

THE TRUTH IN LATIN AMERICA: CONFORMITY WITH FACT OR FICTION?

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“There must have been three thousand of them,” he murmured. “What?”

“The dead,” he clarified. “It must have been all of the people at the station.”

~Jose Arcadio Segundo, One Hundred Years of Solitude

“You must have been dreaming,” the officers insisted. “Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing will ever happen. This is a happy town.”

~One Hundred Years of Solitude

Introduction

What is Truth? Where is Truth found? Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus (2002) defines truth as the following:

1. A being true; specifically, a) sincerity; honesty; b) conformity with fact; c) reality; actual existence; d) correctness; accuracy.
2. That which is true.
3. An established fact (p. 677).

Generally, truth is considered to be events as they happened; but are these events really recounted accurately? This is an age old issue that is felt in every facet of society; from global/international governments and issues, to federal and local government, right down to the individual. Who decides what constitutes the Truth? If a person believes what is not the Truth or assimilates the Untruth into their very being; where does that leave him? Living a lie?

The Truth may lie in the hearts of men. It will vary widely depending on which side of the ‘Truth fence’ a person is standing on. It comes into play with situations as mundane as writing a college paper or it could come right down to the struggle between good and evil in the fate of a culture. The evil will continue unless there is enough military strength and financial backing to overpower it. Historically, and ironically though, both of these factors usually favor aggressors. The Truth in Latin America is a fun-house mirror image of the Truth in Spain; it is a distorted vision that reflects war, religion, greed, and brutality. In the New World, the Spanish manipulated literary, religious, historic, and scientific Truth to serve their own best interests.

Analysis

Father Fray Antonio de Montesinos said, “I am the voice of the one crying in the desert...by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these peoples, who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own land?” (Sanderlin, 1993, pp. 66-67). To forgive atrocities and betrayals calls for an ability to truly have an open mind and a forgiving heart. Where does that leave the person who did the injustice, the one living the lie; off the hook? Where does personal responsibility fit into the puzzle? What about justice? In the broadest sense, people will try to justify their actions and present events in a way that will uphold their own position. Words are finessed; events painted in a certain light. Followers, who agree with whichever position, regularly filter out opposing views and believe the information that will most justify their beliefs and actions. The Spanish did just that; manipulated a variety of texts and information to support their unjust, inhumane actions in the New World.

The positive aspects of Truth are: attention to detail, justice, and open-mindedness. The negative aspects engulf ego, psychology, greed, and pride. It was so much easier and profitable for the Spanish to just enslave the indigenous people in Latin America. The Spanish colonists, clergy, and nobility justified their actions by stating that they were ‘helping’ the indigenas by giving them religion and a more productive way of life (Sanderlin, 1993). The native peoples *needed* the Spanish to direct their lives. “The Discovery and the Conquest also cut short the independent development of brilliant civilizations like the Aztec and Inca Empires, which, many scholars believe, had not exhausted their possibilities for further cultural flowering” (Keen, 2004, p. 57). The Spanish would not recognize the indigenous cultures as equal to or exceeding in advancement and sophistication of their own.

The ‘discovery’ and occupation of Latin America (Central and South America and the Caribbean Islands) show a pattern of violence, destruction, subjugation, and exploitation. “Columbus discovered America!” so says U.S. textbooks for generations. The destruction and subjugation by the Spanish colonization was not accurately depicted until recent history. The United States celebrates Columbus Day still, while many people in other Latin American countries proclaim, “Congratulations on 500 years of oppression!” (Class discussion, September 26, 2007). According to the map in *A History of Latin America* (Keen), on page 56, Christopher Columbus never even set foot on U.S. soil. Upholding inaccurate beliefs (or truths!) is insidious and damaging. Millions of people were ill-informed and manipulated to believe a history that is not accurate. Documents, such as first hand accounts and letters from the 1500s and 1600s are proof that the oppression, slavery, and subjugation in the New World did in fact exist.

Christopher Columbus, obsessed after eight years of promoting his venture, was supported by Spain’s King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (Keen, 2004, p. 54). Columbus and his crew set out to discover a trade route to India and China. He actually discovered the Caribbean Islands but would not even consider that he was mistaken. So intent was Columbus to maintain his delusions that he went so far as to force his crew to swear to always agree that they had discovered the trade route to the Indies and Cathay; “on pain of a hundred lashes and having the tongue slit if they ever gainsaid the same,’ that Cuba was the mainland of Asia” (Keen, 2004, p. 55). That was *his* Truth. Columbus bent his map and his mind to maintain his vision and it ended up costing him the respect and trust of the colonists and his supporters. He lost all credibility.

Columbus made three other trips, carrying people and supplies to settle the “Indies/Caribbean.” He gave away land and native slaves to disgruntled settlers (Keen, 2004, p. 55). Columbus had no respect for the indigenous people. He believed that they were subhuman and it was acceptable to put them into a

life of slavery. “Columbus regarded indigenous peoples not as human beings but as objects” (Keen, 2004, p. 59). He even brought some of them back with him as ‘specimens’ to exhibit in Spain. He gave them away as gifts. Columbus organized a slave trade system and sold as many as 2,000 ‘Indians’ in Castile (Keen, 2004). Usually, his journeys ended in disaster and were not profitable. According to Keen (2004), on his last voyage, Columbus was not allowed to land on Hispaniola and returned to Spain, after a year marooned on Jamaica, to live out the rest of his life in misery.

What makes one religious Truth more legitimate than another? It may lead back to motive and outcomes. Bishop Diego de Landa attempted and nearly succeeded in exterminating the Maya’s cultural heritage. He did this in the name of God. Conversely, Don Fray Bartolome Las Casas, who would later become Bishop of Chiapa, advocated for the rights of the indigenas, also in the name of God. Both relied on biblical text and sacred ideals to justify their positions and actions, yet the outcomes were polar opposites. One side attempted to build up a nation and the other tried to destroy it. Diego de Landa acknowledged that the Maya, for example, were hospitable (Keen, 2004), yet despised their religious beliefs. Diego de Landa was responsible for burning sacred Mayan texts and ordering the brutal torture and even the death of anyone that he deemed an infidel or heretic (Gallenkamp, 1981). He interpreted the Bible in a way that justified his horrific acts. He ignored key passages such as “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew, 22:39; Holy Bible, 1983, p. 1099). It served de Landa’s immediate purpose but ultimately went against God’s word.

According to Sanderlin (1993), Don Fray Bartolome Las Casas traveled between the New and Old Worlds writing and speaking out against the encomienda system and slavery. He attempted to gain civil rights for the native peoples of Latin America. He really advocated for the rights of *all* people. Sanderlin (1993), states that Las Casas was later determined to be “the first person in the sixteenth century to denounce black slavery as inhumane and unjust” (p. xx). Despite Las Casas’s initial involvement and support of the Spanish system of control, Las Casas found his Truth and his voice and advocated for indigenous rights and human rights in general for the rest of his life.

The Spanish, especially Gines de Sepulveda, “a bitter adversary of Las Casas” (Sanderlin, 1993, p. xiv), used Aristotle’s views of Man to justify the way in which the indigenas were treated.

With perfect right do the Spanish exercise their dominion over these barbarians of the New World and outlying isles, who in prudence, natural disposition, and every manner of virtue and human sentiment are as inferior to Spaniards as children to adults, women to men, cruel and inhuman persons to the extremely meek, or the exceedingly intemperate to the continent and moderate – in a word, monkeys to men. (Sanderlin, 1993, p. xiv)

This entire speech and the attitude that it reflects is incomprehensible but it is most amazing that Sepulveda could say, ‘cruel and inhuman persons to the extremely meek,’ without recognizing that he was precisely describing the Spanish in relationship to the indigenas.

Las Casas also used Aristotle’s philosophies but to defend the native peoples. In Valladolid, Sepulveda and Las Casas met and argued their positions. Sepulveda said that “the Indians’ vices justified war against them also that they were an inferior race needing Spanish tutelage- ‘slaves by nature,’ in the words of Aristotle’s *Politics*” (Sanderlin, 1993, p. 13). Las Casas “defended the Indians’ rationality and liberty; he even attempted to find reasons for their practice of human sacrifice” (Sanderlin, 1993, p. 13). Even though Las Casas was favored and inroads were made in the support of human rights, many were ignored or not enforced.

The Spanish oppression continued. Encomenderos and the nobility had gone largely unchecked for centuries. The result was an imbalance in the social, and economic systems, and the governing bodies of Latin America.

With some honorable exceptions, the rich landowners of Mexico...resemble the feudal lords of the Middle Ages. On his seigniorial lands, with more or less formalities, the landowner makes and executes laws, administers justice and exercises civil power, imposes taxes and fines, has his own jails and irons, metes out punishments and tortures, monopolizes commerce, and forbids the conduct without his permission of any business but that of the estate. (Keen, 2004, p. 185)

The Bible and the Popol Vuh are both religious texts that have similar stories and themes, such as creation stories, prayers, and sacred ceremonies. The Spanish usurpers upheld some edicts from the Bible, ignored others but completely disregarded the teachings in the Popol Vuh and the Maya religion itself. To treat both texts as equal would have interfered with the colonization of the New World. The Spanish would have had to admit equality with the indigenas, end slavery, and go back to Spain. That was not about to happen. A parish priest named Francisco Ximenez discovered an alphabetic version of the Popol Vuh sometime during the turn of the 18th century and copied it (Tedlock, 1996). He also translated it into Spanish. There is some question as to whether or not it is an accurate (truthful?) translation. Was it recorded verbatim or enhanced to resemble biblical themes and idealisms? That Truth may never be revealed. It is a miracle that the Popol Vuh survived in any form.

In the examination of the Truth, one could fashion a Truth Pyramid, similar to a Food Pyramid. Scientific Truth may rest as the foundation because it can be hypothesized, proven, and the results recreated. Scientific Truth is not written in stone though, and can be refuted but the process has a logical procedure and rules to follow and an enormous group of scientists and advocates who diligently maintain its legitimacy. What would come next; Historical Truth? Historic books and accounts do carry a sense of reliability, yet there may be shadows of political interference in the presentation of the 'facts.' Even in Keen (2004), General Porfirio Diaz is described as a "hero of the wars of the Reforma" on page 192. Later on, on page 220, the tone shifts and Diaz is depicted as the creator of "the Porfiriato, one of the longest personal dictatorships in Latin American history." Diaz's allegiances may have changed but if one did not go on to read chapter 10, a different view would have emerged.

If it is a stylized Maya Pyramid of Truth, then surely Religious Truth and Literary Truth would create the temple residing at the apex of the pyramid. Neither truth can be proven but both rely solely on faith. Religious Truth has supporting documents (e.g. The Holy Bible, The Popol Vuh), and Literary Truth *is* the supporting document. Both invoke feelings and a vision that is representative of an ideal in the mind's eye.

One Hundred Years of Solitude, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, is a literary masterpiece that is symbolic of the struggles between the Spanish and the indigenas; encomenderos and slaves/peasants; the rich and the poor; nobility and the common man; Truth and Untruth. It is reminiscent of the boat ride scene in the 1971 movie classic, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*; but the ride never ends. Macondo could still be swirling off in a cloud of dust at this very moment. While reading, one is laughing and crying simultaneously while a queasy feeling creeps up from the pit of one's stomach. Marquez writes the plot to entertain and the subplot to inspire and illuminate.

Remedios the Beauty ascended to heaven, taking Fernanda's sheets with her (Marquez, 1970). Why not? Jesus, Son of God, ascended to heaven; why not Remedios the Beauty? Maybe at that moment she was chosen to be the Daughter of God. "Fernanda, burning with envy, finally accepted the miracle, and

for a long time she kept on praying to God to send her back her sheets” (Marquez, 1970, p. 236). Literary Truth has the advantage of pulling details from every manner of Truth- scientific, historical, and religious, to weave a symbolic tale that may inspire, energize, and enlighten the masses.

Conclusion

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Marquez, 1970), Colonel Aureliano Buendia said, “We fought all those wars and all of it just so that we didn’t have to paint our houses blue” (p. 237). Through the ages, did any of the fighters in any war always really know what they were fighting for? Did they know what the other ‘theys’ stood for?

For the advancement of Truth, an open mind is needed along with the capacity to at least attempt to recognize and understand both sides of a ‘story’ or issue. This examination is necessary, no matter how much it might pain one’s own sensibilities or go against ingrained beliefs. New information or another perspective could change minds which might ultimately change the world. During a class discussion (September 26, 2007), it was stated that 90-95% of 90 million people died as a result of Columbus’s ‘discovery.’ It could even be estimated as high as 100-200 million people.

Just imagine the possibilities if Columbus, the Spanish Conquistadors, the clergy, and the colonists had opened their minds and hearts, and looked upon the indigenas with empathy and compassion. It would truly have been a New World. To begin to examine the truthfulness or morality of one’s actions can take a psychological toll that many are not able to withstand or even face. It is akin to taking the proverbial finger out of the dike. The stream would start as a trickle, but gain in strength until it was a flood. It is easier to dam up feelings and emotions, live wholly on the surface of life, and live a life of illusion. It was so much simpler to reap the easy rewards of slavery rather than take responsibility for their actions and be just human beings while living a life of honor.

Belkis Urdaneta understands the importance of an open mind. A native of Venezuela, Ms. Urdaneta has worked for the advancement of humanitarian causes in Latin America. At the beginning of her presentation here at Rivier College on October 3, 2007, Ms. Urdaneta stated, “I’m not going to say that this is the Absolute Truth.” She said that she would present history from a human rights perspective.

Neoliberalism has become a mainstay in Latin American countries. ‘Opinions’ and ‘facts’ alike have to be scrutinized and investigated to attempt to ascertain something remotely resembling the Truth. There is a strong link between neoliberalism and ‘free trade’ (class discussion, October 31, 2007). The cry, ‘let the market decide!’ makes it sound like there is a level playing field that is fair for everyone. Large corporations are favored though, which hurts small business owners (class discussion, October 31, 2007). The propaganda machines that influence nations are unwieldy tanks that crush any resistance in its path.

When considering The Truth, two old-time sayings come to mind: ‘Believe nothing that you hear and only half of what you see;’ the other is- ‘The truth hurts.’ In the case of the colonization of the New World, the Truth did hurt. It cost the indigenas their lives, livelihood, culture, traditions, and freedom which was paid out to the Spanish who were all too eager to blindly further their gains in any way possible. Everyone has a responsibility to gain knowledge, see both sides of any story, and speak out against the injustices of the world. Las Casas and others worked tirelessly to right the wrongs that the Spanish had committed against the indigenas. They set an example of social justice for future generations to follow. It could be a tiring, thankless endeavor but the alternative is silence.

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