

CULTURE OF CONQUEST

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of prior accumulation.

—Karl Marx, from “Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,” *Capital*

HOW IT BEGAN

The late anthropologist Edward H. Spicer wrote that the initial Europeans who participated in colonization of the Americas were heirs to rich and ancient cultures, social relations, and customs in their lands of origin, whether Spain, France, Holland, or England. In the passage to the Americas and encountering the Indigenous inhabitants, they largely abandoned the webs of European social relations. What each actually participated in was a culture of conquest—violence, expropriation, destruction, and dehumanization.¹

Spicer’s observation is true, but the culture of conquest didn’t start with Europeans crossing the Atlantic. European institutions and the worldview of conquest and colonialism had formed several centuries before that. From the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, Europeans conducted the Crusades to conquer North Africa and the Middle East, leading to unprecedented wealth in the hands of a few. This profit-based religion was the deadly element that European merchants and settlers brought to the Americas. In addi-

tion to seeking personal wealth, colonizers expressed a Christian zeal that justified colonialism. Along with that came the militaristic tradition that had also developed in western Europe during the Crusades (literally, “carrying of the cross”). Although the popes, beginning with Urban II, called for most of the ventures, the crusading armies were mercenary outfits that promised the soldiers the right to sack and loot Muslim towns and cities, feats that would gain them wealth and prestige back home. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, the papacy began directing such mercenaries to crush domestic “enemies” in their midst, as well—pagans and commoners in general, especially women (as ostensible witches) and heretics. In this way, knights and noblemen could seize land and force the commoners living on it into servitude. Historian Peter Linebaugh notes that whereas the anti-Muslim Crusades were attempts to control the lucrative Muslim trade routes to the Far East, the domestic crusades against heretics and commoners were carried out to terrorize poor people and at the same time to enlist them in the lucrative and adventurous yet holy venture: “Crusading was thus a murderous device to resolve a contradiction by bringing baron and commoner together in the cauldron of religious war.”²

The first population forcibly organized under the profit motive—whose labor was exploited well before overseas exploitation was possible—was the European peasantry. Once forced off their land, they had nothing to eat and nothing to sell but their labor. In addition, entire nations, such as Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Bohemia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia, were colonized and forced under the rule of various monarchies. The Moorish Nation and the Sephardic Jewish minority were conquered and physically deported by the Castilian/Aragon monarchy from the Iberian Peninsula—a long-term project culminating in group expulsions beginning in 1492, the year Columbus sailed to America.

The institutions of colonialism and methods for relocation, deportation, and expropriation of land had already been practiced, if not perfected, by the end of the fifteenth century.³ The rise of the modern state in western Europe was based on the accumulation of wealth by means of exploiting human labor and displacing millions of subsistence producers from their lands. The armies that did this

work benefited from technological innovations that allowed the development of more effective weapons of death and destruction. When these states expanded overseas to obtain even more resources, land, and labor, they were not starting anew. The peoples of the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and the Andes were the first overseas victims. West and South Africa, North America, and the rest of South America followed. Then came all of Africa, the Pacific, and Asia.

The sea voyages of European explorers and merchants in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were not the first of their kind. These voyagers borrowed the techniques for long-distance sea travel from the Arab world. Before the Arabs ventured into the Indian Ocean, Inuits (Eskimos) plied the Arctic Circle in their kayaks for centuries and made contacts with many peoples, as did Norse, South Asian, Chinese, Japanese, Peruvian, and Melanesian and Polynesian fishing peoples of the Pacific. Egyptian and Greek knowledge of the seas most likely extended beyond the Mediterranean, into the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Western European seagoing merchants and the monarchies that backed them would differ only in that they had developed the bases for colonial domination and exploitation of labor in those colonies that led to the capture and enslavement of millions of Africans to transport to their American colonies.

LAND AS PRIVATE PROPERTY

Along with the cargo of European ships, especially of the later British colonizing ventures, came the emerging concept of land as private property. Esther Kingston-Mann, a specialist in Russian land tenure history, has reconstructed the elevation of land as private property to “sacred status” in sixteenth-century England.⁴ The English used the term “enclosure” to denote the privatization of the commons. During this time, peasants, who constituted a large majority of the population, were evicted from their ancient common lands. For centuries the commons had been their pasture for milk cows and for running sheep and their source for water, wood for fuel and construction, and edible and medicinal wild plants. Without these resources they could not have survived as farmers, and

they did not survive as farmers after they lost access to the commons. Not only were the commons privatized during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were also transformed into grazing lands for commercial sheep production, wool being the main domestic and export commodity, creating wealth for a few and impoverishment for the many. Denied access to the former commons, rural subsistence farmers and even their children had no choice but to work in the new woolen textile factories under miserable conditions—that is, when they could find such work for unemployment was high. Employed or not, this displaced population was available to serve as settlers in the North American British colonies, many of them as indentured servants, with the promise of land. After serving their terms of indenture, they were free to squat on Indigenous land and become farmers again. In this way, surplus labor created not only low labor costs and great profits for the woolens manufacturers but also a supply of settlers for the colonies, which was an “escape valve” in the home country, where impoverishment could lead to uprisings of the exploited. The sacred status of property in the forms of land taken from Indigenous farmers and of Africans as chattel was seeded into the drive for Anglo-American independence from Britain and the founding of the United States.

Privatization of land was accompanied by an ideological drive to paint the commoners who resisted as violent, stupid, and lazy. The English Parliament, under the guise of fighting backwardness, criminalized former rights to the commons. Accompanying and facilitating the privatization of the commons was the suppression of women, as feminist theorist Silvia Federici has argued, by conjuring witchcraft. Those accused of witchcraft were poor peasant women, often widows, while the accusers tended to be wealthier, either their landlords or employers, individuals who controlled local institutions or had ties to the national government. Neighbors were encouraged to accuse one another.⁵ Witchcraft was considered mainly a female crime, especially at the peak of the witch hunts between 1550 and 1650, when more than 80 percent of those who were charged with witchcraft, tried, convicted, and executed were women. In England, those accused of witchcraft were mostly elderly women, often beggars, sometimes the wives of living laborers but usually widows.

Actions and local occurrences said to indicate witchcraft included nonpayment of rent, demand for public assistance, giving the “evil-eye,” local die-offs of horses or other stock, and mysterious deaths of children. Also among the telltale actions were practices related to midwifery and any kind of contraception. The service that women provided among the poor as healers was one of a number of vestiges from pre-Christian, matrilineal institutions that once predominated in Europe. It is no surprise that those who had held on to and perpetuated these communal practices were those most resistant to the enclosure of the commons, the economic base of the peasantry, as well as women’s autonomy.⁶

The traumatized souls thrown off the land, as well as their descendants, became the land-hungry settlers enticed to cross a vast ocean with the promise of land and attaining the status of gentry. English settlers brought witch hunting with them to Jamestown, Virginia, and to Salem, Massachusetts. In language reminiscent of that used to condemn witches, they quickly identified the Indigenous populations as inherently children of Satan and “servants of the devil” who deserved to be killed.⁷ Later the Salem authorities would justify witch trials by claiming that the English settlers were inhabiting land controlled by the devil.

WHITE SUPREMACY AND CLASS

Also part of the Christian colonizers’ outlook was a belief in white supremacy. As an 1878 US Protestant evangelical hymn suggests—“Are your garments spotless? / Are they white as snow? / Are they washed in the blood of the lamb?”—whiteness as an ideology involves much more than skin color, although skin color has been and continues to be a key component of racism in the United States. White supremacy can be traced to the colonizing ventures of the Christian Crusades in Muslim-controlled territories and to the Protestant colonization of Ireland. As dress rehearsals for the colonization of the Americas, these projects form the two strands that merge in the geopolitical and sociocultural makeup of US society.

The Crusades in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal today)

and expulsion of Jews and Muslims were part of a process that created the core ideology for modern colonialism—white supremacy—and its justification for genocide. The Crusades gave birth to the papal law of *limpieza de sangre*—cleanliness of blood—for which the Inquisition was established by the Church to investigate and determine. Before this time the concept of biological race based on “blood” is not known to have existed as law or taboo in Christian Europe or anywhere else in the world.⁸ As scapegoating and suspicion of Conversos (Jews who had converted to Christianity) and Moriscos (Muslims who had converted to Christianity) intensified over several centuries in Christian-controlled Spain, the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* was popularized. It had the effect of granting psychological and increasingly legal privileges to “Old Christians,” both rich and poor, thus obscuring the class differences between the landed aristocracy and land-poor peasants and shepherds. Whatever their economic station, the “Old Christian” Spanish were enabled to identify with the nobility. As one Spanish historian puts it, “The common people looked upwards, wishing and hoping to climb, and let themselves be seduced by chivalric ideals: honour, dignity, glory, and the noble life.”⁹ Lope de Vega, a sixteenth-century contemporary of Cervantes, wrote: “Soy un hombre, / aunque de villana casta, / limpio de sangre y jamas / de hebrea o mora manchada” (I am a man, although of lowly status, yet clean of blood and with no mixture of Jewish or Moorish blood).

This cross-class mind-set can be found as well in the stance of descendants of the old settlers of British colonization in North America. This then is the first instance of class leveling based on imagined racial sameness—the origin of white supremacy, the essential ideology of colonial projects in America and Africa. As Elie Wiesel famously observed, the road to Auschwitz was paved in the earliest days of Christendom. Historian David Stannard, in *American Holocaust*, adds the caveat that the same road led straight through the heart of America.¹⁰ The ideology of white supremacy was paramount in neutralizing the class antagonisms of the landless against the landed and distributing confiscated lands and properties of Moors and Jews in Iberia, of the Irish in Ulster, and of Native American and African peoples.

Great Britain, emerging as an overseas colonial power a century after Spain did, absorbed aspects of the Spanish racial caste system into its colonialist rationalizations, particularly regarding African slavery, but it did so within the context of Protestantism, which imagined a chosen people founding and raising a New Jerusalem. The English did not just adapt the habits and experiences of Spanish colonization; they had their own prior experience, which actually constituted overseas imperialism. During the early seventeenth century the English conquered Ireland and declared a half-million acres of land in the north open to settlement. The settlers who served early settler colonialism came mostly from western Scotland. England had previously conquered Wales and Scotland, but it had never before attempted to remove so large an Indigenous population and plant settlers in their place as in Ireland. The ancient Irish social system was systematically attacked, traditional songs and music forbidden, whole clans exterminated, and the remainder brutalized. A “wild Irish” reservation was even attempted. The “plantation” of Ulster was as much a culmination of, as it was a departure from, centuries of intermittent warfare in Ireland. In the sixteenth century, the official in charge of the Irish province of Munster, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, ordered that

the heddes of all those (of what sort soever thei were) which were killed in the daie, should be cutte off from their bodies and brought to the place where he [Gilbert] incamped at night, and should there bee laied on the ground by eche side of the waie ledying into his owne tente so that none could come into his tente for any cause but commonly he muste passe through a lane of heddes which he used ad terrorem. . . . [It brought] greate terrour to the people when thei sawe the heddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kindsfolke, and friends.¹¹

The English government paid bounties for the Irish heads. Later only the scalp or ears were required. A century later in North America, Indian heads and scalps were brought in for bounty in the same manner. Although the Irish were as “white” as the English, trans-

forming them into alien others to be exterminated previewed what came to be perceived as racist when applied to Indigenous peoples of North America and to Africans.

At that juncture, both in the Christian Crusades against Muslims and England's invasion of Ireland, the transition from religious wars to the genocidal mode of colonialism is apparent. The Irish under British colonial rule, well into the twentieth century, continued to be regarded as biologically inferior. During the mid-nineteenth century, influenced by social Darwinism, some English scientists peddled the theory that the Irish (and all people of color) had descended from apes, while the English were descendants of "man," who had been created by God "in his own image." Thus the English were "angels" and the Irish (and other colonized peoples) were a lower species, which today US "Christian Identity" white supremacists call "mud people," inferior products of the process of evolution.¹² The same Sir Humphrey Gilbert who had been in charge of the colonization of Ulster planted the first English colonial settlement in North America in Newfoundland in the summer of 1583. In the lead-up to the formation of the United States, Protestantism uniquely refined white supremacy as part of a politico-religious ideology.

TERMINAL NARRATIVES

According to the current consensus among historians, the wholesale transfer of land from Indigenous to Euro-American hands that occurred in the Americas after 1492 is due less to European invasion, warfare, and material acquisitiveness than to the bacteria that the invaders unwittingly brought with them. Historian Colin Calloway is among the proponents of this theory, and he writes that "epidemic diseases would have caused massive depopulation in the Americas whether brought by European invaders or brought home by Native American traders."¹³ Such an absolutist assertion renders any other fate for the Indigenous peoples improbable. Professor Calloway is a careful and widely respected historian of Indigenous North

America, but his conclusion articulates a default assumption. The thinking behind the assumption is both ahistorical and illogical in that Europe itself lost a third to one-half of its population to infectious disease during medieval pandemics. The principal reason the consensus view is wrong and ahistorical is that it erases the effects of settler colonialism with its antecedents in the Spanish “Reconquest” and the English conquest of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. By the time Spain, Portugal, and Britain arrived to colonize the Americas, their methods of eradicating peoples or forcing them into dependency and servitude were ingrained, streamlined, and effective. If disease could have done the job, it is not clear why the European colonizers in America found it necessary to carry out unrelenting wars against Indigenous communities in order to gain every inch of land they took from them—nearly three hundred years of colonial warfare, followed by continued wars waged by the independent republics of the hemisphere.

Whatever disagreement may exist about the size of precolonial Indigenous populations, no one doubts that a rapid demographic decline occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its timing from region to region depending on when conquest and colonization began. Nearly all the population areas of the Americas were reduced by 90 percent following the onset of colonizing projects, decreasing the targeted Indigenous populations of the Americas from one hundred million to ten million. Commonly referred to as the most extreme demographic disaster—framed as natural—in human history, it was rarely called genocide until the rise of Indigenous movements in the mid-twentieth century forged questions.

US scholar Benjamin Keen acknowledges that historians “accept uncritically a fatalistic ‘epidemic plus lack of acquired immunity’ explanation for the shrinkage of Indian populations, without sufficient attention to the socioeconomic factors . . . which predisposed the natives to succumb to even slight infections.”¹⁴ Other scholars agree. Geographer William M. Denevan, while not ignoring the existence of widespread epidemic diseases, has emphasized the role of warfare, which reinforced the lethal impact of disease. There were military engagements directly between European and Indigenous nations, but many more saw European powers pitting one Indigenous na-

tion against another or factions within nations, with European allies aiding one or both sides, as was the case in the colonization of the peoples of Ireland, Africa, and Asia. Other killers cited by Denevan are overwork in mines, frequent outright butchery, malnutrition and starvation resulting from the breakdown of Indigenous trade networks, subsistence food production and loss of land, loss of will to live or reproduce (and thus suicide, abortion, and infanticide), and deportation and enslavement.¹⁵ Anthropologist Henry Dobyns has pointed to the interruption of Indigenous peoples' trade networks. When colonizing powers seized Indigenous trade routes, the ensuing acute shortages, including food products, weakened populations and forced them into dependency on the colonizers, with European manufactured goods replacing Indigenous ones. Dobyns has estimated that all Indigenous groups suffered serious food shortages one year in four. In these circumstances, the introduction and promotion of alcohol proved addictive and deadly, adding to the breakdown of social order and responsibility.¹⁶ These realities render the myth of "lack of immunity," including to alcohol, pernicious.

Historian Woodrow Wilson Borah focused on the broader arena of European colonization, which also brought depopulation in the Pacific Islands, Australia, western Central America, and West Africa.¹⁷ Sherburne Cook—associated with Borah in the revisionist Berkeley School, as it was called—studied the attempted destruction of the California Indians. Cook estimated 2,245 deaths among peoples in Northern California—the Wintu, Maidu, Miwak, Omo, Wappo, and Yokuts Nations—in late-eighteenth-century armed conflicts with the Spanish, while some 5,000 died from disease and another 4,000 were relocated to missions. Among the same people in the second half of the nineteenth century, US armed forces killed 4,000, and disease killed another 6,000. Between 1852 and 1867, US citizens kidnapped 4,000 Indian children from these groups in California. Disruption of Indigenous social structures under these conditions and dire economic necessity forced many of the women into prostitution in goldfield camps, further wrecking what vestiges of family life remained in these matriarchal societies.¹⁸

Proponents of the default position emphasize attrition by disease despite other causes equally deadly, if not more so. In doing so they

refuse to accept that the colonization of America was genocidal by plan, not simply the tragic fate of populations lacking immunity to disease. In the case of the Jewish Holocaust, no one denies that more Jews died of starvation, overwork, and disease under Nazi incarceration than died in gas ovens, yet the acts of creating and maintaining the conditions that led to those deaths clearly constitute genocide.

Anthropologist Michael V. Wilcox asks, "What if archaeologists were asked to explain the continued presence of descendant communities five hundred years after Columbus instead of their disappearance or marginality?" Cox calls for the active dismantling of what he terms "terminal narratives"—"accounts of Indian histories which explain the absence, cultural death, or disappearance of Indigenous peoples."¹⁹

GOLD FEVER

Searching for gold, Columbus reached many of the islands of the Caribbean and mapped them. Soon, a dozen other soldier-merchants mapped the Atlantic coast from the northern Maritimes to the tip of South America. From the Iberian Peninsula came merchants, mercenaries, criminals, and peasants. They seized the land and property of Indigenous populations and declared the territories to be extensions of the Spanish and Portuguese states. These acts were confirmed by the monarchies and endorsed by the papal authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 divided the "New World" between Spain and Portugal with a line drawn from Greenland south through what is now Brazil. Called the Doctrine of Discovery, it claimed that possession of the entire world west of that line would be open to Spanish conquest and all east of it to Portuguese conquest.

The story is well known. In 1492, Columbus sailed with three ships on his first voyage at the behest of Ferdinand, King of Aragon, and Isabella, Queen of Castille. The marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469 had led to the merger of their kingdoms into what would become the core of the Spanish state. Columbus planted a colony of forty of his men on "Española" (now the Dominican Re-

public and Haiti) and returned to Spain with Indigenous slaves and gold. In 1493, Columbus returned to the Caribbean with seventeen ships, more than a thousand men, and supplies. He found that the men he had left on the first trip had subsequently been killed by the Indigenous inhabitants. After planting another settlement, Columbus returned to Spain with four hundred Arawak slaves. With seven ships, Columbus returned to the Caribbean in 1498, reaching what is now Venezuela, and he made a fourth and final voyage in 1502, this time touching the Caribbean coast of Central America. In 1513, Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama and charted the Pacific coast of the Americas. Juan Ponce de León claimed the Florida peninsula for Spain in 1513. In 1521, following a three-year bloodbath and overthrow of the Aztec state, Hernando Cortés proclaimed Mexico as New Spain. Parallel with the crushing of Mexican resistance were Ferdinand Magellan's explorations and charting of the Atlantic coast of the South American continent, followed by Spanish wars against the Inca Nation of the Andes. In both Mexico and Peru, the conquistadors confiscated elaborate artwork and statuary made of gold and silver to be melted down for use as money. During the same period, the Portuguese laid waste to what is today Brazil and began a thriving slave trade that would funnel millions of enslaved Africans to South America, beginning the lucrative Atlantic slave trade.

The consequences of this amassing of fortunes were first felt in the catastrophe experienced by small farmers in Europe and England. The peasants became impoverished, dependent workers crowded into city slums. For the first time in human history, the majority of Europeans depended for their livelihood on a small wealthy minority, a phenomenon that capitalist-based colonialism would spread worldwide. The symbol of this new development, indeed its currency, was gold. Gold fever drove colonizing ventures, organized at first in pursuit of the metal in its raw form. Later the pursuit of gold became more sophisticated, with planters and merchants establishing whatever conditions were necessary to hoard as much gold as possible. Thus was born an ideology: the belief in the inherent value of gold despite its relative uselessness in reality. Investors, monarchies, and parliamentarians devised methods to control the

processes of wealth accumulation and the power that came with it, but the ideology behind gold fever mobilized settlers to cross the Atlantic to an unknown fate. Subjugating entire societies and civilizations, enslaving whole countries, and slaughtering people village by village did not seem too high a price to pay, nor did it appear inhumane. The systems of colonization were modern and rational, but its ideological basis was madness.