continent, leaving the US free to impose its own, exclusive, hegemony. This neo-imperialism began in 1898 with the expulsion of Spain from its last outposts in the Caribbean and the Pacific. America had to decolonize itself, but only under US colonial protection. All European colonialism was to be displaced as soon as possible. "America for the Americans."

Latin America experienced the aggression against Spain as an attack on its own peculiar identity, at least as expressed in the thought of Rodó and Vasconcelos. There arose an anti-imperialism that Vasconcelos defined as the battle between Monroeism and Bolivarism. "When after a decade of wars and agitation," write Morison and Commager, "things settled down, the US found itself a potential world power with territories in Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Midway, Guam, Tutuila and the Philippines, protectorates over Cuba, Panama and Nicaragua, and with interests and influences in the Far East."¹² William McKinley and

Theodore Roosevelt had forced the insular US utopia upon a major part of the planet.

Europe, a projection of America

With her hegemony over the American continent established, the US entered the First World War in the name of the defense of freedom. Providence rewarded this intervention by making her the great creditor for both the winners and losers of the war.

A destroyed post-war Europe could not compete with the US which, from a safe distance, had escaped the brutality of the war and consequently reaped the benefits. The America that Hegel had sent into the future was now in Europe, and its presence would grow during the Second World War. Once again this would be in the name of liberty, only this time against Nazi-fascist totalitarianism and Japanese militarism.

The promises made in the 1941 Atlantic Charter between Great Britain and the US, and the participation of nations of what was to be called the Third World, forced Europe to decolonize its African and Asian dependencies. But the US, allegedly securing the liberty of the Free World, would occupy the "power vacuums" left by Europe, in accordance with the doctrine of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. But in relation to whom? In relation to the USSR whose sacrifices in the war made it another of the great victors. The US would have to defend the Free World from perverse Soviet ideology. It therefore assumed the task of keeping the USSR within its frontiers, thereby initiating the Cold War.

In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, Western Europe was occupied by US troops as a defense against aggression while Eastern



E. Gómez (México).

¹¹ Simón Bolívar, *Letter to General Patricio Campbell*. Guayaquil, August 5, 1829.

¹² S.E. Morison and Commager, *Historia de los Estados Unidos*. Tomo II, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1951.

Europe was occupied by the Soviet Union, so as to assure its own security.

Five hundred years after its invention by Europe, America ceased to be the work of Europe. Europe is now the work of the US. Europe was to be reconstructed in the image of the US and according to its interests. There was no longer a vacuum in America, the US had already filled it, and it was prepared to fill whatever vacuums Europe left anywhere in the world, including Europe itself.

However, in 1989 a great change seemed to be under way. The political reforms carried out in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachov seemed to render US and Russian armed presence in Europe unnecessary. Nevertheless, recent events in the Persian Gulf may endanger this grand project. The US, with its immense stockpile of arms to intimidate the Soviets, has installed itself in the area of energy resources in the world. Without these resources the market economy being imposed on Europe will grind to a halt.

Now established in the Persian Gulf, the US can proclaim its hegemony over the world. "The US," says President George Bush, "assumes a large proportion of the leadership in this initiative. Only the US among the nations of the world has sufficient moral stature and means to sustain it. We are the only nation on the planet that can unite the forces of peace. God bless America."¹³

After Hegel, history reaches a new end according to American Francis Fukuyama: it culminates and ends with US ascendancy, just as Hegel's ended with post-revolutionary Europe.

It is the triumph of America's insular message. But what has happened to the other message, to mestizo America and its vision of a world in which all races and cultures live together in one great nation? This

¹³ George Bush, *Address to the US House of Representatives*. January 19, 1991.



America has deeply penetrated the soft underbelly of the other America, coming in under its barriers. White, Anglo-Saxon, Puritan America is now in retreat. There is now an outline of a great nation from one end of the American continent to the other, a nation of multiple and diverse races and cultures, but united in the knowledge that it is a concrete and therefore diverse expression of humanity.

Thus, five hundred years after the arrival of European caravels in America, cruisers, armored ships, aircraft carriers and nuclear bombers make the return journey to Europe. But a message validating that which is mestizo and therefore America's own, sets out in the same direction. It makes its presence powerfully felt in the rest of the world, validating the dreams of American liberators who take the place of the conquerors. **M**