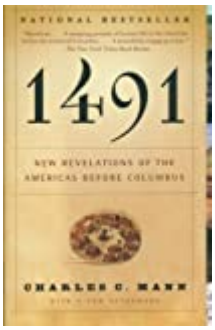
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Charles C. Mann. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2006. xii + 462 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4000-4006-3; $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4000-3205-1.

Reviewed by Michael LaCombe (Department of History, Adelphi University)

Published on H-AmIndian (August, 2006)

Separate but Equal?

At bottom, Charles C. Mann's wide-ranging and well-written book is an effort to debunk a series of myths about pre-Columbian America. According to Mann, the history he and millions of others were taught was "wrong in almost every aspect. Indians were here far longer than previously thought ... 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" (p. 4). In three sections, Mann skillfully develops these broad points, synthesizing decades of scholarly work on pre-Columbian population numbers; the impact of Old World pathogens, plants, and animals; Ice Age migrations; the formation and collapse of complex societies in North America, Mesoamerica, and South America; and other topics. As this summation suggests, Mann's work is very broad in scope, ranging in time and space from Ice Age Beringia to twentieth-century Amazonia and drawing on the secondary literature in history, anthropology, and archaeology.

Mann wrote his book for a general audience, basing his conclusions on interviews, his own observations as well as the scholarly literature, and many of his findings will be familiar to academic historians. One of the most interesting features of Mann's book for specialists is how little effect the scholarship of the last twenty-plus years has had in dispelling the tenacious and pernicious myths of what the Americas were like before the arrival of Europeans. Alfred Crosby outlined much of Mann's argument about pathogens and domesticated animals forty years ago, while William Cronon argued more than twenty years ago that Indians routinely modified the natural world, especially with fire. The list could go on, and yet stereotypes of Native American life persist: undergraduates enter the classroom convinced that Indians lived in harmony with the natural world, that Indian polities were free of coercion, and that Indians for the most part shunned urban settings and complex, stratified societies in order to live in small groups scattered in isolation across a primordial wilderness.

The first virtue of Mann's book is its skillful picking apart, in direct and lucid prose, of the underpinnings of this view and showing how understanding Indians as paleo-hippies deprives them of the sort of human agency

Europeans are always understood to possess. To cite only one example, in describing the disastrous environmental modifications that led to the demise of Cahokia (clear-cutting and diverting waterways), Mann makes it clear that the great population center's collapse was due primarily to catastrophic decisions on the part of its leaders. Placing responsibility in the hands of Europeans, Eurasian pathogens, or climatic forces like drought risks assigning Indians a passive role in their own history.

Another virtue of Mann's book, especially to scholars with an Atlantic bent, is the balance it strikes between North American, Mesoamerican, and South American civilizations. New England makes its appearance in the form of the encounter between Wampanoags and Pilgrims, told from the perspective of native New Englanders. Mann skillfully recounts the fantastic story of the man the Plymouth planters called Squanto, then moves on to the stories of Pizarro and Atawallpa, CortÃ©s and Motecuhzoma. Taken together, the three examples are intended to demonstrate the role of disease in paving the way for European incursion and the fact that, especially in the case of the Pilgrims, Europeans arrived in a landscape already depopulated. But a secondary effect is to contextualize the English experience and the familiar histories of the eastern seaboard in the full sweep of American history. Even within South America, Mann is careful to discuss the Amazon region, the Andes, and the Pacific littoral separately, as befits their very different histories.

A third virtue is the clarity with which Mann summarizes the dense and tense scholarly arguments surrounding his various subjects, including their implications for present-day political questions. The presence of large pre-Columbian population centers in Amazonia, for example, might excuse continued development of the region, with possibly destructive effects on the region's fragile ecosystem. The "overkill" hypothesis, in which early migrants to North America killed off all the Pleistocene megafauna, suggests in one view that Indians were skilled and relentless hunters; in another view, as stewards of the natural world, they were as wasteful as the Europeans and Americans who succeeded them. Efforts to arrive at pre-Columbian population figures are fraught with disagreement and controversy, much of it hinging on the scale of the slaughter that directly resulted from the arrival of the Europeans. In each of these cases, Mann's book might prove valuable in an undergraduate classroom as a means to introduce students to the minutia and expansive implications of (some) scholarly debates.

Some of the most interesting assertions Mann makes center on foods and food production. Claiming that a complex of settlements at Norte Chico on the Peruvian coast dating from c. 3000 B.C. were the first cities in the Americas and the point of departure for later Andean societies, Mann dismisses the pat connection between the Neolithic Revolution, urbanization, and complex societies found in most World Civilization textbooks. Norte Chico had no need for food crops, and indeed cultivated only cotton systematically, since this dense, urban civilization was able to survive almost exclusively on the prolific fishery fed by the Humboldt Current.

Another food-related point has to do with maize cultivation and the discovery of the fruitful combination of maize, beans, and squash from both a nutritional and horticultural perspective. This is an utterly familiar story, though one worth retelling. Here, it serves as evidence for one of Mann's overarching themes: the somewhat strained assertion that the "New World" (the term itself might be anomalous, if the Americas were inhabited before Europe) was equal in its civilizations, population, and accomplishments to the "Old World." In Mann's view, the extraordinarily difficult and mysterious process by which maize was genetically engineered from obscure and unpromising wild grasses makes it a cultural achievement on par with those of ancient and classical Eurasian civilizations.

Certainly the most unfamiliar, and perhaps the most striking, assertion in Mann's text is the evidence for large population centers in Amazonia. Given the region's lack of stone and the harsh treatment climate and soil give to organic remains, there is little evidence of the sort one finds for, say, the Olmecs. But Mann argues that a type of soil known as *terra preta*, ingeniously enriched with charcoal and therefore far more fertile and durable than the thin, acidic soils of the rainforest, appeared at roughly the same time as other evidence of human habitation and spread along with it.

Finally, Mann has an admirable eye for imagery and detail. Suggesting that Europeans entered a world transformed by disease and the invasions of non-native plants and animals is old news. Suggesting that the images Europeans used to express the bounty of the American continent–vast flocks of passenger pigeons and limitless herds of bison–were instead evidence of an ecology thrown out of balance is a new and striking way to express the point.

Despite its virtues, there are limitations in any effort to encompass so much in a single volume. First, in

his comparison of American and Eurasian civilizations, Mann is quick to seize on the size of cities and their probable populations in order to compare, say, Cahokia with London. As he does so, though, he is less quick to stress that Cahokia played a very different role than London did. The fact that Cahokia was a dense concentration of farmers living near a temple complex made it a very different place than the medieval and early modern European city.

Those hoping to find in Mann's book an overview of the empires of the Inca and Aztecs/Triple Alliance might find fault with his summary of those histories. Often in those sections, Mann downplays tensions and conflicts within Indian groups in order to maintain his focus on American/European comparisons, and as a result the Inca institution of the *mita* and the Mexica practice of human sacrifice are de-emphasized.

The book's final section is disappointing. In it, Mann describes how European interactions with and observations of the Five (or Six) Nations/Haudenosaunee inspired the American ideals of freedom and individual liberty. Mann supports his argument in part by pointing out that English settlers consistently ran off to live with the Indians during the early period of settlement. Mann mistakenly assumes that these "White Indians" were drawn primarily by the lure of Iroquois culture, when those in early Plymouth were equally likely to flee hunger, and those in Jamestown the "starving time" of 1609-10 and the brutal martial law regime that followed it. Moreover, neither group ran away to join the Haudenosaunee: the Jamestown settlers were far away, and the English in New England were terrified of the Mohawks, whom they regarded as fierce cannibals. Some were captured, but to support this point Mann would need to explain why many captives were equally unwilling to return from French families.

This reviewer's disappointment with Mann's "Coda" is not rooted only in its errors of fact. As Mann outlines yet another scholarly controversy, the so-called Iroquois influence thesis, he does so for the first time without naming it or acknowledging that there are arguments on both sides of the issue. Further, in this section Mann abandons the crucial distinction between first-hand accounts and later reminiscences. The Five Nations were not necessarily a "feminist dream" just because nineteenth-century feminists "drew inspiration" from it (p. 332). The members of the Boston Tea Party might have disguised themselves as Mohawks not because they had declared themselves rebels seeking to establish a polity inspired by the Mohawk example, but because they sought to portray themselves as American, outside British law, and fearless. Once Indians ceased to play a vital role in everyday life, as a source of food, valued allies, and feared enemies, there were (and are) plenty of writers willing to look to them for misinformed inspiration, yet Mann places only Henry David Thoreau in this category.

It makes for a weak conclusion, but these minor points aside, the book remains a valuable option for undergraduate courses in Native American history, Atlantic history, or World Civilizations.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian

Citation: Michael LaCombe. Review of Mann, Charles C., *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12165

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.