

## When Worlds Collide: The Columbian Encounter in Global Perspective

By Brian Ferguson

*Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice  
Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey*

Over the last few years I have been investigating the impact of state expansionism on indigenous warfare. The main result of that is a book I edited with Neil Whitehead, called "War in the Tribal Zone". Today I will use the findings of that book to address the question: How was European expansion in the New World unique? What I will try to do is sketch out some fundamental characteristics of, first, state expansionism in general, including that of New World states; second, what was qualitatively distinctive about the first centuries of European expansion in the New World; and third, what developments over time led to the spread of European power over the rest of the globe, including those regions remaining beyond the frontiers of the Americas.

Let us start with some of the common features of political expansion, aspects of the process which can be observed in *all* states, New World and Old, and even in some pre state polities. First it is necessary to recognize that expansionism is rarely if ever a monolithic process, entirely dictated by top political authorities. Typically there is a constellation of actors and interests, and the specific combination of these will shape the expansionist thrust.

Second, there are differing strategic objectives in any state expansion. Some scholars make this point by distinguishing territorial vs. hegemonic control; the former being direct governance by the conquerors, the latter being indirect control or influence through local clients. We found this distinction valid, but of limited utility when looking at concrete situations, where some mixture of territorial governance and hegemony seem the rule.

We came up with a different distinction which appears valid in most cases of state expansion: coercion vs. seduction. Rarely does expansion rely on force alone. Usually a mix of positive and negative sanctions are employed, with state manufactured crafts and political support being two common lures. European and indigenous expansionists differed in the specifics, but the principle was the same: divide and conquer. As for the application of lethal force, the Europeans were in general more ruthless and efficient than indigenous conquerors, but there is a large area of overlap in cruelty.

Regarding the impact of expanding indigenous states on non state peoples around them, the evidence remains rather limited. What there is suggests that the exchange networks that emanate from state centers, the large scale conflicts that

surround them, and the extractive and administrative demands of a dominant state, all combine to promote more sharply distinguished cultural divisions or ethnies among the non state peoples around them; and also to promote development of politically cohesive units, or tribes. Not that ethnies and tribes cannot exist in the absence of a state, but states make a lot of them. More on this later.

In all of the above, European expansion in the New World was not unlike the home grown variety. Yet European expansionism had profoundly different consequences for Native peoples. Why? A simple but crucial fact is that Europe was a long way away, both geographically and culturally. By the late 15th century, some European nations had both the maritime technology and the political economic impulse to push outwards over great distances, including across the long-standing barrier of the Atlantic. This geographical and cultural distance meant that European expansion would be very different from any Native Americans had known before.

First and foremost, there was disease. A succession of newly introduced diseases killed enormous numbers, usually two thirds or more of a population, in the years before and after direct contact occurred. Such sudden and massive losses had terribly disruptive consequences ramifying throughout indigenous societies. This is one *huge* difference, and it is probably the principal reason why early European expansion was so wildly successful in the New World.

A second function of the distance between Europe and the Americas is also biotic. Europeans introduced a diversity of plants and animals, which literally changed the land to make it more supportive of European lives. The impact was most pronounced in those areas with a climate capable of supporting highly developed European plant and animal complexes, but the global European expansion also brought transfers from tropic to tropic. Ecological change was not necessarily negative in its effect on Native Americans. One could argue that the Great Plains people prospered with the horse, although that prosperity came only after the advanced sedentary peoples of the Mississippi had been decimated.

A third function of distance is that Europeans brought with them a spectrum of technologies, derived from all the ancient civilizations of the Old World, which were absent in the New. Simple products made of metal, glass and cloth may have been barely tradeable in the Old World, but in the New

they found a tremendous demand. These and more refined crafts were the primary means of seduction, the gifts with which Europeans bought complicity.

Europeans also had some immediate advantages in transportation and weapons technology, but these were less decisive in the first centuries than later. Organizationally, European military forces were more effective killing machines than their Native opponents, but not sufficiently so to triumph over indigenous numbers without assistance. And in that last area, Europeans did enjoy a considerable military advantage by virtue of being newcomers: they could pick sides in local disputes and recruit indigenous allies and auxiliaries, who in the early years usually did most of the fighting.

A final consideration which distinguished European from Native expansionism is their demand for slaves and other forms of forced labor. Certainly, some pre-Columbian polities took and kept captives in war, some of whom could be called "slaves". But the scale of European demand dwarfed anything that existed previously. With some major exceptions northern North America for one the Europeans' early spread throughout the hemisphere depended directly on exploiting unfree labor. The effect of this exploitation was multiplied by the fact that Native laborers died very quickly from disease or abuse and had to be replaced. To consider just the demand for slaves alone, the impact of Europe was more devastating on peoples of lowland South America, than was the later trans-Atlantic slave trade on the peoples of West Africa.

To this point I have been focusing on the earlier years of European expansion. Expansion is a long process, not an event. Over the centuries, aspects of European culture evolved which contributed to its continuing expansion over the surface of the New World. These gradual changes also drove Europe's conquests in Asia and Africa, where for centuries Europeans had remained mostly traders, not rulers.

Above everything, there is the evolution of capitalism. This has been so thoroughly discussed by others that it is necessary here only to note its existence as the motor which has pushed Europe to all corners of the world. Hand in glove with the capitalist economy is evolving industrialism. The concomitant transformation of the entire world into Europe's market and/or workhouse meant a basic restructuring of non-European societies, be they tribes or empires.

Two specific areas of technological advance merit special consideration: transportation and armaments. Steamships, outboard motors, and helicopters have expanded Europeans' scope of low cost movement, allowing them to inhabit progressively more remote areas. Rifled barrels, machine guns, and cruise missiles have each in their turn given European armies a qualitative if often transitory advantage over non-European enemies.

Speaking of the military, European armed forces began a formidable evolution just around the time of Columbus, which culminated in the development of recognizably mod-

ern armies, well disciplined and drilled, around the start of the 18th century. It was only then that they were able to vanquish the armies of "gunpowder empires" of the Old World. Last but not least, another important but highly variable aspect of European expansion over time is the migration of large numbers of Europeans to different parts of the world. And that concludes the discussion of varieties of state expansionism.

I would next like to talk about what a heightened recognition of the impact of Western expansionism means for our conceptualization of all the non-state societies which have been described by literate observers. One implication is that we have to drop the notion of the ethnographic present through a hypothetical moment between a culture's "discovery" by the outside world and the beginning of its acculturation. Certainly in the New World, disease, ecological introductions, and Western manufactured goods typically spread through indigenous networks, far outpacing any face-to-face contact by observers. Change preceded reportage.

Another implication is that we need to reconsider the idea of a frontier as being a line or qualitative break between a state and non-state peoples. Neil Whitehead and I have coined the term "tribal zone" to refer to the space extending outward from state contact points, where there exists a demonstrable impact from the nearby state. These influences which spread in advance of any frontier regularly led to widespread political and economic transformations. One of the most conspicuous products of this process are the politically bounded and unified groups we call tribes. Their prominence is why Whitehead and I call this the tribal zone. I want to stress, however, that in my opinion this recognition does *not* negate the possibility of using ethnographic cases to make evolutionary comparisons although we *do* need to become more historically aware about the cases.

Another area where we may have to rethink the basics is in our understanding of tribal warfare. War in the tribal zone is invariably transformed, frequently intensified, and often generated by the far-reaching effects of a proximate state. Not that there was no war before, but generally the fighting gets worse before any process of pacification begins. This I call "warrification", and I hope to demonstrate some of its more subtle manifestations in a book I have written on the history of Yanomami warfare. I think that all state expansionism may have this effect, but Europe's peculiarly disruptive character made it particularly destructive in this sense.

But it will not do to elevate European expansion into something totally unique. All states have had their tribal zones. If we look at maps of the ancient world, and think about how far outwards trade, migration, and political military shocks can travel, it appears that for non-state peoples over the past several thousand years, living in the shadow of states may be more the rule than exception. Even without states, chiefdoms have their own zones of influence. For that matter, we are now coming to appreciate that even relatively

egalitarian peoples are frequently enmeshed in broader, often very complex social networks.

So another ethnographic chestnut that may have to go is the idea that any society, no matter how "simple", can be understood by what can be observed within one village. As archaeology and early contact reports tell us more about these ancient systems of integration, we may come to accept that everywhere, change is more normal than stasis, and that all human societies have an equal amount of history behind them. Perhaps ironically, with this realization the distinction of pre and post contact situations may itself lose salience, as we come to appreciate the existence of a whole range of societal interaction situations.

I have been talking about the history of the world system. I would like to conclude with some speculation about its future. Looking back in time, every state or empire that has expanded, ultimately has collapsed. What went up, went down. How about us, now? Five or six hundred years for the modern world system is a rather long run, as things go. Will this time be different? Is this one permanent? Of course no one knows. There are, however, some suggestions that the maximum global spread of governance by discrete states, the post colonial world of mid twentieth century, may be going into decline. Listen to these recent headlines: "Convoy of Diplomats Flees Afghan Capital", "Tea Growers Plan Own Army in North India", "U.N. Urges Warlords to Open Somali Port". The next decade may see a real transformation of global military relations, as the center adapts to a collapse of the planetary network of governmental administrations forged after World War II. The North, the Triad of Japan, Western Europe and North America, seems to have a sharply diminished interest in maintaining the stability of the underdeveloped world as a market, and the Gulf War has demonstrated a capacity to deal with any real threat to the supply of critical resources. With the competition out of business, that is, with communism no longer threatening capitalism with an alternative international economic order, the northern powers seem unwilling to pay the costs of control.

Will developing third world industrialists try to use force to protect their growing international economic interests? Will new relations emerge between commerce and non state armed forces, with the cocaine cartel as one model? What kinds of political structures will exert what kinds of control? How far can the U.N. go to establish order, and on what terms? And what will be the make up of the U.N.? The maps of the future are a real question, not where the lines will be, but what *kinds* of lines will be drawn.

There is no possible military solution to the fundamental problem of a world filled with extraordinary numbers of inhumanly poor people. These afflicted masses may not represent an immediate military threat to the world's elites, but even the super rich have to live on this planet, and this much poverty is a planetary problem. The North may construct barriers to keep the rest of the world out, but there is little reason to expect these will be more successful than in the past. Migrants will continue to flee their horrors; the crack trade may be only a harbinger of a deepening global poverty connection. The continuing stagnation or decline of living conditions in the Third World will contribute to global ecological problems, and its miserable sanitary and health conditions are breeding grounds for more lethal pathogens. Ecology and disease contributed to the world system's expansion. They could contribute to its collapse as well.

Again, world system collapse is only an idea. But I suggest that anthropologists might focus our cross cultural perspective on those diverse areas which were the most recently integrated into the international order of modern states. What is happening at the fringe of the world of states? There may be generalizations worth formulating, hypotheses worth testing. I know that such scientism seems old fashioned to some. But I see introspection and reflexivity as luxuries when your house may be burning down.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Paper presented in the session "Politics and Violence" 91st Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association December, 4, 1992, San Francisco, California.



"THIS JUST IN—TERRORISTS THREATEN TO DETONATE A NUCLEAR BOMB IN 60 SECONDS—MORE AFTER A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR."