

MOST of us know, or think we know, what the first Europeans encountered when they began their formal invasion of the Americas in 1492: a pristine world of overwhelming natural abundance and precious few people; a hemisphere where - save perhaps for the Aztec and Mayan civilizations of Central America and the Incan state in Peru - human beings indeed trod lightly upon the earth. Small wonder that, right up to the present day, American Indians have usually been presented as either underachieving metahippies, tree-hugging saints or some combination of the two.

The trouble with all such stereotypes, as Charles C. Mann points out in his marvelous new book, "1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus," is that they are essentially dehumanizing. For cultural reasons of their own, Europeans and white Americans have "implicitly depicted Indians as people who never changed their environment from its original wild state. Because history is change, they were people without history."

However, instead of a community devoid of impact on the Americas, Mann argues the following in his book:

- In 1491 there were probably more people living in the Americas than in Europe.
- Certain cities—such as Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital—were far greater in population than any contemporary European city. Furthermore, Tenochtitlán, unlike any capital in Europe at that time, had running water, beautiful botanical gardens, and immaculately clean streets.
- The earliest cities in the Western Hemisphere were thriving before the Egyptians built the great pyramids.
- Pre-Columbian Indians in Mexico developed corn by a breeding process so sophisticated that the journal *Science* recently described it as "man's first, and perhaps the greatest, feat of genetic engineering."
- Amazonian Indians learned how to farm the rain forest without destroying it—a process scientists are studying today in the hope of regaining this lost knowledge.
- Native Americans transformed their land so completely that Europeans arrived in a hemisphere already massively "landscaped" by human beings.

What Mann is most interested in showing us is how American Indians - like all other human beings - were intensely involved in shaping the world they lived in. He is sure that "many though not all Indians were superbly active land managers - they did not live lightly on the land." Just how they did live, so long uninfluenced by the vast majority of the world's population in Africa and Eurasia, forms the bulk of his fascinating narrative.

As a result, what emerges is an epic story, with a subtly altered tragedy at its heart. For all the European depredations in the Americas, the work of conquest was largely accomplished for them by their microbes, even before the white men arrived in any great numbers. The diseases brought along by the very first unwitting Spanish conquistadors, and probably by English fishermen working the New England coast, very likely triggered one of the greatest catastrophes in human history. Before the 16th century, there may have been as many as 90 million to 112 million people living in the Americas - people who could be as different from each other "as Turks and Swedes," but who had cumulatively developed an incredible range of natural environments, from seeding the Amazon Basin with fruit trees to terracing the mountains of Peru. (Even the term "New World" may be a misnomer; it is possible that the world's first city was in South America.)

Then, disaster. According to some estimates, as much as 95 percent of the Indians may have died almost immediately on contact with various European diseases, particularly smallpox. That would have amounted to about one-fifth of the world's total population at the time, a level of destruction unequalled before or since. The exact numbers, like everything else, are in dispute, but it is clear that these plagues wreaked havoc on traditional Indian societies. European misreadings of America should not be attributed wholly to ethnic arrogance. The "savages" most of the colonists saw, without ever realizing it, were usually the traumatized, destitute survivors of ancient and intricate civilizations that had collapsed almost overnight. Even the superabundant "nature" the Europeans inherited had been largely put in place by these now absent gardeners, and had run wild only after they had ceased to cull and harvest it.

In the end, the loss to us all was incalculable. As Mann writes, "Having grown separately for millennia, the Americas were a boundless sea of novel ideas, dreams, stories, philosophies, religions, moralities, discoveries and all the other products of the mind. Few things are more sublime or characteristically human than the cross-fertilization of cultures. The simple discovery by Europe of the existence of the Americas caused an intellectual ferment. How much grander would have been the tumult if Indian societies had survived in full splendor!"

How much of the information in the assignment is new to you? For many of you, almost all of it will be a revelation. Why do you think this is and what purpose do you believe it has served to omit these civilizations as part of our uniquely "American" foundations?

1. Please post an *initial* response to these questions of *at least* 150 words
2. Reply (2 or 3 sentences) to *at least* 3 other students' initial postings.

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