

PROMISES OF THE NEW WORLD



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At the end of the 15th century, the Great Age of Exploration began for Western man.¹ Between the 15th and 19th centuries, explorers, adventurers, administrators, soldiers and emigrants moved out physically across the seas to the Americas, to Australia, into Africa. Meanwhile, scientists, inventors and engineers set out on an intellectual form of exploration, and investigated the heavens, the motion of planets, the measurements of time, the laws governing repetitive events. The geographical New World as well as the mechanical New World of mathematics, astronomy, physics, and technology became accessible to exploration. In a sense, not only the Americas but the whole planet became a New World. And eventually the two modes of exploration came together in a single movement: to replace the multitudinous gifts of nature with whatever man himself could make and do to bring nature under his domination. Seeking different goals, and traveling different routes — never as far apart as they seemed — both kinds of exploration ended in the religion of the Machine.

The official date for the opening of the New World has long been fixed as that of Christopher Columbus's first voyage, though by now one has reason to suppose that sundry blinder, more tentative thrusts were made in the same general direction — possibly first by Irish monks, Norse rovers, and Breton fishermen, and later by sailors from Bristol, between 1480 and 1490, as Carl Sauer has pointed out.² Certainly Greek cosmographers' picture of the earth as a globe had become known, if not generally accepted, even before the 15th century.

In turn, Columbus, though in no wise an intellectual leader, commanded the scientific means to plot his voyage and insure his return with astrolabe, the magnetic compass, and the existing sailing charts, means that gave him self-confidence to set forth on his tricky voyage and hold to his course in the face of his doubting crew. Thus, long before the industrial changes brought about by coal and iron, by the steam engine and the automatic loom, earlier technical advances — which, like the extensive use of wind power and water power in mills, originated in the Middle Ages — had wrought a far more significant change in the human mind. The latter-day practice of dating the industrial, and technical, revolution from the 18th century is a parochialism due originally to lack of historical information among technicians and lack of technical information and insight among historians.

Our current views of both the terrestrial and mechanical New Worlds have been falsely colored by the opaque religious prejudices of the leaders of the 18th century Enlightenment. Thinkers like Voltaire and Diderot, judging medieval institutions by the decayed survivals of their own day, took it for granted that the Middle Ages were a period of besotted ignorance and superstition, and in their desire to throw off the influence of The Established Church they converted the High Middle Ages, one of the great moments in European culture, into a neo-Gothic horror story, assuming that no serious progress had been made in any department until their own period. This anti-Gothic obsession resulted not only in the devaluation of medieval achievement but also in the wholesale destruction of buildings and institutions that, if preserved and renewed, might have helped to humanize the rising power system based on the machine.

Now that competent medieval scholarship has removed these blinders, we can appreciate that the groundwork for all these discoveries was laid by a series of technical advances in the 13th century, with the introduction of the magnetic compass and gunpowder from China; indeed, from the 10th century onward, European society staged a kind of dress rehearsal for the period that followed. This started with the clearing of the forests by the monastic orders and founding of feudal pioneer settlements and new cities on the eastern and southern borderlands, and the first settlers in the New World, so far from starting life anew, carried with them their typical medieval institutions and continued the same processes: the "American" log cabin actually came from Sweden.

According to this view of the explorations, the voyages and conquests of the Vikings, raiding Ireland and England, seizing the Orkneys, settling in Iceland, invading Sicily, conquering Normandy, finally reaching Persia, were the first wave of conquests and colonizations, and held the same pattern of ruthless intimidation and berserk destruction. So, too, the series of Crusades in the Near East must be regarded as the earliest manifestations of Western imperialism, culminating in the Fourth Crusade, which, without the faintest pretext of pious purpose or self-defense, went out of its way to sack and devastate the Christian realm of Byzantium. Again, the exploration of the perimeter of Africa by the Portuguese, beginning with the 15th century expeditions sponsored by Prince Henry the Navigator, set another ugly precedent, for it brought back Negro slaves. This resuscitated slavery, a practice that had been dying out, along with serfdom, in feudal and urban Europe, and the institution was spread by the Portuguese, the Spaniards, and the English under the piratical Sir John Hawkins, to the New World. As for the equipment that made these conquests and exploitations and enslavements possible — the armors, the

crossbows, muskets, and cannon — these new technical facilities gave the Europeans who commanded them, though vastly outnumbered, the power to overcome the aborigine; their grim audacity and their utter ruthlessness were not only supported but magnified by their superior weapons. What is more, the easy success of this achievement reinforced the new power complex that had been coming into existence.

From the beginning, there was an inner contradiction in Western man's attitude toward the New World, not merely between the dream and the muddy reality but between the desire to extend the influence of Christianity — under royal power and command — to distant parts of the world and a seething dissatisfaction with these same institutions at home, which nourished the hope that at least on the other side of the planet a fresh start might be made. On one hand, the Christian missionaries sought to convert the heathen — by fire and sword, if need be — to the gospel of peace, brotherhood and heavenly beatitude; on the other, the more venturesome spirits wished to throw off the constraining traditions and customs, and begin life afresh, leveling distinctions of class, eliminating superfluities and luxuries, privileges and distinctions, and hierarchical rank — in short, to go back to the Stone Age, before the institutions of Bronze Age civilization had crystalized. Though the Western Hemisphere was indeed inhabited, and many parts of it were artfully cultivated, so much of it was so sparsely occupied that the European thought of it as a virgin continent against whose wildness he pitted his manly strength. In one mood, the European invaders preached the Christian gospel to the native idolaters, subverted them with strong liquors, forced them to cover their nakedness with clothes, and worked them to an early death in silver and gold mines. In another, the pioneer took on the ways of the native American, adopted his leather costume, and reverted to the ancient paleolithic economy — hunting, fishing, gathering shellfish and berries, reveling in the wilderness and its solitude, defying orthodox law and order, and yet under pressure improvising brutal substitutes. Nowhere were these contradictions more flagrant than in North America. The very colonists who threw off their allegiance to England and justified their act in the name of freedom, equality, and the right to happiness, retained the institution of slavery and exerted constant military pressure upon the Indians, whose lands they systematically seized by fraud and force, shamelessly described as "purchase," sanctified by treaties the United States government has repeatedly broken — and still keeps breaking — at its own convenience.

But an even more tragic paradox sullied the New World dream and made it impossible to begin life afresh under a new sky. For the high cultures that were already established in Mexico, Central America and the Andes were not in any sense primitive or new; still less did they represent more acceptable human ideals than those the Old World cultures had put forward. The Conquistadors of Mexico and Peru found a native population so rigidly regimented, so completely deprived of initiative, that in Mexico, as soon as the emperor, Montezuma, was captured and unable to give orders, they offered little or no overt resistance to the invaders. Here, in short, in the "new" world was the same institutional complex that had shackled civilization since its beginnings, in Mesopotamia and Egypt: slavery, caste, war, divine kingship, and even the religious sacrifice of human victims on altars — sometimes, as with the Aztecs, on an appalling scale. Politically speaking, Western imperialism was carrying coals to Newcastle. Yet later, all over the world, the more understanding civilized representatives, such as Captain James Cook, Herman Melville, Alfred Russell Wallace and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, found little pockets of humanity living much the same kind of life as had their paleolithic or neolithic ancestors, whose mild manners and habits of mutual aid contrasted favorably with the harsh practices of most later "civilizations."

As it turned out, the wilderness that Western man had failed to explore was the dark continent of his own soul, that very "heart of darkness" which Joseph Conrad depicted, released by its distance from Old World sanctions, throwing off archaic taboos, conventional wisdom, and religious inhibitions, and obliterating every trace of neighborly love and humility. Wherever Western man went, slavery, land robbery, lawlessness, culture-wrecking, and the outright extermination of both wild beasts and tame men went with him, for the only force he now respected — an enemy with equal power to inflict damage upon him — was lacking, once his feet were firmly established on the new soil. Within half a dozen years after Columbus' landing the Spaniards, a contemporary observer estimated, had killed off one and a half million natives.

Emerson noted, significantly, in his essay on "War," that "the celebrated Cavendish, who was thought in his time a good Christian man, wrote thus to Lord Hunsdon, on his return from a voyage around the world: 'Sept. 1588. It hath pleased Almighty God to suffer me to circumpass the whole globe of the world, entering in at the Strait of Magellan, and returning by the Cape of Buena Esperanza; in which voyage I have either discovered or brought certain intelligence of all the rich places of the world, which were ever discovered by any Christian. I have navigated along the coast of Chile, Peru & New Spain, where I made great

EDITOR'S NOTE:

1 Mumford's use of 'man' to describe both genders of humanity is typical of the era in which he wrote, and continues into this new century/millennium. Critics suggest past writings be edited to reflect the broader inclusion of both genders in human portrayal but that presumes the writers in question were as capacious in their perceptions.

2. See 'Plant & Animal Destruction in Economic History' by Carl Ortwin Sauer, December 2003 issue of the NCTE.

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