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The Spanish priest and journalist Jose Maria Blanco White (1775-1841) promoted an important debate in Europe about the Catholic Church's domination of Spanish society. Drawing upon the Spanish experience, he also advocated the independence for the colonies.

With Blanco's major works, *A letter upon the mischievous influence of the Spanish Inquisition: as it actually exists in the present* (1811), *Slave trade report: moral, political and Christian remarks on this trade* (1814) (*Bosquexo del comercio en esclavos: y reflexiones sobre este tráfico considerado moral, política y cristianamente*); and *The life of the reverend Joseph Blanco White written by himself; with portions of his correspondence* (1845), along with Alexander von Humboldt's *The Spanish America in 1800* (*L'Amérique espagnole en 1800*), this paper attempts a reading of how Blanco and Humboldt understood the use of faith in the Spanish conquests and the limits and ambiguities of their own arguments about the achievement and consequences of the conquering civilization.

Conquest in the name of faith

The bishop of Chiapas, Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566), was the first Catholic chronicler to denounce violence against indigenous peoples.

Las Casas raised a key point on the conquest and colonization process: the servitude of indigenous peoples and the political and theological legitimization of the principles of the discovery of the New World. On the one hand, he recognized indigenous peoples as vassals of the king, a condition established by baptism. But at the same time, by legitimizing their religious conversion, he integrated them into the Catholic Church's celestial order.

As Eduardo Subirats says (1994), Las Casas' theological-political argument against violence and advocacy for the salvation of indigenous peoples was constructed around the fundamental constitutive principle of the Spanish colonization, that is, the Christian ideal of propagation of the faith, conversion and salvation (the Spanish chimera).

Las Casas used three arguments to legitimize the colonization. One is the strong rhetorical denunciation of the cruelty of the conquerors. Las Casas built a theological and jurisdictional framework for a radical, democratic liberation of indigenous peoples. He reformulated conquest and colonization and transformed the conversion principle, previously associated with violence, into a new process: conversion was the ultimate means of protection of indigenous peoples against conquerors.

Las Casas called for punishment of the oppressors of the indigenous peoples. He argued that they should not be given to individual Spaniards in commission (1542) because they belonged to the Crown. Las Casas called on the king to establish laws to incorporate the indigenous peoples into the Kingdom as subjects and free vassals, to create inviolable constitutional impediments to their removal from the Kingdom. By doing so, Las Casas did not question the underlying principle, or the concept of discovery. He redefined discovery, as a messianic enterprise, as an act in the spirit of "Orbis Christianus."

Neither give them as vassals, nor entrust, nor give them as serfs, nor in commission, no in deposit nor by any other title (ni dadlos a nadie por vasallos ni encomendados, ni dadlos en feudo, ni en encomienda, ni en depósito ni en otro ningún título) (my translation, "Christianity and defense of the Indian American," p. 30).

Las Casas' second reason for supporting the incorporation of indigenous peoples as free vassals into the Crown was the need for their peaceful religious conversion. However, such a peaceful conversion only changed the external aspect of the conquest; it did not touch its internal principle.¹

The predication and foundation of their faith and their conversion through knowledge of Christ (La predicación y fundación de la fe en ellas y su conversión de conocimiento de Cristo) (my translation, p. 31).

Las Casas alerted the Crown to the avarice and greed of the Spaniards, who did not allow the priests to enter the towns of indigenous peoples who had been converted. He denounced the violence as he understood the strategic importance and use of the indigenous people.

1. Eduardo Subirats. *El continente vacío. La conquista del Nuevo Mundo y la conciencia moderna*. Madrid: Anaya t Mario Muchnik, 1994.

Emancipation in the Name of Reason

Both Humboldt and Blanco raised new questions about the violence directed against indigenous peoples. They denounced the connection between the instrumental use of the indigenous people and religious conversion. Humboldt strongly criticized the Jesuits for their responsibility in the violent religious conversion of indigenous peoples. For him, the real interest of the Jesuits was not to protect them but to set the stage for the conquest of their souls. He described the despotism of Spanish soldiers who in their *entradas* destroyed all resistance, imprisoning indigenous peoples far from their hometowns; although this practice was forbidden, it was the best way to assure the expansion of the Jesuit Order.

Although this violent means to conquer souls was prohibited by Spanish law, it was still accepted by the civil governments and considered necessary by religious authorities for the expansion of the Jesuit mission... These principles that degrade humankind undoubtedly were not shared by the entire society that has made their steps to civilization, but society that in the New World remains exclusively in the hand of priests. But the *entradas*, the spiritual conquest with bayonets was an inherent vice of the regime that resulted the rapid expansion of their missions. (Ce moyen violent de conquérir des âmes, quoique prohibé par les lois espagnoles, était toléré par les gouverneurs civils, et vanté comme utile à la religion et à l'agrandissement des missions par les supérieurs de la Compagnie... Ces principes, qui dégradent l'humanité n'étaient point partagés sans doute par tous les membres d'une société qui, dans le Nouveau Monde et partout où l'éducation est resté exclusivement entre les mains des moines, a rendu des services aux lettres et à la civilisation. Mais les *entradas*, les conquêtes spirituelles à l'aide des baïonnettes, étaient une vice inhérent à une régime qui tendait à l'agrandissement rapide des missions) (my translation L'Amérique espagnole, p. 83-84.)

In June of 1810, Blanco published his most critical essay on the Spanish American colonies: *An examination of the work entitled Essay on the Kingdom of the New Spain (Examen de la obra intitulada Essai sur le Royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne)* in which he presented a partial translation of and response to Alexander von Humboldt's *The Spanish America in 1800 (L'Amérique espagnole en 1800)* for a Spanish-speaking audience.

Blanco's paper acknowledged that Humboldt's essay raised several issues: the brutal exploitation and perpetual enslavement of indigenous peoples and the chiefs' revolts in the Spanish American colonies. He argued that slavery had no commercial nor historical justification. But the most important contribution of Humboldt was, according to Blanco, his view of the colonial social structures built on religious dogmatism and despotism.

Blanco recognized the ideological dimensions of Humboldt's work in providing an extensive description of the Spanish American colonies. For Blanco, Humboldt's analysis went far beyond the traditional priests' chronicles that consistently ignored the internal composition of the colonies:

It goes beyond the miserable volumes of ecclesiastical history written by friars and other ignorant church scribes...by writers who ignored the internal state of the colonies or who abstained from publishing their news due to political constraints.(va más allá de los miserables volúmenes de la historia eclesiástica, escritos por frailes, y otros eclesiásticos ignorantes...de escritores que ignoraban el estado interno de las colonias, o se abstuvieron de publicar sus noticias, contenidos por consideraciones políticas.) (my translation, *El Español* 30 de julio 1810- 240-144).

Blanco said that both religious dogmatism and despotism were the two supports of the social organization of the Spanish America colonies, along with the legal modalities on the protection of indigenous peoples.

Later in Blanco's *A letter upon the mischievous influence of the Spanish Inquisition: as it actually exists in the present* (1811), he attacked religion even more directly. In the context of the revolution in Spain (1808-1814) he argued that there could be nothing more barbarous than to oblige the studious youth of a nation to choose between immorality and ignorance. With such a statement, Blanco distinguished between a well-informed and enlightened people, and the veneration of religious principles.

I must in truth confess to you that I should consider the fruits of the glorious Revolution of Spain as for the most part lost if, after liberating herself from the French, the Inquisition were again to be established, even on the same footing as it has stood in recent years. (6)

With such an argument, Blanco anticipates the distinction between Catholicism and Enlightenment secularism of the contemporary debate. Spain does not know what a critical Enlightened epistemology means,² that is to say, Enlightenment as criticism and reflexive knowledge with an hermeneutical dimension and social content (Subirats).

In an article he wrote for the African Institute, *Slave trade report: moral, political and Christian remarks on this trade* (1814) (*Bosquexo del comercio en esclavos: y reflexiones sobre este tráfico considerado moral, política, y cristianamente*) Blanco argued against the justification of slavery by reference to the supposed barbarism of African people. He rejected the assumed authority of Europeans *to go hunting in Africa* and thus went beyond the abolitionist essays. He carefully traced the reasons to challenge the paradigm of

2. Eduardo Subirats. *Después de la lluvia. Sobre la ambigua modernidad española*. Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 1993; Francisco Sánchez- Blanco. *La mentalidad ilustrada*. Madrid: Taurus, 1999.

civilization versus barbarism and more importantly questioned Las Casas and the principle that legitimized the conquest. This article is an invitation to reopen the debate on the European emancipation project or Enlightenment.

For both Humboldt and Blanco, progress is based on knowledge, that is to say, the instrumental reason (everything that responds to the criteria of efficiency–means-ends), the systematization of what is useful for the enrichment of a society, and the arts. In a synthesis of Western history, tracing the progress from early times (barbarism) to societies with organized civil structures, Africa was, for Blanco, an example of the internal limits of civilization. Africa had contact with the civilized world (Europe), but this contact did not benefit for the continent itself; instead, it meant:

To plunder and to suppress its knowledge, and if it can be said in one new word...we could say, to barbarize it. (para depravarla y oscurecer sus entendimientos, y si puede usarse una palabra nueva...diremos, que para barbarizarla) (my translation, p. 43-44).

Blanco argued that Cuba's claim to increase the slave trade was immoral; he questioned the Royal License of 1789 to import slaves to Cuba and regretted the suppression of the 1811 bill that outlawed the slave trade. Although his arguments are constructed within the tradition of denunciation of violence against indigenous peoples (Las Casas), Blanco recognized the deep contradictions of this tradition. For him, any sort of paternalism was questionable because it retarded the progress of peoples.

Addressing the internal state of the Spanish American colonies, Blanco criticized the fragility of their organization and blamed Spain for this. Under the prolongation of exploitation of indigenous peoples lies the abuse of authority and injustice: his denunciation of slavery is both applicable in Africa and in the colonies.

Blanco acknowledged Humboldt's comments on the state of the population of the Spanish America colonies and his denunciation of the conversion violence. He advocated the rights of the vassals in the name of a secular reason. His teleological-political argument for the progress of indigenous peoples was constructed in a fundamental constitutive principle of that reason, that is, civilization. However, he did not understand that underneath Humboldt's critical testimonies on the experience of the native towns confronting modern civilization lay another colonialist will. Humboldt's contribution to the study of what is called contemporary ethnology (Labastida),³ was always accompanied by a compromise with the colonial perspective seeking to maximize the utility for the Spanish American colonial empire.

3. Jaime Labastide. *Humboldt, ciudadano universal*. Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI, 1999.

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