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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Special Issue: Shifting Frontiers: Historical Transformations of Identities in Latin America (Jan., 1995), pp. 9-24

Published by: [Wiley-Blackwell](#) on behalf of [Society for Latin American Studies \(SLAS\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3339268>

Accessed: 08/10/2012 04:38

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0261–3050(94)00033–6

# ‘The Coming of the White People’. Reflections on the Mythologisation of History in Latin America<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. THE COMING OF THE WHITE PEOPLE<sup>2</sup>

My point of departure in this paper is the experience of doing anthropological fieldwork in Northern Potosí, Bolivia. Over time I became aware that the Aymara-speaking peasants of the ayllus where I have lived did not periodise the past in the way that I took for granted. In particular, they did not give the same saliency to the moment of the coming of the Spanish or their conquest of the Andean region. This has led me to reflect more generally on the way particular views of the past are constituted; the Columbus quincentenary further led me to ask what are the forces which encourage this fetishisation of the moment of the coming of the white people.

Most of us probably remember learning history at school at least in part as a losing struggle against an avalanche of dates. Dates often seemed arbitrary and mathematical, having no intrinsic connection to the narratives of heroism and defeat, death or empire that they were there to order and classify. Yet, there are some dates that are so hedged about with mystique, so fetishised, that we retain them without effort. For the English it is 1066; for the Scottish, probably it is the pairing of the ‘15 and ‘45. Such dates are usually at the heart of the narratives of nationalist historiography: the moments of defeat, of resistance, of liberation.

The year 1492 is another such date. Its status in Europe is all the more striking since it is not, except for Spain, tied to nationhood in the same way. The 1992 celebration and/or commemoration of Columbus’s first voyage to the Caribbean made this process of mythologisation abundantly clear. Lief Erikson may have been the first European to set foot in the Americas but he did not discover the New World in the sense that Columbus did, because he created no enduring myth, and because the changes that resulted were insignificant. Everything we know about Columbus indicates what a self-publicist he was, how conscious he was of the resonances of his actions in the unfolding cosmography of the early Renaissance Mediterranean world. He was well aware, for example, of the significance that his great voyage took place the same year as the Reconquest of Granada and the expulsion of the Jews. His *Book of Prophecies* locates him in a series of cosmic events the predestined nature of which does nothing to undermine the novelty and daring of his enterprise (Kadir, 1993).

When Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* that the discovery of

America was one of 'the two greatest and most important events in the history of mankind' ([1776] 1937: 590), he was referring to its economic consequences.<sup>3</sup> Two hundred years later the periodisation has become more generalised: today many argue that 1492 heralds the dawning of modernity, and even of modern European identity. Thus Tzvetan Todorov writes in *The Conquest of America* (a book hailed as a classic in many quarters but viewed with scepticism by Americanists):

The discovery of America ... is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history. We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the 'discovery' of other continents and other peoples ... The conquest of America ... heralds and establishes our present identity even if every date that permits us to separate any two periods is arbitrary, none is more suitable in order to mark the beginning of the modern era than the year 1492 ... We are all direct descendants of Columbus, it is with him that our genealogy begins, insofar as the word *beginning* has a meaning (1984: 4–5).

This uninhibited proclamation has the merit of articulating very explicitly the mythological grounding for modern European identity. Even a more nuanced view of the same event such as that of Steve Stern, which recognises that 1492 'did not really constitute the decisive or leading "cause" of this vast reconfiguration of world history' (1992: 3) has to start from the premise that this is what it 'symbolises' for us.<sup>4</sup>

What is clear is that the discovery of America functions as an organising moment for European historical periodisation from many distinct perspectives. Still more does it do so in American history, and of course Columbus Day is a national holiday in many parts of the continent. In Mexico and in the Andean region, however, more attention is given in national historiographies to the Spanish Conquest which was effected in the early decades of the sixteenth century. A standard periodisation of the past is found throughout Latin America: I recall the daughter of a Bolivian friend of mine stuck over her homework, asking her father what was meant by historical periods. 'Easy', he replied, 'there are three periods. First there is before the Spanish (pre-Hispanic), then there is colonial (i.e. the period of Spanish rule), and now is the republican period' (i.e. after independence from Spain).

It is this very obviousness that I wish to question. In my experience of doing fieldwork in the Bolivian Andes, the ways that Aymara-speaking peasants conceptualise the past do not fit in any straightforward sense into this mould. The decisive events which are thought to separate one period from another are rarely phrased in terms of the Spanish. Recognition of this lack of fit has led me to think more generally about the issue of periodisation.

There have been many revisionist accounts by historians questioning the givenness of particular periodisations, as in those based, for example, on the English or French 'revolutions'. However, there has been very little in the way of general discussion of periodisation by historians: to what degree are periodisations intrinsic to the body of data itself, and to what degree *ad hoc*, depending on the particular perspective adopted? Are they fundamental to

the historians' craft? Are they an innate function of the way that human beings conceptualise and give meaning to the past?

Among anthropologists there seems to be no discussion at all of this issue. It is by now generally accepted in the discipline that our starting point has been the other of European modernism, the exotic which is constructed in opposition to the concepts of modernist rationality and order. Not only were the characteristic themes of anthropological research those which contrasted most cleanly with the self-image of Europeans themselves, but also anthropologists tended to ignore the impact of colonialism on the non-European populations they studied. As Bernard Cohn (1981) put it in his state-of-the-art account of the relations between anthropology and history a decade ago, in studies of colonial contact historians begin at the moment of discovery, while anthropologists typically end with the coming of the destructive other—the Europeans. For both, the moment of discovery is constitutive of their disciplinary orientations.<sup>5</sup>

In recent decades there has of course been a fundamental shift of emphasis, and many anthropologists and historians have turned to the study of colonialism and its impact. This shift of attention has been motivated by a number of factors, an epistemological and political critique of the previous silence as well as the more pragmatic consideration that it was the fact of colonial government that generated a substantial corpus of written documents in many parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> However, there is also something more at work: this is the fascination with the changes wrought by expansionist Europe on the rest of the world that treats these changes as qualitatively different from any other historical process. Eric Wolf's (1982) *Europe and the People Without History* is a case in point. The narrative is decisively organised around the coming of the Europeans, showing time and again how this process integrated peripheral or autonomous populations into the European world system.

It would appear that periodisation is often seen to be given by the material itself, particularly since so much of anthropology is concerned with areas of the world colonised by Europe. As a result, periodisation frequently falls naturally into a pre-colonial, a colonial and a post-colonial matrix without further debate.

To use colonial rule as the axis on which ideas about the past are organised may seem so obvious, so right, that any further discussion is redundant. The coming of the white people has an almost transcendental status in the way the past is conceptualised. However, I think that we need to adopt a more agnostic stance as regards the historical salience of this event, if indeed it should in all cases be treated as an 'event'. At the very least we need to enquire whether it has the same salience for all colonised peoples as it does for the Europeans themselves.

## 2. HISTORY AND APOTHEOSIS

Columbus may be the most mythologised of European 'discoverers' of unknown lands and peoples, but there are many others. A salient figure of comparable stature is Captain Cook who also set sail into the unknown, and with his sailors and crew encountered populations that had no previous

experience of white people. According to both academic and popular accounts, Captain Cook was a brilliant navigator, a humanist, and dedicated to exploration, to the advance of civilisation and the frontiers of knowledge. He was killed through the ignorance and error of the Hawaiians. These events have been made well known to anthropologists through the influential but controversial interpretations made of them by Marshall Sahline (1979, 1981, 1985).

Columbus is often seen as heralding the dawning of the Renaissance; Cook, by contrast, typifies Enlightenment Man (Obeyesekere, 1992: 7). In both cases their historical salience derives in part from the fact that their exploits and achievements exemplify a new spirit, the dawning of a new age. These metaphors of course flow naturally from the concepts of Renaissance ('rebirth') and Enlightenment (dawning).

Recently Gananath Obeyesekere has published a critique of the work of both Sahline and Todorov. His particular concern is the way that they accept uncritically the well-known story that the Europeans, whether in Hawaii or in the Americas, were believed to be gods. At the same time, they implicitly accept the enduring European idea that identifies history with the Europeans, and relegates the non-literate world to the domain of myth. Todorov quite unashamedly invokes a Lévi-Straussian opposition between a Europe oriented to the present, to improvisation and pragmatics, and a non-European world oriented to the past and dominated by tradition (see, for example, Todorov 1984: 84).

Obeyesekere's critique is aimed mainly at those who perpetuate the myth of 'Europeans as gods' in the late twentieth century. This myth is more entrenched than we might be aware. The god-like status of white explorers and conquerors is a common trope in, for example, the increasingly popular use of primitives as a cinematic theme, by means of which the superior knowledge, understanding, moral stature or power of the whites can be delineated (Herzog's *Aguirre—Wrath of God*, *The Mission*, and Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* are obvious examples). However, it also needs unpicking in terms of the original historical context in which it is supposedly enacted.

In the case of Cook's death, his identification by the Hawaiians with their deity Lono is used to evoke their naivete and shocking error in killing him. In other words, in European narratives at least, the figure of pathos is Cook himself. By contrast, in the narratives of the 'discovery' and 'conquest' of the Americas, the story focuses more frequently on the pathos and the tragic consequences for the Americans of their lack of comprehension in identifying the white people with gods. The incomprehension is contrasted with the cunning and resourcefulness of the Europeans, thus insinuating that the Europeans did understand what was going on, and what they had 'discovered'. But it is clear from many clues that the Europeans were pre-disposed to find the natives treating them as gods. Already in his first voyage, Columbus speculated in his journal whether the Caribbean natives might not have mistaken the seafarers for gods (1990; see also Todorov, 1984: 41). The theme is fully elaborated in the familiar tale of the conquest of Mexico in which Cortés' arrival was said to be the fulfilment of a prophecy concerning

the return of the god Quetzalcóatl, and which Cortés seems to have made good use of, and actively encouraged (Todorov, 1984: 117).

According to many historical accounts, the same theme was repeated 13 years later in 1532, in what today seems like an uncanny re-enactment, in the encounter of Pizarro and his band of Spanish adventurers with King Atahualpa and the massed Inca armies. Let us look at this case in a little more detail. The story is told by a number of late sixteenth-century chroniclers; for example, Sarmiento writes:

When Atahualpa heard this [the arrival of the Spanish] he was delighted, believing that it was Viracocha who had come, just as he had promised them when he went away . . . And he gave thanks to Viracocha because he was coming at the appointed time (Sarmiento [1572], quoted in Mroz, 1991: 103).

Acosta adds a biblical comparison to illustrate the identification of the Christians with pagan gods. This reminds us that there were examples with which the Spanish would have been familiar to reinforce the strength of the association:

They called the Spanish viracochas because they believed they were the children of heaven and deities, just as other peoples once attributed divine status to Paul and Barnabas, calling them Jupiter and Mercury respectively and trying to offer them sacrifices as though they were gods (Acosta [1590], quoted in Mroz, 1991: 93).

Already, by 1560, the equation of Spanish and the god Viracocha was so generally accepted that Domingo de Santo Tomás, in the first Quechua dictionary, translated viracocha as 'Christian'. And it is still commonplace in the Andean region today for white men and those of high social status to be called viracochas. I too, in line with my androgynous status as an anthropologist, have been addressed as *wiraquchi* on numerous occasions in highland Bolivia.

In recent years, doubts have increasingly been voiced regarding the authenticity of this story. In particular, the Polish ethnohistorians, Marcin Mroz and Mariusz Ziolkowski, have argued that it requires serious qualification. Mroz (1991) points out that the earliest accounts of the conquest of Peru make no reference to the identification of the Spanish with Viracocha. It took some time for the confused events of the 1530s to settle into an agreed narrative, and the first version that identifies the bearded white men with Viracocha is that of Cieza de Leon (1553). Cieza mentions the myth that the god Viracocha had gone away across the sea, but is sceptical about the belief (which he also mentions) that the Spanish are called Viracocha because they came from the sea.

Mroz (1991: 94) suggests that it was the Spanish themselves who presented themselves as gods to the Indians. The success of the same idea in the conquest of Mexico would undoubtedly have influenced them. In addition, the ruling classes of Cuzco may have endorsed this identification as part of their own local power struggles, in which the Spanish were themselves caught up. Further doubt on the plausibility of the myth is cast by Mariusz

Ziolkowski. He points out that the Incas certainly knew something about the Spanish before the arrival of Pizarro, because four members of an earlier expedition had been taken to the presence of the Inca Wayna Qhapaq and then killed. We can be sure, then, that the ruling élite knew that the Spanish were not gods but mortal, even if the common people may have had doubts on this score. Ziolkowski also poses the question of translation. Felipillo, the young man captured by the Europeans who served as their interpreter, had to create a means of translating the term 'Christians' into Quechua. Since 'the sons of god' was a common form of self-designation for the Christians it seems plausible that Felipillo might have used the phrase 'sons of Viracocha'. In this case the identification of the Christians with the god Viracocha would be explained as a question of translation, rather than naïvety of mythological structures on the part of the native Americans.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the identification of the Spanish with gods is thoroughly overdetermined, and it seems increasingly likely that it derived from a variety of quite pragmatic considerations, rather than from an absolute propensity of the natives to interpret the coming of the Europeans in terms of their gods.

The evidence for the Andean version of the myth of 'white people as gods' supports Obeyesekere's general scepticism and appears to provide further illustration of what is a well-established anthropological theme familiar from Malinowski on: the natives far from being tradition-bound and governed by an irrational adherence to myth and religion, use the same sorts of pragmatic considerations as Europeans. However, the process of demystification cannot be left there.

There is more to be said on the subject of what is involved in identifying white people with deities. The English or Spanish distinction between 'god' and 'man' is not the same as that made in other parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> The Judaeo-Christian theological tradition is unusual in the degree to which a radical discontinuity is postulated between divinity and humanity. By contrast, other theologies see connectedness and gradations between them, and in the Americas the concept of 'man-god' has been extensively explored, especially for Central Mexico (López Austin, 1973; Gruzinski, 1989).

Quite apart from such theological considerations, there are many different ways in which an identification between humans and deities can be made. Few deities in the world's religions have the unambiguously high moral standing and ontological transcendence of the god of the Semitic religions. Spirits may be worshipped almost as equals, they may be feared, negotiated with, even ridiculed (Obeyesekere, 1992). The use of distinctive features of white people in identifying and portraying deities may be based on analogy rather than ontological identity. It does not, therefore, necessarily entail that the whites themselves are thought to be transcendent or surrounded by an extraordinary aura.

For example, in many regions of the Andes, the mountain deities are represented as *gringos* wearing high leather boots with large spurs. There are also mountain deities identified with lawyers, priests and policemen. In the argument of John Earls this identification is derived analogically: it is the similarity of their power over the common people that leads to their merging (1969).

Colonial rulers were of course in a position to insist on respect from their subordinates. There are many examples from twentieth-century history which reveal how intolerant white people were of any realist portrayal of themselves by colonised peoples which put them in a less than flattering light. What to later eyes seems like mimesis was condemned as caricature and parody. A notorious, if extreme, case was that of Julius Lips, who in the late 1920s as Director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne assembled a collection of photos of often skilled and imaginative portrayals of Europeans in realistic or less than glorious light from ethnographic museums across the world. He was denounced to the Nazis by some of his students for shaming the master race and was forced to flee Germany in 1933. He eventually published his material in the United States in 1937 as *The Savage Hits Back*—a title which makes clear the provocative quality the images were perceived to have (Lips, 1937; Kramer, 1993).<sup>10</sup>

### 3. EVENT AS MYTH

The god-like status of white explorers and conquerors is only one particularly evocative and strongly grounded instance of the more general process of mythologisation, in which the coming of the Europeans to other parts of the globe in general attains an almost transcendental status in the way the past is conceptualised. The theme of the presumed divinity of the white outsiders emphasises their uniqueness, their superior knowledge and powers, the idea that the coming of the Europeans constitutes a significant rupture and discontinuity. Many researchers have assumed that this idea of radical discontinuity would be manifest in indigenous historiographies as much as in those of Europe. Such a view is implicit or explicit in much of what anthropologists and ethnohistorians have written concerning indigenous histories in the Americas.<sup>11</sup>

I wish to suggest that periodisations which derive from this postulate of absolute rupture associated with the coming of the white people are mythologised, in the sense that they derive from a set of criteria which go far beyond the historical data themselves as regards the explanatory power they have. The way that all of us who are not professional historians conceptualise the past is an intersection of the mythical and the empirical.

Furthermore, if it is useful to identify as myth the moments of the transition from one epoch to another, then we must also modify the widely held notion that myth is associated with timelessness. This view is expressed particularly clearly in the influential writings of Eliade (1954). It is true that much of what is conventionally referred to as myth involves a pre-historical world lacking in transformative events. And modern interpretations of the semantics of mythology such as that of Roland Barthes also argue that myths naturalise history and thereby render it timeless (1973).

However, even the most past-oriented, tradition-dominated worlds include some concept of before and after a cataclysm.<sup>12</sup> Myth cannot simply be associated with the static, the timeless, the past-oriented, but may also invoke archetypal moments of rupture, a contrast between before and after, the sense of a beginning. This is the myth of Columbus, especially, as we have seen. It is the way that the historiography of the colonised world has generally

been written, although whether the 'before' is seen as utopian or as uncivilised and barbarous will obviously depend on the perspective of the writer. However, it is not obvious that the coming of the white people is the means for establishing mythologically the moment of rupture and the beginning of the present era in all social environments.

If this is the case, then clearly the opposition cannot be sustained between mythological, past-oriented, 'cold' social orders and historical, change-oriented, 'hot' societies which is not only beloved by structuralists, but also underlines most of the ideologies that contrast the world of modernity with that of the primitives.<sup>13</sup> The widespread assumption that mythological thought is concerned with repetition, with timelessness or with the cyclical does not take into account that the unique event is typically itself 'mythologised'. Myth includes moments of rupture, of a change of temporality, as much as of continuities.

#### 4. THE MULTIPLICITY OF THE OTHERS

One consequence of the increased attention paid to colonial history has been a growing reflexive interest in how the coming of the white people was viewed by the non-European world, both at the time it occurred, and later in historical and mythical categories and narratives. There is now a wealth of texts exploring the advent of the Europeans from the 'native point of view' (Wachtel, 1977; León-Portilla, 1985; Lockhart, 1993).

The perennial anthropological interest in millenarian movements is another instance of the same genre, in which indigenous responses to European domination take a particularly dramatic form. The literature on millenarian movements gives expression to the pathos of encounter, in which the non-Europeans are portrayed as responding to Euro-American domination in ways that confirm their otherness from the perspective of European rationality. The topic combines the theme of resistance against colonialism with complex exotic beliefs and practices which are an expression of symbolic and local values against the apparently inexorable expansion of the world system.

Even those who seek to move away from Eurocentric positions find it hard not to privilege the coming of the white people, as is illustrated by a volume of anthropological essays which seeks to explore historical and mythical perspectives of the past in the non-literate cultures of South America. *Rethinking History and Myth. Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past* (Hill, 1988) includes case studies both of Amazonia and of the Andes. It is particularly concerned to combat the idea that indigenous South American cultures privilege stasis over change and lack historical consciousness.<sup>14</sup> The authors emphasise processual and dynamic notions of time in their interpretations of particular myths. How they distinguish myth from history varies, but by and large they avoid the issues because with no explicit justification they simply identify historical material, or historical consciousness, by reference to white people.<sup>15</sup> For all their insistence on the need to get away from an opposition which identifies myth with non-Western, and history with Western societies, they continue *de facto* to identify history with the coming of the whites.<sup>16</sup>

In his ethnographic essay on Kayapo myth in the same volume, T. Turner insists that it would be wrong to suggest that contact with Western Society constitutes the native societies' first experience of history, and that Kayapo also possess historical accounts of their relationships with other native groups (1988: 199). Nonetheless, he too concentrates his attention on Kayapo ideas about Brazilians and in general on the 'contact situation'. This reinforces the overall implicit message of the book that history can indeed be equated with the coming of the whites. Moreover, he seems to assume that myths of the origin of Brazilians and their characteristic possessions, firearms and commodities, are representations of the first encounters between the Kayapo and Brazilians—an assumption which must certainly be queried.

The overall orientation of the volume, and specific arguments such as this, operate to undermine its stated aim of restoring historicity to indigenous South American cultures. However, it does provide a wealth of ethnographic material on how different indigenous cultures think about and categorise white people. For example, the nature of white people is often explained in terms of the same kinds of principles that produced native society too.<sup>17</sup> In several cases, the creation of white men is an analogous process, or directly linked to, the creation of native people.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the myths quoted reveal a preoccupation with how to understand white people in terms of indigenous peoples' own conceptual resources, rather than depicting them as completely alien, completely new.

In part this is doubtless because in the Amazon region information concerning white people (often in the form of myth) as well as commodities such as iron and chickens, and of course diseases, travelled fast, so that 'contact' was in many areas a 'rather long-drawn-out affair, sometimes lasting centuries' (Hugh-Jones, 1989). In part it is because white people do not necessarily have the unique status in the constructs of the colonised that we as Euro-Americans expect and assume them to have. In many instances, white people are only one of a whole range of alien powers, and it would be a profound distortion to extract the image of white people from this wider context and fetishise them as something *sui generis*. The ways Europeans and their culture have been interpreted and incorporated depends on previously existing categories of otherness and ways of representing the alien and exotic. This might be epitomised by wilderness, or by neighbouring tribes.

This interpretation seems much more productive either than the simple equation of Europeans with gods, or the equally simple denial of this equation. It starts from the necessary assumption that all human societies have means of conceptualising self and other, the familiar and the foreign, and that they do so largely in terms of images. Any new phenomenon is likely to be interpreted in the first instance in terms of existing images and categories—and this is obviously every bit as true for Europeans confronting the non-European world as vice versa.<sup>19</sup>

There are a number of paradigms within which the coming of the white people can be interpreted. In addition to the mythopraxis in treating Europeans as gods, and their coming as the definitive rupture with a mythical past, we can add the idea that the image of white people as gods derives from pragmatic and mythological considerations on the part of the Europeans

themselves, and may be further reinforced by local power struggles, as in the Andean case. Furthermore, insofar as whites are frequently classified in terms of existing categories of alien and exotic powers, their coming may more properly be conceived as one more addition to the mythico-historical world constructed by every human society, rather than as the definitive moment of rupture.

The 'naturalness' by which we assume that events which were of momentous significance for European historiography and the construction of the European identity have the same status in the historical imagination of those conquered and subjugated by these same Europeans, needs to be unpicked. It is, therefore, salutary to bear in mind that in some instances indigenous peoples seem to have expressed indifference or at least evinced very little surprise at the arrival of the Europeans. For example, the Selden Codex of the Mixteca includes a detailed chronological sequence, covering the years of the Spanish arrival in Mexico, and their increasing penetration of the south, but fails to mention it (Caso, 1977: 149).<sup>20</sup>

It might be argued that a case like this reflects merely the failure of communication, or the gaps in Mixtec chronological record-keeping. However, a later case, also from Mexico, suggests also that the Spanish Conquest is not the defining feature of all periodisations. In an illuminating study of Nahua (Central Mexico) land titles from the end of the colonial period—an invaluable source for indigenous historical ideas, since claims to land were supported by reference to the past—Wood argues that there is very little reference to the conquest, and that 'the Christian victory is ultimately a cause for celebration among at least community leaders'. Moreover, the title-holders barely mention the epidemic and do not connect the devastating diseases of the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Europeans (Wood, 1991: 190).

One could go on citing examples. A final quote from Kay Warren's excellent ethnography of the western highlands of Guatemala makes the point very clearly. 'The Trixanos', she writes, 'rephrase the creation mythology so that it *omits* mention of the Conquest' (1978: 49). In other words the assumption is clear. Any *accurate* mythology would necessarily have to give the conquest a prominent place. Failure to mention it constitutes a 'rephrasing', an omission, in other words a distortion of the past. As far as I know, no other historical event is treated in this way in the analysis of indigenous mythology.

## 5. THE 'DANCE OF THE CONQUEST'

There is one example that anyone familiar with the ethnography of highland Latin America would probably see as a significant counter-example to the argument presented so far. This is the so-called 'dance of the conquest'. In the Andes it takes the form of a ritual re-enactment of the encounter between Pizarro and Atahualpa performed during religious feast-days in some regions (Lara, 1985). These enactments have been used as evidence of the enduring nature of the trauma of the conquest (e.g. Wachtel, 1977), and are popular with documentary film-makers since they are a vivid indigenous representation of the coming of the Europeans.

In recent years a debate has developed as to how to interpret these performances. In 1988, the Peruvian historian Manuel Burga published a book in which he argued that the enactment of the encounter between the Inca and Spanish was a transformed version of earlier rituals portraying the antagonistic encounter between insiders and outsiders, wife-givers and wife-takers: 'The enactment of the Inca and the Captain was surely the permitted form taken by Andean rituals in order to survive, retaining the structure and functions that they had before the conquest' (1988: 25, my translation). In other words, he provides another version of the argument described already, in which the coming of the Europeans is incorporated into pre-existing native categories, and becomes an extension or instantiation of a well-established theme. Thierry Saignes published a critique of this position in which he argued that the ritual enactments of the dance of the conquest probably derived far more of their impetus from the Spanish Church, in particular the Jesuits, and their attempts to instill the meaning of evangelisation into their flocks through theatrical pieces which re-enacted the process of conversion to Christianity (drawing analogies with the familiar Andalucian rituals of the battles of the Moors and Christians) (Saignes, 1990; Driessen, 1985).

Saignes's position emphasised the European genesis of these myths and enactments, which thereby demonstrate in his view just how far the conquest and consequent conversion were accepted and internalised by the Andean populations. His argument has in turn been roundly criticised by the Bolivian actor, Orlando Huanca. In stressing the European origins of these theatrical representations Saignes underplays the agency of the Andean peoples themselves, and the changing contexts in which these dances or dramas have been played out and re-enacted to the present day (Huanca Ticona, n.d.).

Historians such as Saignes and Burga have imposed a unitary meaning, derived from one historical moment, on these dance-dramas of the conquest. Insofar as they continue to be performed throughout the Andes in changing historical conditions, their meaning is undoubtedly polysemic and capable of reinterpretation. In the context of my previous argument there are two points to be made. First, that, as with the examples of Amazonian mythology, these enactments must be placed in the context of a broader field of mimetic art, which in the Andean region today is found in most expressive form in ritual dance. In these dances, all manner of alien powers and beings are enacted, from priests, to bears, to half-naked 'jungle' Indians to devils, or to Che Guevara (Poole, 1990; Sallnow, 1987). Insofar as the 'dance of the conquest' forms part of this semantic field, it must be seen as yet one more instantiation of embodying the power and identity of the alien through mimetic dance.<sup>21</sup> In other words, to focus on the 'dance of the conquest' is potentially a Euro-centric way of singling out and giving unique status to one particular case of this widespread genre of dances.

The second point in a way contradicts the first, and leads me towards my conclusion. It is that where these dance-dramas are performed as historical commemoration we should pay careful attention to the social and semantic context. In the Bolivian highlands, these dances are found frequently in urban settings, sometimes with elaborate Quechua scripts (Lara, 1985). The earliest reference to a performance of the defeat of Atahualpa, along with

representations of other feats and legends of Inca kings, comes from 1555 (Arzanz y Vela, 1975: Ch. 28), where it was performed before the Indian nobles in Potosí, and undoubtedly had direct political resonances for the Indian ruling class who were struggling to retain their aristocratic prerogatives under the new region, and to extend their power. Today one well-known enactment in Bolivia is in the mining town of Oruro, where it is performed by mestizo town-dwellers. In this instance the drama has an immediate salience as an allegory of Bolivian nationalism. In nearby peasant communities, the same story evokes the long struggle with their creole-mestizo rulers over their rights to their land (Huanca Ticona, n.d.). In short, where the dance-drama of the conquest does not form part of a wider mimesis of alien beings, its enactment as a self-contained piece of theatre very probably expresses an overtly political project or statement.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

My argument is not that we should dismiss the coming of the whites in historical analysis, but recognise that usually this moment is treated not as a historical fact with consequences that must be investigated inductively, but as a transcendental event upon whose axis history is created, a rupture from which fundamental categories of periodisation and identity are derived. The move to a recognition of the importance of colonialism over the past 20–25 years has paradoxically reinforced the self-importance of Europeans.

Alongside the perennial fascination amongst Europeans with the idea that they are treated as gods, there is a more recent interest in seeing ourselves reflected back from the eyes of those others, no longer necessarily as gods, sometimes a demons, sometimes merely with acute mimetic realism, no doubt part of the 'culture of narcissism' to which writers such as Lasch (1979) have drawn attention. We have moved from a convention of the invisible observer, the authoritative voice of objectivity, to a new more reflexive position, one that takes pleasure in the otherness of ourselves, the Europeans, as seen through the eyes of exotic observers.

Despite the wealth of new historical and ethnographic research, the strength of the implicit belief persists that until the arrival of 'us' there was no history. This is part of what accounts for the commonplace choice of the coming of the white people, or the Europeans, as the paradigm of history. It is yet another instance of the power of implicit categories in the face of empirical evidence. The pragmatic fact that it is only with the coming of the whites that written records begin in many parts of the world is not sufficient to justify or explain the strength of this assumption. From the point of view of academic historiography we can agree that the arrival of white people was of the greatest historical significance, but we also have to recognise both that factors other than objective historiography enter into this evaluation, and that not all indigenous, colonised peoples give the same centrality to the coming of the Europeans, or certainly to the moment of contact.

However, alongside this new form of Eurocentrism, there is another reason why the coming of the white people occupies such a central place in historical periodisations. It is that the prevailing political and moral context for the study of history is nationalism. The typical narrative form taken by

nationalist historiography is that of a prior state of autonomy, followed by fragmentation, defeat, and subjection to an alien power. The conclusion/denouement to this narrative, realised in some instances, hoped for in others, is liberation from the oppressor and reconstitution of the independent nation.

In the Latin American context, it is in nationalist history that the standard three-part periodisation of pre-Spanish, Spanish colonial, and post-Spanish republican is found. In the narrative of the emergence of the Bolivian, or the Mexican, or the Colombian nation, the Spanish conquest plays a crucial role indeed, initiating the period of subjugation to European rule from which the nation was eventually able to construct itself by opposition.<sup>23</sup> On a somewhat different basis, contemporary Indian movements and indigenous nationalisms also ground their narratives on the moment of Spanish conquest.

In saying this, I merely wish to draw attention to the fact that apart from the factual basis, or not, of historical narratives, they are also generally formed by a set of structural principles of which periodisation is an important one. Periodisation, in turn, is frequently grounded in myths which posit a sharp break in the flow of events according to criteria which are themselves derived from ethical and political concerns. There is no doubt that the coming of the white people to colonise other parts of the world operates as one of these mythical markers of rupture. There is also no doubt that it is not universal amongst colonised peoples, and that its increased salience derives from a political context in which indigenous leaders are seeking to understand the sources of their own powerlessness.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Anthropology Department seminar at the University of Bergen, and a longer version delivered as a Munro Lecture at the University of Edinburgh, November 1993. Its point of departure derives from discussions with Thérèse Bouysse-Cassagne, Tristan Platt and Thierry Saignes, as part of a joint Franco-British research project.
2. By the term white people I refer generically to those of European descent associated with the colonisation of the rest of the world. Clearly, phenotypes are not at issue here, but the way that Europeans (and Americans) have been referred to as whites in so many parts of the world.
3. The other event was the discovery of the passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope. Thanks to Heinz Lubasz for this reference.
4. This is central to the argument of Edmundo O'Gorman. America as a concept depends on Europe, as an entity 'discoverable' by Europe. Its discovery can only be conceived as such if it was perceived that way at the time. It was not: Columbus discovered America 'casualmente' (1976: 20).
5. I am only concerned here with those parts of the world subjected to colonisation by Europe: there is no programmatic attempt here to restrict the subject matter of anthropology as a discipline to these areas.
6. However, in the light of this pragmatic consideration, it should not be forgotten that in some instances the colonial rulers actively destroyed existing written records. Nowhere is this more dramatic than in the Americas, where in addition to actually burning indigenous texts (such as Diego de Landa's *auto da fe* of the Maya codices) the knowledge for deciphering them was undermined (for example the Andean quipú or knot writing). Such processes contributed to the creation of an illusion that the native Americans were people without writing (Brotherston, 1992, Ch. 2).
7. It should also be mentioned that there has been considerable scepticism as to whether the

- deity Viracocha really did have the status of 'Andean high god' comparable to the Christian god, for example, by Pierre Duviols (1977).
8. Ziolkowski, personal communication (1993), based on an unpublished manuscript.
  9. A point made by Sahlins apropos Hawaii (1985: 147).
  10. Another well-known example is the French film-maker Jean Rouch's documentary *Les Maîtres Fous* (1954/5). The film portrays the Hauka cult of the Upper Niger region and shows the initiates possessed by powerful spirits that take the form of figures of authority in the colonial administration. Here the theme of whites as god-like is revealed as troubling and ambivalent. Bloody animal sacrifices are made to the spirits, and the well-observed mimicry of officials led to the film being banned throughout Britain's African colonies because of its 'inflammatory' content. It later became the basis of Genet's play *The Blacks* on the same theme (Eaton, 1979: 6).
  11. For example, James Lockhart (1991) in an essay devoted to Nahua society in the sixteenth century, periodises it into three stages, which are entirely derived from the degree of impact of certain aspects of mixing, or of memory of the conquest. The implication is that the significance of change is a function of the gradual replacement of the indigenous by the Spanish.
  12. Sullivan (1988) argues that the idea of distinct world ages separated by cataclysmic moments is characteristic of native South American cultures.
  13. Todorov again is a good example, as a mythographer of European self-identification. He contrasts Cortés as a 'master of improvisation' with 'the Indians' whose culture favours 'code over context, conformity to order over efficacy-of-the-moment, the past over the present'. The conquest is an 'absolutely unpredictable event, surprising and unique' in a 'past-oriented, tradition-dominated world' (1984: 84, 86).
  14. The interpretation that several contributors, especially Hill, make of Lévi-Strauss' distinction between 'cold' and 'hot' societies is highly questionable but does not concern me here.
  15. For example, 'Wakuenai narratives include a historical dimension by integrating images of whites and their material culture into the framework of mythic past times. So, too, there is a strongly mythic quality to Wakuenai narratives about specific persons and events of past historical periods. History and myth intermingle in Wakuenai narratives' (Hill and Wright, 1988: 78-79).
  16. For example, Alcida Ramos: 'indigenous societies are not static . . . Nevertheless, it is impossible to minimize the impact of Europeans on indigenous peoples. The advent of the whiteman is an undeniable "founding event"' (1988: 227).
  17. For example, Hill and Wright referring to the Wakuenai: 'The arrival of the whiteman . . . [is] part of the same active process through which Inapirrikuli, the trickster-creator brought into being the ancestral spirits' (1988: 91).
  18. Terry Turner (1988) discusses Da Matta's interesting proposal that myths concerning the origins of white people are an inversion of the origin myths of Indian groups themselves.
  19. Pagden (1982) and Mason (1990) offer detailed accounts of the ways that Europeans sought to conceptualise the recently discovered native Americans in terms of mythological, theological and philosophical categories from their own cultures. In a recent book, Lévi-Strauss (1991) discusses the concept of the Other in native American thought especially through myths of twins. He argues that in European thought twins are treated as undifferentiated sameness, whereas in American thought they are a dualism in perpetual disequilibrium. In his view the Amerindian concept of the Other allowed conceptual space for the white strangers.
  20. Thanks to Gordon Brotherton (personal communication) for this observation.
  21. Bricker's (1981) account of the representation of historical forces of occupation in the dance dramas of highland Chiapas provides vivid evidence of the need to consider the broad semantic field, rather than arbitrarily extracting one type of figure such as the Spanish.
  22. Joanne Rappaport has recently analysed the development of an 'ethnically militant' didactic theatre which emphasises the theme of the Spanish conquest in Cumbal, S. W. Colombia (1994: 149).
  23. An explicit example of this is Jorge Klor de Alva's statement that the story of the Aztec/

Mexica defeat is a 'national "charter myth" standing behind every important nation-building legend or initiative' (1991: xiii).

24. For example, Quintin Lame, a Colombian Páez who finished a lengthy manuscript on the history of his people in 1939, claimed that evil came into the world with the Spanish invasion. Columbus for him was the 'conquistador', and 12 October 1492 emphasised as a pivotal day on every page of his manuscript (Rappaport, 1990: 113).

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