

# Book review of 1491 by charles c. mann



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With 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus Charles C. Mann has written an extremely interesting and controversial book. Beginning in 1983 Mann began to become aware that research had indicated the commonly held view of the settling of the Americas was wrong. The commonly held and taught belief that the Americas were inhabited by people who crossed the Bering Sea from Europe about 13,000 years ago was wrong. Allegedly these people lived in small, isolated groups that had little impact on the environment.

Instead Mann, with considerable documentation and research by scientists, archeologists and geographers supporting this view, argues that the Americas were inhabited thousands of years earlier, existed in far larger numbers, and had been “successful at imposing their will on the landscape that in 1492 Columbus set foot in a hemisphere thoroughly marked by humankind” (Mann, 1491, 4). Spurred by what he had seen and read and by the fact that his son was being taught the same thing Mann had been taught in high school thirty years earlier, he wrote a book that “explores what I [he] believes to be the three main foci of the new findings: Indian demography . . . Indian origins . . . and Indian ecology” (Mann, 1491, x-xi).

Mann begins his book by discussing the notion of the “Noble Savage,” a concept that began in the early sixteenth century. This position is the notion that the indigenous people of the Americas lived an idyllic life prior to the arrival of Columbus or were savage barbarians who did nothing constructive. Mann cites Bartolomé de Las Casas a conquistador who had visited the Americas who believed “Indians were natural creatures who dwelt, gentle as

cows . . . waiting for millennia—for Christian instruction” (Mann, 1491, 12-14).

In essence this view is that of a colonist who came to the Americas looking for signs of the Old World. Since the Native Americans apparently did not have as dramatic an impact on the environment subsequent generations viewed the pre-Columbian people as either innocents or as barbarians. Both accounts showed the prejudice that these people lacked “agency—they were not actors in their own right, but passive recipients of whatever windfalls or disasters happenstance put in their way” (Mann, 1491, 12). It would be interesting to examine the European migration into the Americas from the point of view of the indigenous people.

Mann cites studies that have called into question the notion that Native Americans first arrived in the Americas 13,000 years ago over a land bridge in the Bering Straits and slowly migrated south and east until they populated the Americas. In 1987 people who had supported this view publicly admitted that there is clear evidence of human habitation in Chile more than 12,000 years ago. Consequently it is unlikely that natives would have migrated more than 7,000 miles in less than a millennium leaving people in their wake to form new groups of people who would create their own culture. In addition there is evidence suggesting habitation in Chile more than 20,000 years ago. Further exploration has revealed numerous indications of large civilizations throughout Mesoamerica and South America that had existed and ended well before the sixteenth century.

According to Mann the current view among scholars is that the Western Hemisphere was “a thriving, stunningly diverse place, a tumult of

languages, trade, and culture, a region where tens of millions of people loved and hated and worshipped as people do everywhere” (Mann, 1491, 26-27). According to a 1999 United Nations estimate, the population of the earth in the beginning of the sixteenth century was about 500 million. Estimates by Dobyns and others indicate that by 1630, between 80 and 100 million Native Americans had been killed by a variety of epidemics including small pox, typhus, and influenza. These numbers suggest that nearly one fifth of the world’s population was killed by disease in the one hundred and fifty years after the arrival of Columbus (Mann, 1491, 94-96).

According to Mann in 1491 the Inka (or Inca as it is more commonly spelled) was the largest empire on the planet. It was bigger than China, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and bigger by far than any European state. It extended for more than thirty-two degrees of latitude (the United States has a latitude length of approximately twenty-five degrees of latitude though of course a much wider degree of longitude). The Inka had a goal that was remarkably similar to the Europeans; they want to “ knit the different groups of South America . . . into a single bureaucratic framework under the direct rule of the emperor”(Mann, 1491, 66).

They wanted to meld together the people’s religion, economics, and arts. At time they were brutal. They would remove people from their homelands by means of a road system of approximately 25, 000 miles, the longest in the world and locate them to live with and work with other people who had also been displaced. They developed a system of accounting that used ropes with knots in a way remarkably similar to the binary mathematics use in today’s computers. Such an extensive and sophisticated government hardly supports

the theory of the “Nobel Savage” living an idyllic life, doing nothing that affected their environment (Mann, 1491, 64-82).

Interestingly, among those people who are reluctant to accept such an early arrival of Native Americans are Indian activists who do not wish to push the date of arrival of Native Americans further into the past. Particularly in light of the evidence that supports the notion that large civilizations such as the Incas and Aztecs were not the original inhabitants but had supplanted people that had arrived much earlier. If this were the case, the claim that their land was stolen by European immigrants is considerably weakened since the indigenous people at the time of Columbus were not the first to “own” the land, just the people who had most recently stolen the lands from the previous populations in the Americas.

According to his website Mann is a journalist and writer. He is a correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Science*, and *Wired*. He has written for a wide variety of magazines including: *The New York Times Magazine*, *Forbes ASAP*, *Smithsonian*, and *The Washington Post*. He has co-authored four other books. Mann’s writing tends to focus on “the intersection of science, technology, and commerce.” He is a three-time National Magazine Award finalist and has received numerous awards from the American Bar Association, the American Institute of Physics, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the Margaret Sanger Foundation. Mann’s credentials indicate that he is a well-qualified writer and does careful research.

Mann’s writing has a liberal edge to it that often seeks to correct common perceptions about the topics he chooses to write about: in this case the life of Native Americans before the arrival of Columbus. 1491 is a well-written,

well-organized book. Mann provides a survey of research since the early 1950s when the “ Noble Savage” theory of Native Americans was first popularized. Although Mann clearly has a position he wants to convey, he provides a fair presentation of other positions and explains why he believes the “ Noble Savage” theory does not account for many discoveries and recent research. He writes in a very readable style without the many subordinate clauses and circumlocutions professional scholars are often given to.

A nice feature of the book is the inclusion of maps and pictures located throughout the book instead of placing the maps on the flyleaf and having the pictures grouped together in the middle. Consequently, the impact of the pictures and maps is greater because they are pertinent to the nearby text. Mann provides ample endnotes both citation and explanatory notes that add to the authenticity of the text. The bibliography is comprehensive and lists use of a variety of scholarly journals from such disciplines as anthropology, geography, history and archeology among others.

Mann’s writing is convincing. He provides considerable recently discovered information that contradicts the Noble Savage theory. It is apparent that people have lived throughout the Americas for a much longer time than the 13, 000 years conventionally taught. Although future research and advanced technology will likely reveal new details and correct other errors, it is clear to that the indigenous people existed in much more sophisticated societies and in much larger numbers that has been believed.

#### Works Cited

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