“Are they not men?”: European Debates Over Indigenous Society

Sources
-Stuart Schwartz (personal notes)
-Franklin Knight’s introduction to An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies.
-Anthony Pagden’s introduction to A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies.
-Lewis Hanke’s Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America
-Pedro Vaz Caminha’s Letter to Dom Manuel
-William Hickling Prescott’s Conquest of Mexico
-The Requerimiento
-Hans Staden’s True History

Vocabulary
Antonio de Montesinos
Bartolomé de las Casas
Natural Law
Encomienda
Encomendero
Requerimiento
Juan Palácio Rubios
Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda
Aristotle
I. Antonio de Montesinos: A Prophet in the Wilderness

A. On the Sunday before Christmas (December 21) in 1511, a recently-arrived Dominican missionary delivered a sermon in the church of Santo Domingo to the Spanish inhabitants of Hispaniola.

1) His name was Antonio de Montesinos
   a) Born in Spain in the mid-15th century
   b) Became a Dominican friar at an early age
   c) Served as sub-prior of the convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca
   d) Subsequently decided to journey to the Caribbean to be a missionary to the indigenous inhabitants of the New World around 1510.
   e) By Christmas 1511, we find him in Santo Domingo.

2) He based his text on St. John, drawing an analogy between the natural desert in which the Evangelist had chosen to spend his life and the human desert which the Spaniards had made of the island of Hispaniola.
   a) “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” he began. “In order to make your sins known to you I have mounted this pulpit, I who am the voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island; and therefore it behooves you to listen to me, not with indifference but with all your heart and senses; for this voice will be the strangest, the harshest and hardest, the most terrifying that you ever heard or expected to hear . . .”

3) By this point in time, the Religious Orders in the New World – particularly the Dominicans – had become very concerned at the way Spanish conquistadors used Indian labor.
   a) Briefly discuss the Encomienda.
   QUESTION: WHAT WAS THE ENCOMIENDA?
   1) In part, an attempt to recreate the serfdom found in the Old World.
   2) Spanish Encomenderos envisioned themselves as a new group of landed aristocracy.
      a) Partly explains the crown’s attempts to limit the encomienda.
      b) And yet, criticisms of the encomienda—particularly as directed by the clergy—were about more than just royal interests, they were also about both the “temporal and spiritual” well-being of New World natives.
4) Certainly, this was the case with Antonio de Montesinos, the self-proclaimed “voice of one crying in the wilderness”:

“This voice,” he continued in his December sermon, “declares that you are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery? By what right do you wage such detestable wars on these people who lived mildly and peacefully in their own lands, where you have consumed infinite numbers of them with unheard-of murders and evils? Why do you so greatly oppress and fatigue them, not giving them enough to eat or caring for them when they fall ill from excessive labors, so that they die or rather are slain by you, so that you may extract and acquire gold every day? And what care do you take that they receive religious instruction and come to know their God and creator, or that they be baptized, hear mass, or observe holidays and Sundays? Are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? How can you lie in such profound and lethargic slumber? Be sure that in your present state you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks who do not have and do not want the faith of Jesus Christ.”

5) For nearly every Spaniard in attendance, Montesinos’ sermon was considered scandalous.
   a) Montesinos was accused of heresy
   b) Denounced to the crown
   c) Eventually forced to flee back to Castile to defend himself before King Ferdinand.
   d) And yet, there was one man in attendance who was moved by Montesinos’ words: Bartolomé de las Casas.
II. Bartolomé de las Casas

a) Biographical information
   1) Born in Seville in 1474
   2) His mother died when he was very young, leaving his father to raise Bartolomé and his three sisters.
      a) At his father’s request, the young Las Casas was enrolled in a cathedral school in Seville in order to study to become a priest.
   3) Las Casas’ father (and also two uncles) would go on to sail with Columbus on his second voyage in 1493.
   4) Las Casas would later accompany his father in 1502, when the latter sailed to the New World in the company of Nicolás de Ovando (the new governor of Hispaniola that had been appointed to take the place of Columbus and his heirs).
      a) They arrived in Santo Domingo on August 15, 1502.
      b) Las Casas and his kin would go on to participate in expeditions against the region’s natives, and in return for his labors be awarded rights to Indian labor and tribute from various villages, i.e., to be an encomendero.
   5) Having been touched by the sermon of Montesinos in 1511 and having witnessed the atrocities committed by Spanish conquistadors over the course of his time in the Caribbean, Las Casas would completely change the trajectory of his life.
      a) In 1514, we find him in what is now Puerto Rico preaching against the encomienda during the Catholic Feast of the Assumption.
      b) Later we find him back in Santo Domingo, where he becomes a Dominican Friar in 1523 – again, literally following in the steps of Antonio de Montesinos.
      c) In the coming years he would preach and publish extensively on the subject of New World natives, condemning Spanish settlers for the manner in which they treated them.
d) He would eventually return to Spain and would convert many powerful individuals at court to his cause.

1) Quotation from Las Casas to give students a sense of his arguments:
“The reason the Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed. . . . Their insatiable greed and overweening ambition know no bounds; the land is fertile and rich, the inhabitants simple, forbearing and submissive. The Spaniards have shown not the slightest consideration for these people, treating them (and I speak from first-hand experience, having been there from the outset) not as brute animals - indeed, I would to God they had done and had shown them the consideration they afford their animals - so much as piles of dung in the middle of the road. They have had as little concern for their souls as for their bodies, all the millions that perished having gone to their deaths with no knowledge of God and without the benefit of the Sacraments. One fact in all this is widely known and beyond dispute, for even the tyrannical murderers themselves acknowledge the truth of it: the indigenous peoples never did the Europeans any harm whatever; on the contrary, they believed them to have descended from the heavens, at least until they or their fellow citizens had tasted, at the hands of these oppressors, a diet of robbery, murder, violence, and all other manner of trials and tribulations.”

b) And yet Las Casas’ perspective was only one-side of a much larger debate about indigenous life that stemmed from the encounter between the Old and New Worlds.
III. European Conceptions of Native Americans in the 16th Century

A. Europeans encountered a number of different native groups – sedentary, semi-sedentary, and nonsedentary.

1) Go on to provide examples: Aztecs and Inca w/ great cities and empires, the Tupinambá in Brazil who moved about and constantly fought with one another, to the apparently friendly Arawak in the Caribbean, or the Caribs who were considered cannibals.
   a) Given the tremendous diversity of native America, Europeans were left with the general question of how to conceive of and make sense of New World natives.

2) European responses would take various forms
   a) Some believed that if New World natives were on the one hand uncivilized, they were also innocent, and additionally, very ready to receive Christianity.
      1) This was the impression that we get from Columbus’ initial description of the Arawak (from previous class).
      2) That same impression is initially conveyed in early descriptions of other groups.
         a) Following the discovery of Brazil in 1500, Pedro Vaz Caminha, described the erection of a cross and early Portuguese attempts to preach to the Tupinambá:
            “When we disembarked, the captain said that it would be well to go directly to the cross, which was leaning against a tree near the river, to be set up the next day . . . and that we should all kneel down and kiss it so that they might see the respect which we had for it. And thus we did. And we motioned to those ten or twelve who were there [and here he is referring to Tupinambá Indians] that they should do the same, and at once they all went to kiss it.”
            Now listen carefully to Caminha’s conclusion:
            “They seem to be people of such innocence that, if one could understand them and they us, they would soon be Christians, because they do not have or understand any belief, as it appears . . . For it is certain that this people is good and of pure simplicity, and there can easily be stamped upon them whatever belief we wish to give them . . .”
b) Others believed that New World civilizations must in some manner hearken back to the ancient civilizations of the Old World.  
1) This was particularly true of sedentary groups like the Aztecs or the Inca who had large cities with great pyramids and complex social structures.  
   a) In this regard, they argued that native groups could not have accomplished all of this on their own, and that indigenous groups must be descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel.

c) And finally, yet others provided a much different description of New World civilizations based on the fact that many groups carried out practices that the Europeans abhored.

1) In this regard, the dilemma of how to best conceive of New Worlds natives was a question that not only vexed sixteenth Europeans, but later historians as well.  
   a) This can be illustrated by the case of William Hickling Prescott, a nineteenth-century Harvard boy, who went on to write an epic account of the Conquest of Mexico, and is often considered the father of modern history.  
   b) Prescott’s treatment of native America is particularly intriguing in this regard.  
      1)) On the one hand, he had great praise for native meso-American civilization.  
         “The degree of civilization which they had reached,” he writes, “... may be considered ... [like] that enjoyed by our Saxon ancestors, under Alfred.”  
      2)) And yet, on the other hand he also condemned these same native civilizations, on account of their practice of ritual cannibalism.  
         “[C]annibalism under any form,” he wrote from the relative security of his private library, “... cannot but have a fatal influence on the nation addicted to it.”

2) Hans Staden, a sixteenth-century German adventurer, had somewhat more to say on the subject. “We landed on a beach close by the sea,” he writes, describing the location where he had been brought shortly after his capture by a tribe of Brazilian Tupinamba, “... and I was forced to call out ... and say: A junesche been ermi vramme, which means: 'I your food have come.'”
B. Caught between the glorious past of antiquity and the barbarous practices of modernity, nineteenth-century historians like Prescott and sixteenth-century adventurers like Staden faced the same dilemma when confronting native civilizations: kings or cannibals?

1) In understanding how European conceived of native groups, it must be emphasized that empirical observations about Indians had to be reconciled with established authority.

   c) Europeans believed that Indians in the New World – like everyone, everywhere – were subject to Natural Law.

      a) Based on the notion that all peoples – Christian and non-Christian alike – are subject to certain basic principles infused in their very being by God.

      b) Juridically speaking, violation of Natural Law meant that someone could be enslaved.

         1) If you committed cannibalism, practiced homosexuality, were taken prisoner in a just war, etc.

         2) Based on early ideas of Aristotle and others that some peoples were meant to rule and others were meant to be ruled.

         3) Quotation by Aristotle:

            “Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the "Tribeless, lawless, heartless one" . . . . But is there any one thus intended by nature to be a slave, and for whom such a condition is expedient and right, or rather is not all slavery a violation of nature? There is no difficulty in answering this question, on grounds both of reason and of fact. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.”
2) THIS BROUGHT EUROPEANS BACK TO A CENTRAL QUESTION: Who were the natives of the Caribbean? Could they be enslaved?

a) Upon arriving in the Caribbean, Columbus initially said “yes”, believing that certain groups of natives should be enslaveable.

1) Why? In part, because he believed certain groups to be cannibals.

2) Columbus, in fact, sent back a number of Indians to Isabella to be slaves

b) Isabella, however, very much disagreed with Columbus in this regard.

1) She freed the indigenous slaves that Columbus sent back.

2) She considered the inhabitants of the Caribbean to be her subjects.
   a)) Who had given the Spaniards the right to enslave her subjects?
     b)) Africans, of course, were not her subjects – but rather, the subjects of other kings.

c) In 1504, a committee (junta) is convoked to debate questions surrounding Indian labor.

1) Isabella said that Indians should be treated well and not abused.
2) Colonists responded, however, by saying that Papal Bulls gave them the right to enslave pagans because of the issue of natural law.
d) In order to bridge the gap between these two points of view, the Spanish come up with something called the *Requerimiento*.

1) Created in 1513 by a Spanish Jurist, Juan López de Palacios Rubios.  
2) Began with a history of the world since Adam. It then moved on to the grant made by the Pope to the Castilian Crown and the obligation that every Indian had to obey the agents of the crown. And concluded by saying that if you did not obey the royal agents, then you would be at their mercy and they would be justified in this regard.  
3) Quotation from Requerimiento:  
   “But, if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us. And that we have said this to you and made this Requisition, we request the notary here present to give us his testimony in writing, and we ask the rest who are present that they should be witnesses of this Requisition.”

e) Additionally, in coming years, the crown and the Pope enact a series of decrees and reforms meant to ameliorate the condition and treatment of New World natives.  
   1) Laws of Burgos in 1512  
   2) In 1537, the Pope issues a Bull saying that Indians are indeed human beings.
f) And yet the debate continues, reaching a climax in 1550, when Las Casas goes before the Spanish court to debate one of the most celebrated Spanish jurists of the day: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda.

1) Sepúlveda, a translator of Aristotle’s work, had published a book, The Second Democrats, which drew upon Aristotle to argue that it was just to use force against those who were naturally inferior and refused to serve.

a) Read quotation:
“... the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. This same relationship exists among men, there being some who by nature are masters and others who by nature are slaves... One may believe as certain and undeniable, since it is affirmed by the wisest authors, that it is just and natural that prudent, upright, and humane men should rule over those who are not. ... Such being the case, you can well understand... if you know the customs and nature of the two peoples, that with perfect right the Spaniards rule over these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in wisdom, intelligence, virtue, and humanitas are as inferior to the Spaniards as infants to adults and women to men.”

1)) very much a racial argument
2)) celebrated by Spanish colonists in the New World.

2) Las Casas and Sepúlveda debate before the court and Council of Indies in Vallodolid in 1550.

a) Council asked to vote on whether Spain’s conquest was just.

b) We don’t know the outcome of the vote, but Sepúlveda’s book is banned and the idea of conquest is replaced in Spanish with the word “pacification”

IV. Slides.