

# Montaigne and las casas history essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Compare and Contrast Las Casas' and Montaigne's portrait of the people of Latin America. Would it make a big difference to Las Casas' aims if they were really cannibals, as Montaigne supposed? Would it matter to Montaigne if it turned out that they weren't really cannibals?

On October 12, 1492 Columbus spotted the first island of the West Indies. The colonization of the New World and the conquest of the native Americans followed. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the natives had developed hundreds of varying tribal cultures and perhaps two thousand different languages. Many of those civilizations were totally destroyed, the population murdered, tortured and enslaved. The conquistadors are to blame for the genocide on hundred thousands of native Americans. Bartolomé de Las Casas was an eye witness of those atrocities. In Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies he gives a nearly factual account of some of those acts of violence. He wanted to persuade the King of Spain to do something to stop them. The conquistadors justified many of their cruelties with the claim that native Americans were barbarians. Their chief barbarism was cannibalism. Michael de Montaigne addresses native American cannibalism in his essay On the Cannibals. He argues that the newly discovered people were not deprived but live well ordered lives. Their society was not inferior to western society; in many aspects it was even superior. In this essay, I will show that Montaigne's and Las Casas' both idealize the Indian society. However, while Montaigne depicts it as more or less civilized, Las Casas describes it as juvenile and defenseless. Yet, their aim is similar, in that they both want to show that in many instances, Europeans act more like uncivilized savages than the Indians.

Montaigne portrays the Indian society as a utopian one. He writes that “ it seems to me that what experience has taught us about those peoples surpasses ... all the descriptions with which poetry has beautifully painted the Age of Gold and all its ingenious fictions about Man’s blessed early state” (Montaigne 232). In Greek mythology, the Age of Gold was a time of perfect peace and agreement. According to Montaigne, the natives live in a natural state that even surpasses the Age of Gold. They live in harmony and do not even have words for “ treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness” (Montaigne 233). They participate in wars, but when they are fighting, they are fighting for sheer honor. They have no interest in acquiring land or gold, there is not greed or lust in them. Their wars are more like duels in which they measure their strength. This is why their behavior in battle is more honorable than that of the Europeans. Montaigne says that they do not even know the meaning of “ fear or flight” (235). However, when they take a prisoner during such a war, they perform a cruel ritual on him. They kill the prisoner, “ roast him and make a common meal of him” (Montaigne 235). They do not do it for nourishment, since nature provides them with enough food, but to “ symbolize ultimate revenge” (Montaigne 235). At first this seems to contradict Montaigne’s portrait of a harmonic Indian society. One would think that there is an inconsistency in his picture. However, this inconsistent picture is seen only when one looks at it from an European perspective. Montaigne says that “ we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of opinions and customs of our own country” (231). Europeans viewed cannibalism as especially barbarous because it was a form of cruelty that they were not accustomed to. Montaigne does not defend the Indians and he thinks that one should

condemn their cannibalism. However, one should not forget that the Europeans participate in behavior that is even more barbarous than cannibalism. As an example he gives “ lacerating by rack and torturing a body still fully able to feel things” (Montaigne 236). Lacerating by rack was a method of execution that was common in Europe in the time of the Holy Inquisition. Because this practice creates a lot of pain Montaigne compares it to “ eating a man alive” (236). The cannibals are less cruel because they quickly kill their victims with their swords and eat them dead.

At the end of the essay, Montaigne quotes an Indian song. He wanted to show that the natives are capable of producing art. Art is a sign of civilization and Montaigne describes the Indian culture as we civilized. Their language is “ a pleasant one with an agreeable sound and has terminations rather like Greek” (Montaigne 240). The Greek language, the language of Socrates and Plato is also used as a symbol of civilization. Comparing the Indian language to Greek is to acknowledge that the Indian society is a highly developed one. That their society is well ordered can also be seen in their eating habits, their ethic and religion, and their political order. Their days were ordered and followed a routine. They had one single meal every morning. Throughout the day, they consumed a lukewarm drink. This drink was produced by the women while the men were out hunting. Their houses were big enough for two to three thousand people. Husbands slept separated from their multiple wives. Their ethic basically consisted of two things: “ bravery before their enemies and love for their wives” (Montaigne 234). Furthermore, the natives also had a well developed religion. Just like Christians they believed in the “ immortality of souls” (Montaigne 234). There were priests and clairvoyants.

In the end, Montaigne shows that Indians lived in a hierarchical system.

There were rulers and subjects. When Montaigne talked to one of the native rulers in Rouen, it turned out that his high rank as a military official granted him the “ privilege of having paths cut for him through the thickets in their forests” (Montaigne 241).

Bartolomé de Las Casas provides us with a different picture of the natives.

Las Casas was called the “ Defender and Apostle of the Indians” (Las Casas xv) because he opposed the gruesome ways in which the Spanish colonists treated them. He developed sympathy for the American Indians and

compassion for their suffering. The Short Account of the Destruction of the

Indies is a collection of incidences that illustrate the sadism and cruelty of

many Spanish colonialists. He tells those stories very graphically in order to

give the reader an understanding of the horrors of the conquest. He created a romanticized and idealized picture of the natives. Unlike Montaigne, Las

Casas did not mention a possible dark side of the Indian character. He

described them as “ so peace-loving, so humble and so docile” (Las Casas 6).

They are “ gentle lambs” (Las Casas 11) but also “ the least robust of human

beings” (Las Casas 10). Their wars were not more “ deadly than our jousting

or many European children’s games” (Las Casas 14). Las Casas describes the

Indians as very passive people that live in a state of nature. Sometimes it

seems as if Las Casas would not even recognize them as full human beings.

Maybe he decided to describe them as more innocent than he experienced

them to be in order to contradict their gentleness with European cruelties.

He sees the conflict in good and evil dichotomies. The Europeans are

slaughtering gentle, childlike people that cannot defend themselves. Many

Many

Europeans justified this killing with the claim that the Indians were ignorant of Christianity. However, Las Casas says that if they are introduced to the word of God, they quickly adopt the Christian beliefs. The Spaniards, however, do not bother to teach them Christianity. Most of the time they present them with an ultimatum: “ either they adopt the Christian religion and swear allegiance to the Crown of Castile, or they will find themselves faced with military action” (Las Casas). Las Casas thinks that this is counterproductive. Force cannot make them Christians. They should be educated in the matters of Christianity because then they will themselves adopt it as their religion.

Las Casas was a Catholic priest, therefore the question how the Indian fit into the Christian view of history must have occurred to him. In Christian mythology, Noah had three sons who became the forefathers of Africans, Asians and Europeans. There is no mention of Americans in the Bible. This led many Christians to believe that the Indians did not descend from Noah and therefore not from Adam either. They were either animals or unaffected by the original sin. We can speculate that Las Casas' utopian description of their society might have incorporated the latter. He puts a lot of emphasis on their innocence and purity. If they were unaffected by the original sin, they would be gentle and childlike, unable to hurt anybody, just as Las Casas describes them. He also repeatedly reminds the reader of their unembarrassed nakedness. Montaigne might also have incorporated this view in his essay. He mentions their nakedness and includes an Indian love song which starts with the lines “ O Adder, stay: stay O Adder! From your colors / let my sister take the pattern for a girdle” (Montaigne 240). If the

natives were unaffected by the snake's seduction in the Garden of Eden, they would not have a problem with singing a song about the beauty of snakes.

Montaigne mostly uses second hand accounts when he talks about the Indians. He introduces us to a “ simple, rough fellow” (Montaigne 231), who provided him with most of the information he had about the natives. At the end of the essay, Montaigne mentions a conversation with a native in Rouen. During this conversation he uses a “ stupid interpreter” (Montaigne 241) that could not understand his ideas. Montaigne uses the second hand accounts and invents the interpreter in order to distance himself from the account. We can assume that he intended the story to be treated as fiction rather than an accurate report. The essay is not a work of anthropology, whether the Indians really practiced cannibalism is irrelevant to the point it wants to make. Montaigne uses the contrast between the fictional Indian society and the European society to point out flaws in the latter. At the beginning of the essay, he raised the questions whether the New World could be Plato's Atlantis. He does that in order to create a connection between America and Europe. He used the story about the American natives to denounce the barbarity of the Inquisition and of the conflicts in the aftermath of the Reformation. Montaigne made a general point about human behavior: we judge everything that we are not accustomed to. We think that in our own country, “ we always find the perfect religion, the perfect polity, the most developed and perfect way of doing anything” (Montaigne 231). The environment we grow up in influences our perception of the world. Growing up as a Catholic would make one think that Catholicism is right, growing up

as a Protestant would make one think that Protestantism is right and growing up as a cannibal would make one think that cannibalism is right. We should not judge people and force our view on them because our view easily could be wrong. We should not pretend to be more civilized than the cannibals and forget our own cruelties over their cruelties.

Las Casas views the Indians as ‘ noble savages’, who have a close connection to nature and are essentially good. However, they might lack full use of reason. He argues that the conquistadors are participating in the killing and enslaving of fundamentally innocent and childlike people that cannot defend themselves. Las Casas claims to give a factual account of the genocide in South America. However, it is undeniable that he changed the stories a bit in order to create a better argument to persuade the king. He might also left out some of the less flattering facts about the Indians. His goal was to save the Indians from the Europeans and the Europeans from divine judgment. If the Indians would engage in cannibalism, like Montaigne assumed, it would ruin Las Casas’ picture of the natives. They would not be innocent anymore and that would prove his whole argument to be invalid.

Las Casas and Montaigne have different pictures of the Indians. Modern ethnologists would probably disagree with either picture. However, their pictures serve the purposes of their arguments. They argue against the views that Indians are dangerous savages or natural slaves. Las Casas’ picture of the conflict between Indians and Europeans is one of victims and culprits. The Indians are innocent and the Europeans are the barbarians. In contrast, Montaigne argues that there are degrees of barbarity and Europeans are barbarians to a higher degree than the natives.



Work Cited:

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