

New revelations of pre-columbian america

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In his breakthrough book, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, Charles C. Mann changes myths about the Pre-Columbian America into scientific facts that nobody would deny. The book is a discussion about the scientific reality of Native American life before Columbus set foot in America. As it turns out, this view of reality based on scientific details is completely different from what we had previously thought about Pre-Columbian America. The thesis of Mann's book may be summed up in his own words thus:

When I went to high school, in the 1970s, I was taught that Indians came to the Americas across the Bering Strait about thirteen thousand years ago, that they lived for the most part in small, isolated groups, and that they had so little impact on their environment that even after millennia of habitation the continents remained mostly wilderness. Schools still impart the same ideas today. One way to summarize the views of people like Erickson and Balée would be to say that they regard this picture of Indian life as wrong in almost every aspect. Indians were here far longer than previously thought, these researchers believe, and in much greater numbers. And they were so successful at imposing their will on the landscape that in 1492 Columbus set foot in a hemisphere thoroughly marked by humankind.

After introducing the main thesis of his book - that, in fact, Native Americans were far more civilized than we had previously imagined - Mann begins "Part One: Numbers from Nowhere" by dealing with New England in the 1600s, and the myth that European technology was far superior to American Indian technologies. This myth was based on the fact that the Indians did not appreciate guns. However, the reality is that the Indian moccasins were

far more comfortable than the boots of the European; and the canoes built by the Native Americans were speedier and more maneuverable than the small boats made by Europeans.

Next, the author gets into a discussion about the reasons for the fall of the Inca Empire. During this discussion we learn that while the Europeans used metal to make tools, the Indians used it for tokens. Moreover, the Europeans had used horses while invading the Inca Empire, and the Indians did not have the technology to beat the intruders on horses. Still, the Inca Empire collapsed mainly because of disease in addition to factionalism. There had been a civil war after the Native Americans had clashed with the Spanish. Smallpox and various other epidemics were also responsible for the fall of the Inca Empire.

The first part of Mann's book also tackles the controversy surrounding the number of Native Americans in Pre-Columbian America. Scholars have disagreed on the population of the Indians. Whereas Dobyns believed that there were around one hundred million Native Americans living before the fall of the Inca Empire; Henige argued that the population was much less. Yet, as Mann points out, there is virtually no evidence to suggest that the population of Native Americans was little.

In addition to the above, the first part of the book deals with the Aztecs. According to scientific evidence, the Aztecs were more sophisticated than we had previously believed them to be. The Greek "thinker-teacher" model prevailed among them as "tlamatini."

“ Part Two: Very Old Bones” provides scientific evidence linked to the skeletons of Lagoa Santa that were found in Brazil’s caves to conclude that the Indians and the Siberians share common ancestry. Agriculture, too, is a focus of this part of Mann’s book. According to the author, the Indians began breeding maize right from scratch given that the crop had no “ wild ancestor.” With the development of maize, the Mesoamerican life was further advanced. The Olmec civilization is mentioned as an example of the high culture that was promoted due to advancement in agriculture.

Mann also provides evidence that the Mesoamerican cultures made use of calendars, in addition to wheels. However, the wheels were used only for small toys. This is because the Mesoamericans were geographically isolated, and therefore did not have access to other people’s ideas on wheels.

“ Part Three: Landscape with Figures” is where Mann brings all of his evidence together to conclude that there are things we have to learn from the Indians. He discusses the Maya, and points out that the civilization was active in transforming land. Additionally, the author describes the unique use of fire by the Indians in this part of the book. Apparently, the Indians used fire to benefit the plants as well as encourage the abundance of some animals.

Mann points to the mistake of holding racist views about the Indians in understanding their unique culture given that such views cloud our receptiveness to reality. As a matter of fact, the Indians had reached their optimal level of environment. Before Christopher Columbus arrived on the continent, however, the Europeans had changed the landscape created by the Indians.

Analysis

Indeed, Charles C. Mann is correct in his belief that we have been collectively fed in with the myth that the Native Americans were culturally backward. In point of fact, this myth does not surround the Indians alone. Rather, we are made to believe that all civilizations before the major ones as we know them - the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Muslims, and the United States - were culturally backward.

We further tend to believe that it was almost impossible for the civilizations of old to perform the kinds of amazing deeds that we perform today, with respect to our technology. And so, scholars struggled for a long time trying to understand how the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids without our present technology. This struggle to understand was led by speculation.

However, speculation is unnecessary when scientific facts are before us. So, we are aware that the ancient Egyptians had their own technology to build the pyramids. We do not understand the exact nature of that technology. We may only know from the evidence we have gathered thus far that some of the civilizations of old were far more sophisticated than we had previously imagined them to be. This is the case with the Indian civilization. Perhaps, this was also the case with the people of the Stone Age, who might have developed themselves in terms of philosophical thinking if nothing else.

The fact that we do not possess tomes written by people of the Stone Age or the Indians, does not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that the civilizations in question were less developed or evolved than we are. Rather, those civilizations used their intellectual capacity in a different way.

Believers in the scriptures which recount the story of Adam and Eve would all agree that the essential human being has not changed through the ages. Based on this view, only that which civilizations focus upon in their own time is likely to vary from civilization to civilization, and the human being is the same as he was in the beginning, that is, a being that is curious and would like to see change.

The main strengths of Mann's book are its lucid language, and the vast amount of evidence collected by the author. Mann makes his book extremely interesting by addressing old myths, and describing the facts that must replace the myths. The book describes unique fruits, for example, that we had previously supposed to be wild. Even so, the unique fruits consumed by Indians were as nutritious as today's fruits. Mann describes interesting fruits with flavors like vanilla ice cream, for instance, and others that contained high levels of vitamin C and protein.

The discussion that this book is made up of is very valuable in helping us understand faulty perceptions. According to the author, "Given the charged relations between white societies and native peoples, inquiry into Indian culture and history is inevitably contentious." To put it another way, white societies may have deliberately kept us away from understanding the significance of the Indian culture. I believe that this is untrue, given the white societies' emphasis on knowledge. Moreover, I trust that the mention of racism should not have been a part of this book. After all, the book was published in a white society to uncover the reality of the Indian civilization. As a matter of fact, given the importance of the scientific evidence in the

book, it is expected that this book will be studied in white societies for a long time to come.

Works Cited

Mann, Charles C. 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.