

Investigation on christopher columbus' prejudice against the american indians

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



Prejudice and discrimination amongst european explorers against the American Indians is an issue found in Christopher Columbus' two letters concerning his voyages to America. To explain how prejudice attitude arises, Tajfel proposed the social identity theory. According to this theory, belonging to a group is a source of self-esteem and so in-group members would discriminate against out-group members to improve self-image.

Furthermore, social categorization is the first step towards prejudice and discrimination as it cultivates the us and them mindset. The last step would be a social comparison of the in-group to the out-group. For example, Columbus and his men (in-group) see themselves as more civilized than the Natives (out-group) and so the Natives are labeled as savages to their more gentlemanly counterpart. As a result, this labeling by Columbus fosters differential treatment of Natives by the European settlers, in other words, discrimination occurs. Thus, this essay would explore his prejudice against the American Indians by characterizing them as an underdeveloped society in need of protection, commodities to bought and sold, Columbus leeching off the wealth that the Natives possess and their naivety in trading transactions , how the Columbus' religion further discriminate the Natives and how Columbus fits the label of a savage, not the Indian.

Christopher Columbus depicts himself as the Natives' protector. As he constantly compares the Natives to his society, Columbus sees inadequacy in the lifestyle of the American Indians and as a result he believes it is his responsibility to guide and govern their lives. According to Columbus, the Natives ' were a very poor people, in everything' which explains their nakedness. In this line, Columbus is sympathetic and mistakes the lack of

clothing as a monetary issues and a sign of their low education. Furthermore, Columbus comments on the generosity of the Indians and he ' forbade worthless things being given to them'. Again, he is trying to reinforce his role as the guardian of the Natives. This need to protect the locals implies that Columbus regards them as simple-minded race who naive akin to children. This childlike treatment shows Columbus patronizing the Natives as he treats them as inferiors and implying that they are incapable of taking care of themselves.

Another evidence is when his men when to the town and the natives ' fled without a moment's delay although I protected them from all injury'. Here this line betrays Columbus' feelings of superiority as by mentioning he protects the Indians from harm it paints the Natives as if they are his possessions to which he has the right to protects them from harm. In addition, Christopher Columbus is so used to look down on Natives, that he is surprised by the existence of the Natives language. ' observed little difference in the appearance of the people, or in their habits and language, except that they understand each other, which is remarkable.' This line highlights Columbus' opinions of them as beings so inferior that they do not have proper means of communication. Although the ' remarkable' shows him as commending the natives, it also illustrates his low expectations for this society as he see something mundane as having a language as something astonishing. Not only that, it shows his prejudice towards the Natives as he pre-judged them as languageless. Therefore, labeling the Natives are inferior beings, to be educated in their ways, fosters mistreatment of Natives as they

are treated not as adults but children that depends on their parents to shield them. With that in mind, by helping the Natives, this increases Columbus self-image as he believes as himself as the benevolent savior of the Natives.

The Native's cowardice and weakness further fuels Columbus the need for him to subjugate them and depicts how conquerable the Natives are. In Columbus eyes, the Native are helpless as they do not even understand what arms are and when he ' showed them swords and they took them by the edge and ignorantly cut themselves'. This depiction of natives ignorance and accidentally cutting in his letter further reinforces the notion that Columbus regards them as unintelligent. However, Columbus does not take into account the fact that it is not that the Natives are unaware of what weapons as they do own a primitive version of it, they are merely unfamiliar with the weapons of the white man thus being injured by the sword should not be an evidence of their foolishness. In addition, Columbus sees their weapons as lesser to his own as they are merely a sharpened stick however he implies that the Natives are afraid to use it. All these evidences point out that the Natives are a defenseless group of people and poses no threat to the European explorers. At the same time, this gap in weaponry further emphasizes just how vulnerable the Natives are to the European as they have no proper means of protecting themselves. Also, the unsophistication of Natives' weapons further adds on to Columbus' idea of them being savages. As a consequence, their vulnerability is easily exploitable by Columbus as he writes that ' when your Highnesses order it, all can be taken... or held captives on the island itself, because with 50 men all can be

subjugated and made to do everything which is desired'. This line illustrates Columbus overconfidence to hold the inhabitants of an island as his hostages with just 50 men which implies that the Natives can be easily dominated and restrained. The fact that he mentions ' all' Natives cements how he perceives that he has great power over them and so he is entitled to ship them of like objects back to his country. Thus, the savages lack of defense and fear of arms reveals how primitive their lives are and as a result, the Europeans exploit the Natives for their slavery trade.

Additionally, the American Indians were not just potential slaves and servants for the Europeans but also a source of wealth. This is because the land that the Natives inhabit are abundant with resources that the European explorers value. In both Columbus' letters he constantly keeps on referencing on the island's gold mines for instance, ' numerous mines of metals' and ' the Indians... saying there was gold everywhere'. This observation of collection of information regarding gold mines exposes his ulterior motive of extracting such riches from the Natives as he continuously broach the topic of gold in his letters. Furthermore, such idea is supported by Columbus promising the highnesses that ' I (Columbus) can give them as much gold as they desire...spices, cotton' all the products that can be found on the Natives' Island. By mentioning all these resources are under his to control to be willingly given in any amount to the Spanish monarchs, Columbus is assuming the leadership of these islands as being a leader would entail in him managing these assets. As a consequence, he disregards the Native own authorities as he hijacks this line of command which signifies

how he belittles their power. Not only that, the line ' gave a thousand good and pretty things that i had to win their love... and help to get for us things they have in abundance, which are necessary to us' highlights Columbus hidden goal of gaining the love of Native is merely a performance to access their valuable products. Also, there is a sinister tone to the word ' get us' as it implies the Europeans will receive these items for free and so this depicts them using the Natives to get to the gold.

In addition, observe how Columbus mentions he is ' win(ning) their love' and not trust, it is more important for him to be well-liked by the Natives as this would make them amenable to accept his request for gold or even to obey him. Therefore, Columbus abuses this relationship with the Natives as he is extracting gold from them by being friendly to them.

In addition, he blinds the Natives with ' pretty things' and not with useful things and this insinuates that he views the Natives as easily amused with simple items thus illustrating Natives as ignorant of trade values. With that in mind, he showcases that the Natives are easy to trick as they trade ' parrots and cotton thread wound in balls and spears...they traded them with us for... small glass beads and hawk's bells'. Hawk bells were inexpensive to produce and the Indians appreciate this low valued item as a trade item and utilize it as a decorative jewelry. Although, the Natives are agreeable to trade their products for a measly thing, this might further shapes Columbus opinions of them of being naive as this is not a fair trade and they treat this mundane thing as something valuable.

This point is reinforced when he mentions that the Natives ' were as much pleased to get them (worthless things) as if they were the finest jewels in the world. Here, Columbus brings up the fact due to their savagery, their uneducatedness, the Indians are not able to differentiate assets from scraps. Thus in a way, this is a backhanded compliment as he highlights their lack of education emphasizing their savagery background. Because of the savages are known to be too generous for their own good and never disagree with the white men, this permits the stereotype that the Natives could not think for themselves and very obedient to any requests. Such stereotype further flames the prejudice towards the Indians as this generalization will cause other people to treat them as imbeciles.

Differences in religion can easily segregate people and can lead to discrimination in this case the Indians were seen as savages or heathens because they are not Christians thus this reinforces the belief that the Natives needs to be fixed by guiding them towards Christianity. The Europeans employ social comparison of the social identity theory as they depicts themselves as superior than the natives because of their faith, this results in a greater rift as it further adds more differences between these two races. Religions further discriminates the Natives as being unholy beings as in Mary Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative she compares the Indians to creatures of hell, for instance, ' Black creatures...made the place a lively resemblance of hell' and a ' company of hell-hounds'. This demonstrates that Mary thinks of Indians as doomed being as they belong to hell explaining why she depicts them as creatures that are inhabitants of hell. In addition,

her comparison of Natives to animals emphasizes that she regards them as animals as a result she dehumanizes the Indians as she equates them to unintelligent animals. It is evident from this account that Christians would view the Indians in need of their Holy Faith as these savages know nothing better and need to be educated. So, Columbus supports the idea of the conversion of Natives as ' they seem much inclined'. But since his letters are his account of the events this may be a subjective view as Columbus may be biased since this is his religion so he would perceive his religion as the superior religion and that Natives would agree with him. Moreover, it is highly improbable that all the Natives accept his faith. Also this conversion can be seen as Columbus forcing his religion on to them which reinforces his dominion over them as Columbus gets to change the Natives' beliefs because he thinks its the wrong faith. Thus, the Europeans were discriminating the Natives for not believing in their god and so they attempt to alter this wrongful nature of Natives by assimilating them to a civilized society which consists of accepting Christianity.

In-group members tend to view themselves as better than the out-group, in this case while Columbus see himself as their liberator from their barbaric nature but in reality he is the villain of the story. Columbus is prejudiced against natives as he perceives them as insignificant beings shows him not identifying with the out-group which easily leads to discrimination of this outer group, in this case Columbus' abuse towards American Indians. Not only has he established a Indian slave route back to Seville, he is also responsible for abducting Indians in his first voyage to guide him through the

islands. In addition, Tremlett (2006) report the reappearance of a lost document that describe the tyrannical government of Columbus and the severe punishment for simple transgressions such as cutting the nose and ears of a man stealing corn who was then sold as a slave or the story of how woman was paraded naked on a mule because she commented that Columbus was of a lowly birth. This document reveals that behind the written words of his letters lies the sinister reality of his mistreatment of Natives, an opposite personality to his previous intentions of being their protector in the first letter to Luis De Santangel. Furthermore, in his second letter, he mentions that he was ' made prisoner and with my two brothers'. This line alludes to when the rumors of his tyranny reached the Spanish monarch which led to an investigation on these allegations against Columbus and consequently led to the arrest of Columbus and his brothers. In addition, in a survey on the public's belief on Columbus, the Villainous Columbus view was supported mostly by Indians, 41. 7 percent compared to other races. This justifies that Columbus was indeed a man of cruel nature that even future generations of Indians still remember he his actions. The label savage does not apply to these Natives but towards Columbus, it ironic that a man from a civilized society is the one behaving like a barbarian by subjecting everyone under his rule and using his power to keep the Natives under his control. Columbus propagates the unequal treatment of Natives as he was the one portraying them as savages that require the intervention of white man to make them appear as sophisticated as the Europeans.

In conclusion, Columbus categorizing the Natives as very different to himself allows the US versus them mindset. He is able to compare his life to the Natives in which he finds their lacking in manners, education and their religious beliefs. In addition, he sees the culture of the Natives as evidence for their barbaric and savage ways thus he hopes to turn them into a civilized group of people. However, Columbus is not just aiding them out of the goodness of his heart but also because of his greed for the Natives' gold mine. His treatment of Natives described in the letters appear patronizing as he handles them with gloves, for instance protecting them from harm and distracting the Natives with their shiny objects. Furthermore, he does not treat the natives as human beings because he sees them as lower standing. The fact that they are not Christians further strengthen Columbus' portrayal of them as savages, because they never embraced their religion so they are out of God's mercy thus the Natives live the sinful way. Again, he forces them to convert to further his missionary mission which highlights that Columbus merely uses the Natives to spread his religion. All these stereotypes present Columbus various situation in which he discriminates the Natives by taking advantage of them. In the end while Natives maybe known as savages by Columbus and his men, in this century further evidence arises to accuse the wrongdoings of Columbus.