

*PART  
TWO*

*TRANSITION:  
THE COPERNICAN REVOLUTION OF  
THE HERMENEUTIC KEY*

At this second, intermediate stage, I will examine the *maximum of critical consciousness*, which Europeans were able to attain regarding their own actions (chapter 5). Then I will focus on the other completely distinct, indigenous perspective, which inverts the usual European understanding of 1492 (chapter 6).

CHAPTER

5

CRITIQUE OF THE MYTH OF  
MODERNITY

This war and conquest are just first of all because these barbaric, uneducated, and inhuman [Indians] are by nature servants. Naturally, they refuse the governance which more prudent, powerful, and perfect human beings offer and which would result in their great benefit (*magnas commoditates*). By natural right and for the good of all (*utriusque bene*), the material ought to obey the form, the body the soul, the appetite the reason, the brutes the human being, the woman her husband,<sup>1</sup> the imperfect the perfect, and the worse the better.

—Ginés de Sepúlveda, *De la justa causa de la guerra contra los indios*<sup>2</sup>

This claim that the conquest is "for the good of all" and of "great benefit" for the dominated, vanquished one, perfectly expressed the myth of modernity.<sup>3</sup> One defines one's own culture as superior and more developed and the other as inferior, crude, barbaric, and culpably *immature*.<sup>4</sup> While one culture may be superior to another in many aspects, the critical observer realizes that the criteria of this superiority are always qualitative and so uncertain in their application.<sup>5</sup> Even the violence inflicted on the Other is said to serve the emancipation, utility, and well-being of the barbarian who is civilized, developed, or modernized. Thus after the innocent Other's victimization, the myth of modernity declares the Other the culpable cause of that victimization and absolves the modern subject of any guilt for the victimizing act.

Finally, the suffering of the conquered and colonized people appears as a necessary sacrifice and the inevitable price of modernization. This logic has been applied from the conquest of America until the Gulf War, and its victims are as diverse as indigenous Americans and Iraqi citizens. Its features become evident at the birth of modernity, in the Valladolid dispute (1550), the most famous, consequential, and influential of the last five hundred years.

Historically, three theoretical-argumentative positions take up the questions of the inclusion of the Other in civilization's *communication community* and the sixteenth century's justification of the conquest: (1) modernization as *emancipation* (Ginés de Sepúlveda); (2) modernization as *utopia* (Gerónimo de Mendieta); and (3) a European critique of the *myth* of modernity (Bartolomé de las Casas).

## MODERNITY AS EMANCIPATION

Ginés de Sepúlveda, the modern Spanish humanist, presents argumentation that is shockingly blunt, unabashedly cynical, and typically modern. He begins by denying that the Aztec or Incan urban centers, whose architecture dazzled the conquistadores, prove that the Indians are civilized:

Many are deceived, but not I, since I regard these very institutions as proof of these Indians' rudeness, barbarity (*ruditatem barbariæ*),<sup>6</sup> and innate servitude. Natural necessity

induces human beings to build houses, rationalize some behaviors, and engage in some species of commerce. That the Indians do these things proves that they are not bears or monkeys, and are not totally devoid of reason.<sup>7</sup>

He proceeds candidly to reveal the ideal of modernity in the light of which he judges the indigenous world:

On the other hand, in their republic *no individual is entitled to own* a house or a field or to bequeath it *as a testament* to descendents. Everything belongs to their lords, whom they improperly name kings and whose judgment they follow more than their own. They submit completely to their kings' capricious will without being coerced and forfeit *their own liberty* voluntarily and spontaneously.<sup>8</sup> This abasement signals the servile, abject spirit of these barbarians.... The barbarous, uneducated, and inhuman character and customs (*ingenio ac moribus*) of these half-men (*homunculos*) pre-existed *the arrival of the Spaniards*.<sup>9</sup>

For Sepúlveda, the root of indigenous barbarity lies in its non-individual mode of relating to persons and things. The Indians know nothing of private possession (*ut nihil cuiquam suum sit*), personal inheritance contracts, and, above all, modernity's supreme characteristic: subjective liberty (*suae libertati*), autonomously resistant to the arbitrariness of rulers.<sup>10</sup>

Conquest emancipates by enabling the barbarian to depart from (Kant's *Ausgang*) *immaturity*, as the text opening chapter 5 suggests. Sepúlveda proffers a second justification for conquest:

The second cause is to ban these barbarians' abominable lewdnesses (*nefandae libines*) and to save from serious injury the many innocent mortals they immolate every year.<sup>11</sup>

Inadvertently Sepúlveda passes from the concept of modernity to its myth.<sup>12</sup> Conceptually modern rationality affords an emancipative potential to civilizations with less developed instruments, technologies, practical politico-economic structures, and capacities for subjective expression. But, at the same time, this concept hides the domination or violence that modernity exercises over other cultures. Modernity justifies the Other's suffering because it

saves many innocent victims from the barbarity of these cultures. Sepúlveda articulates with definitive and classical clarity the myth of modernity, whose argumentative stages (premises, conclusions, corollaries) follow:

(1) Europe is more developed;<sup>13</sup> its civilization is superior to others (major premise of all *Eurocentrism*).

(2) A culture's abandonment of its barbarity and underdevelopment through a civilizing process implies, as a conclusion, progress, development, well-being, and *emancipation* for that culture.<sup>14</sup> According to the *fallacy of development* [developmentalism], the more developed culture has already trod this path of modernization.

(3) As a first corollary, one defends Europe's domination over other cultures as a *necessary*, pedagogic violence (just war), which produces civilization and modernization.<sup>15</sup> In addition, one justifies the anguish of the other culture as the necessary price of its civilization and expiation for its culpable immaturity.<sup>16</sup>

(4) As a second corollary, the conquistador appears to be not only *innocent*, but meritorious for inflicting this necessary, pedagogic violence.<sup>17</sup>

(5) As a third corollary, the conquered victims are culpable for their own violent conquest and for their own victimization. They should have abandoned their barbarity voluntarily instead of obliging the victimizing conquistadores to use force against them. Hence, so-called underdeveloped peoples double their culpability when they irrationally rebel against the emancipatory conquest their culpability deserved in the first place.

While modernity's emancipatory concept is visible in stages 1 and 2, its myth is exposed in the Eurocentrism of 1, in the developmental fallacy of 2, and in stages 3 to 6. The *full* realization of modernity's *concept* demands that one surpass modernity in a project of *transmodernity*<sup>18</sup> which upholds negated alterity, the dignity and identity of the other cultures, and the covered-over (*en-cubierto*) Other. At the same time, one can negate the *myth* of modernity by modifying or denying the Eurocentrism of the major premise.<sup>19</sup> The myth propagates a *sacrificial paradigm* which calls

for the sacrifice of the victim of violence for human progress—a key tenet for Kant and Hegel, but not for Marx.<sup>20</sup>

The myth of modernity perpetrates a gigantic *inversion*: the innocent victim becomes culpable and the culpable victimizer becomes innocent. Paradoxically, modern humanist Ginés de Sepúlveda and all subsequent modernity lapse into irrationalism by advocating not argumentation but violence as the means of including the Other in the communicative community. Sepúlveda appeals to the New Testament text in which the lord whose many banquet invitees fail to appear finally obliges or compels (*compelle*) the poor to enter. Saint Augustine adds a special interpretive twist, which Sepúlveda recalls:

St. Augustine... adds: Christ illustrated this point sufficiently in the parable of the banquet. Those invited did not come and the father said to his servant: "Leave with haste and scour the plazas and city streets to find the poor and *introduce* them into the feast." ... But since there was still space, the lord commanded the servant: "Go along the roads and through the fields and *oblige* (*compelle*) people to enter and fill my house." The lord thus revises his first order, *introduce them*, to the second, *oblige them*, for the later arrivals. This alteration signifies thus the two periods of the church. [Up to here Saint Augustine speaks, but Gines adds]—... I maintain that we are not only permitted to invite these barbarians, violators of nature, blasphemers, and idolators [in brief, culpable ones]. But we may also *compel* them, so that under the bondage of Christian rule they might hear the apostles who announce the gospel to them,<sup>21</sup>

By *compel* Sepúlveda intended even the use of war to pacify indigenous peoples. Only afterward did he think it appropriate to "initiate them into Christianity and to imbue them with it, since one transmits that religion better by examples and persuasion than by force."<sup>22</sup> Hence, Sepúlveda recommends violence to insert the indigenous people within the communication community, but, once inside, they deserve to be addressed with rational argumentation. Thus, the Valladolid dispute deals with *how one enters* the communication community described by K.-O. Apel.

## MODERNIZATION AS UTOPIA

Gerónimo de Mendieta authored this second major position on modernity, which manifests the influence of other early Franciscan missionaries in Mexico,<sup>23</sup> among whom were "spirituals," "Jochinists,"<sup>24</sup> and "millenarists." According to the author of the *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, the devil had immersed the Aztecs in paganism, idolatry, and enslavement just as he had done to the Hebrews in Egypt. Hernán Cortés, preceded by Christopher Columbus, was the Moses<sup>25</sup> liberating them from servitude in accord with modernity's emancipatory tendencies. Unlike Bartolomé de las Casas, the Franciscans favored waging war against the indigenous peoples if they opposed evangelization. Although they concurred with Ginés de Sepúlveda's defense of the conquest on the basis of Luke 14: 15-24,<sup>26</sup> they disagreed on what was to be done afterward. While Ginés supported the Hapsburg monarchy, Mendieta strongly criticized Philip II for the *Babylonian captivity* he imposed upon the Amerindians.

Mendieta held that since the gospel had been preached to all peoples, the end of the world had been inaugurated, though one quite different from the Indian end of the world. Furthermore, although sinful Europe had betrayed Jesus Christ, the simple, poor Indians behaved as if untouched by original sin.<sup>27</sup> Mendieta envisioned them as reenacting the ideal church of the earliest era,<sup>28</sup> prior to Constantine and corresponding to Francis of Assisi's dream.

During the Mexican church's golden age from 1524 to 1564, it conserved those Aztec traditions that the Franciscans and Pedro de Gante deemed not to be in conflict with Christianity. The Franciscans conserved autochthonous languages, clothing, customs, and political structures. They undertook a modernizing project from the outside, from what was still intact after the conquest, in order to build a Christian community immune to Spanish influence. This essentially utopian project, similar to the Jesuit reductions, eventually spread throughout the continent, extending from San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Antonio (in the California territory) to Bolivia and Paraguay of the Moxos and Chiquitanos.



Taking their cue from the alterity of the Indian, the Franciscan missionaries introduced the Christian religion, European forms of government, European technology, including iron plows and other instruments, the textile industry, horses and other domestic animals, alphabetical writing, and advanced architectural devices such as the semicircular arch. This *Indian monarchy*, as Torquemada designated it, placed the Indians under the emperor's political sway while granting them cultural independence under the Franciscans' paternal guidance.

However, the European colonizers were not at all satisfied with these paternalistic utopias set up by the Franciscans and later by the Jesuits in Paraguay on a larger and more developed scale. Gerónimo de Mendieta documents how the entire project failed when Spanish colonizers seized these indigenous communities after 1564.<sup>29</sup> During the reign of Philip II, these colonizers instated the "kingdom of silver" and the "Babylonian captivity." The modernizing utopias, which in part respected indigenous cultural exteriority, yielded to the *repartimiento*, a parceling out of Indians for governmental or private agricultural or mining enterprises. The *repartimiento's* economic exploitation of indigenous people reimposed what Mendieta had earlier dubbed the slavery of Egypt and restored the reign of mammon, or capital, according to Marx's interpretation.

## THE CRITICISM OF THE MYTH OF MODERNITY

Bartolomé de las Casas surpassed modernity's own sense of criticism as represented by Sepúlveda, Mendieta, Francisco Vitoria, the great professor of Salamanca,<sup>30</sup> and later Kant. Las Casas exposed the falsity of inculcating the subjects for a supposed immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*) in order to legitimize modern aggression. He appropriated modernity's emancipatory meaning without partaking of its irrational myth, which attributed culpability to the Other. He denied the validity of any argument sanctioning violence in order to *compel* the Other to join the community of communication. Given the undisputed belief that within the communicative community only argumentation was appropriate, las Casas's concern focused on how the Other should *enter* the community and

begin to *participate* in it. In this debate regarding the a priori conditions of participating in a rational community of communication, Sepúlveda endorsed an irrational first moment—war—to inaugurate argumentation. Las Casas insisted instead on rationality from the start of the dialogue with the Other.

For las Casas, the emancipation of indigenous peoples from past domination and their imputed bestiality or barbarity warranted neither violence nor Spanish colonization, which was totally out of proportion to all that preceded it. In contrast with the new servitude, the ancient order among the indigenous peoples<sup>31</sup> seemed like a lost paradise of freedom and dignity. He wrote in the prologue to the *Apologética Historia Sumaria*:

Ultimately we have written to make better known all these nations... whom some have defamed... by reporting that they were not rational enough to govern themselves in a humane and orderly fashion.... I have compiled the data in this book to demonstrate the contrary truth.<sup>32</sup>

An opposite purpose motivated the great Franciscan anthropologist Bernardino de Sahagún to gather the most complete collection of Aztec beliefs and culture in his *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*:

It is necessary to know how these people formerly practiced idolatry in order to preach against it or even to recognize it. Because of our ignorance, they now practice idolatry in front of us without our understanding it.<sup>33</sup>

For las Casas, it was possible to appropriate modernity without its myth as long as the Indians were not destroyed in their alterity. Rather than setting modernity against premodernity or antimodernity, the Spanish could have modernized by starting from alterity instead of from *the Same* of the system. Such a project would have constructed a system from the transsystemic moment of creative alterity. In *De Unico Modo*, las Casas expressed his critical method—a rationalism of liberation:

Divine providence established once and for all a single, same method for teaching the true religion: the persuasion of the

understanding through reasoning, inviting, and gently moving the will.<sup>34</sup>

Las Casas answered thirty-five objections to this point in three hundred pages in only one chapter. To convince the gentiles about the true religion, one needed only to resort to rational argumentation and the testimony of a good life to avoid falling into a *performative contradiction*. This mode of conveying the true religion "ought to be common throughout the world and not distorted by sects, errors, or customs."<sup>35</sup> Las Casas formulated an absolutely universal principle based upon the autonomy of reason:

The rational creature possesses a natural aptitude to be moved... to listen voluntarily, to obey voluntarily, and to adhere voluntarily.... Hence one should be permitted to consult one's own motives, free will, and natural dispositions and capacities as one listens to everything proposed.<sup>36</sup>

After thorough discussion, he proposed a second question for chapter 6:

Some... believe it convenient and feasible to subject infidels to the dominion of Christians, whether they want it or not. After establishing their dominion, Christians are supposed to then preach the faith in an ordered manner. Thus, preachers would not oblige infidels to believe, but convince them by reason.<sup>37</sup>

Las Casas was preoccupied with the *rational* conditions not for arguing but for coming to participate in a community of argumentation in the first place. He added:

But since no infidel and certainly no infidel king would prefer to submit himself voluntarily to Christians... undoubtedly it would be necessary to undertake war.<sup>38</sup>

Las Casas confronts the myth of modernity and future modernizations at their outset. Modernity as myth always authorizes its violence as civilizing whether it propagates Christianity in the sixteenth century or democracy and the free market in the twentieth. But this violence has its price:

Evils accompany war: the clamor of arms, sudden, impetuous, and furious attacks and invasions; ferocity and grave

perturbations; scandals, deaths, and carnage; havoc, rape, and dispossession, the loss of parents or children; captivities and the dethronement of kings and natural lords; the devastation and desolation of cities, innumerable villages, and other sites. These evils leave kingdoms and regions mourning copiously, shedding tears, and gloomily lamenting their calamity.<sup>39</sup>

Las Casas refuses to impute to the indigenous people the *culpable* immaturity that Kant later ascribes to the unenlightened:

This war would only be just... if the people against whom it is waged deserved war because of some injury they inflicted on those waging it. But these infidels living in their country distant from Christian domains... have done nothing to Christians *for which they deserve to be attacked*. Thus, this war is unjust.<sup>40</sup>

Las Casas demolishes the nucleus of modernity's myth<sup>41</sup> and places the blame where it belongs, on those pretending to be innocent: the civilizing European heroes, especially their leaders:

The texts cited prove that those who give the orders are principally responsible for the grave and bloody crimes perpetrated upon the infidels. These who give orders sin more seriously than the rest.<sup>42</sup>

Las Casas attained the maximal critical consciousness by siding with the oppressed Other and by examining critically the premises of modern civilizing violence. In his view, a more developed Christian Europe would have displayed its pretended superiority over Others differently. It would have taken account of the Other's culture, respected the Other's alterity, and engaged the Other's free, creative collaboration. Las Casas's critical reason was buried beneath the avalanche of Philip II's strategic rationality and cynical realism. Subsequent modernity, enlightened (*aufgeklärt*) and critical within Europe's confines, availed itself of irrational violence when it came to what was outside Europe... even until now, at the end of the twentieth century.