

REVIEW ARTICLE

AMERICA EN EL ESPIRITU FRANCES DEL SIGLO XVIII¹

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This book marks a distinct advance in our knowledge of a field which has attracted many explorers during the last twenty-five years but is still far from being exhausted. Dr. Zavala's exploration was mainly carried out in France, he made extensive use of the resources of the Bibliothèque Nationale, of several private libraries, and he brought into it the experience accrued during almost fifteen years of similar investigations. In his introduction Dr. Zavala paid a handsome tribute to his predecessors, mentioning, discussing and evaluating the studies of the author of this review, of Bernard Fay, Afonso Arinos de Mello Franco, Antonello Gerbi, and Régine Pernoud. Such a list could not be complete, but curiously enough the most serious omissions concern work done by American historians, such as Howard Mumford Jones's pioneering study on *America and French Culture, 1750-1848* (Chapel Hill, 1927). The fact that this fundamental work was unavailable in France is a sad reflection on the inability of French libraries to keep abreast of American publications rather than a criticism of the author. It is much to be regretted that Dr. Zavala was not aware of the articles published during the last ten years by Merle Curti and Michael Kraus. At this point it may not be out of place to call attention to two publications which came out after Dr. Zavala's study. The first is the capital book of Michael Kraus, *The Atlantic Civilization; Eighteenth Century Origins* (Cornell University Press, 1949). The second, entitled *American Influences Abroad*, was edited by Richard H. Heindel and published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (New York, 1949). One will find in it, in a condensed form, the views of ten scholars who may be considered specialists in the field.

Having paid his respects to those he considered, rightly or wrongly, to be authorities in the field, Dr. Zavala struck out for himself. Confronted with a bewildering amount of material, he wisely decided to concentrate on a certain number of outstanding problems, to select representative authors and typical illustrations rather than attempt to draw up a dreary catalogue of titles. The study proper is divided into five chapters or sections, each of them broad enough to include several secondary topics.

¹ By Silvio Zavala (Mexico City: El Colegio Nacional, 1949. Pp. 314. Paper.)

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The first, and by no means the least, advantage of this method was to permit a more extensive study of several authors too often mentioned "by title" only, or having hitherto received scant attention. Incidentally, it must be noted here that Dr. Zavala made his own choice. He is to be congratulated for refusing to follow the beaten path and particularly for disregarding the superficial and too often petulant pronouncements of Bernard Faÿ.

The first chapter, "Las investigaciones filosóficas sobre los resultados del descubrimiento de América," centers around the question proposed in 1782 by the Académie de Lyon, on behalf of Abbé Raynal, on the good or bad consequences ensuing to Europe as a result of the discovery and colonization of America. The debate, which went on to 1787, marked the end of an era and the beginning of the new era during which the United States was to occupy the center of the stage. All the authors discussed in this chapter were fully aware that the discovery was perhaps the most outstanding event in the history of the previous three centuries and that the two worlds were closely knit together. All of them hailed the rising of the young nation on the other side of the Atlantic as an omen of the transformations which the aging civilizations of the Old World could no longer escape or evade. In this chapter one will note particularly the analysis of Mandrillon's *Le spectateur américain* (Amsterdam, 1784), not because Mandrillon was a very original writer, but because he was one of the very first to present a sort of panoramic view of America. He also deserves credit for calling attention to one of the most distinguishing features of the New World, namely the practically unlimited space at the disposal of the new settlers, a fact contrasting strikingly with the cramped notion of territorial boundaries, private or national, prevailing in Europe.

Chapter II, entitled "Las descripciones de viajes," enumerates eight different kinds of travelers in North and South America representing as many approaches or points of view. Dr. Zavala gives no less than twenty-five pages to an analysis of Frézier's *Relation de la Mer du Sud aux côtes du Chily et du Pérou . . .* (Paris, 1716), while declaring the author unphilosophical, unimaginative and pedestrian. But Frézier, by profession an engineer, was an exact observer, one of the very few travelers in Ibero-America not to be hypnotized by the "black legend." Contrasting sharply with Frézier's account is Durret's fictitious relation of a *Voyage de Marseilles à Lima* (Paris, 1720). Chastellux is portrayed as an aristocrat perplexed by the beginnings of a democratic republic; Father Labat as a priest and traveler become a colonist and a planter. Abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages* and its continuation, 1754-1780, is characterized as a work of vulgarization and a storehouse of

information; Poncelin de la Roche Tillac's *Almanach américain*, published yearly from 1783 to 1788, is an evidence of the curiosity of the public for American subjects. Grasset Saint-Sauveur with his *Tableaux des principaux peuples de l'Europe, de l'Asie, de l'Afrique, de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1798), is represented as an outstanding propagator of the black legend. At this particular point one finds it difficult to agree completely with Dr. Zavala. Granting that Grasset was moved by a republican enthusiasm for the rights of man, granting also that he was a vehement enemy of "fanaticism," it is hard to attach much importance to the few pages of text which accompany a work the value of which rests almost exclusively in the illustrations. What Grasset really did, in the part of his album dealing with America, was to fix for several generations, in his charming vignettes, Indian types which must have delighted a few years later the readers of Chateaubriand's *Atala*. He certainly belongs in a selective list of this kind, not as a philosopher, but as a representative of the many illustrators who, from De Bry to the romantic engravers, idealized, and Europeanized, the good savages and especially the Indian women. Although little studied, the influence of the illustrators of books of travel can hardly be overestimated. One would like, also, to differ from Dr. Zavala in his judgment of Humboldt's famous *Voyage*. It may well be that Humboldt's work is a "culmination," and as such not entirely original, but it cannot be denied that until the publication of the *Voyage* the European public had remained unfamiliar with the splendor of the tropical scene, even taking into consideration Chateaubriand's description of the Mississippi in *Atala*.

The works treating more particularly of the American Indians form Chapter III on "Ethnography." Theories on the origins of the Indians and the way America was peopled, from Acosta to Paul Rivet, are listed. Such a list would deserve considerable elaboration because of the theological and philosophical aspects of the question and the long controversies which raged around it, particularly in the eighteenth century. A serious omission in the list is that of the name and theories of Buffon. Quite correctly, Dr. Zavala remarks that many European polemicists used books of travel and observations on the Indians as a means of criticizing the society in which they lived and that the travelers themselves were very seldom disinterested observers. Lahontan and his re-write man, Gueudeville, were, in fact, pamphleteers intent on attacking European civilization. Father Lafitau may be considered as their counterpart, but the good Father was often misled by his eagerness to find everywhere evidences of a natural or universal primitive religion. Being a doctor and something of a scientist, Barrère, in his *Relation de la France Equinoxiale* (1743), proves to be a more reliable observer, and La Condamine

is proclaimed a truly scientific traveler; one of the features of his *Relation abrégée d'un voyage fait dans l'intérieur de l'Amérique méridionale* (Paris, 1745), being the distinctions he succeeded in noting between different tribes of South America. "Philosophical" ethnography is represented by Pierre Poivre's *De l'Amérique et des Américains, ou observations curieuses du philosophe La Douceur . . .* (Berlin, 1772). Since the list is highly selective, there was no great need of including Bossu whose *Nouveaux voyages dans l'Amérique septentrionale* (Paris 1777), a continuation of the *Voyages aux Indes Occidentales*, published in 1768, deals with New Orleans, Mexico, Cuba, and Santo Domingo. In fact, any one acquainted with Charlevoix will recognize in both works many passages borrowed from the Jesuit historian.

Chapter IV deals with translations of works treating more especially of the Spanish colonies. It is an excellent choice, starting with Oviedo, Gómara, and the polemical works of Benzoni and Las Casas and going on with the classics of colonization: Acosta, Herrera, and Palafox. In the eighteenth century, Don Antonio de Ulloa and his German commentator, J. G. Schneider, receive extensive treatment. The chapter ends with the *Lettres américaines* of Comte Carli, translated from the Italian in 1788, an important and significant work which we shall attempt to discuss later on.

The last chapter treats of the historiography of America. Here again we have a highly selective list and Dr. Zavala made his own choice. Leaving out Charlevoix, the great historian of *La Nouvelle France*, he studied at length the less-known work of Lafitau, *Historie des découvertes et conquêtes des Portugais dans le Nouveau-Monde* (Paris, 1733). Obviously, Dr. Zavala is particularly grateful to Lafitau for the tribute the old historian paid to the Portuguese, for his efforts to be impartial, to stick to facts, and for his appreciation of the heroic quality of the conquest. He quotes with approval the page in which the good Father defines "the mission of the historian" and professes principles which coincide with those of Pierre Bayle. Quite correctly, the author observes that the works of most eighteenth-century French historians of the New World are colored with biases and nationalistic prejudices. The last part of the chapter takes up a more contemporary period with Dillon's *Beautés de l'histoire du Mexique* (1822), and Duffey's *Résumé de l'histoire des révolutions de l'Amérique septentrionale* (1826), in which the story of the conquest is less emphasized and parallels are established with the American Revolution.

Within the limits he set for himself Dr. Zavala has fulfilled his purpose. He has traced the origin of prejudices and preconceived notions which prevailed in France about the conquest of America. He has

given us a well-informed, well-written, and stimulating piece of work; he has called attention to books unjustly neglected and sometimes completely ignored by his predecessors; he has reminded us of the elements provided to the composite "image" or "images" of America by travel accounts dealing with Ibero-America. He has touched upon so many problems, indicated so many approaches, that no detailed discussion of them is possible within the limits of this article. It is much to be hoped that in the near future he will undertake to exploit more fully himself some of the discoveries he has made in the rich field of the literature of travel. Meanwhile, I may perhaps venture to submit in conclusion a few observations suggested by this survey.

The first remark bears on the terminology currently used in dealing with such subjects. The multiplicity of the topics sketched in brief outline by Dr. Zavala demonstrates the danger of inconsiderately employing such terms as "mirage," "vision" or "image," when, in fact, we have to analyze and take into account a variety of images which cannot be combined or superimposed. It is not enough to admit that each image may be colored by the aims, feelings, and prejudices of the individual writers. Often the images under consideration are so essentially different that they cannot be classified under the same headings. The tendency to generalize is so insidious that it threatens equally the traveler and the historian of travel accounts.

It should also be kept in mind that very few relations of travel are impartial, disinterested, or objective. This is particularly true of the literature of travel dealing with American subjects. From the earliest accounts which followed the discovery to the latest newspaper or magazine article, they contain either an explicit or an implicit criticism of the writer's own milieu, unless they are meant as a justification of his own people's ways of living. This was true even in the sixteenth century, as when Montaigne contrasted his "Cannibals" with his contemporaries, but a climax was reached during the eighteenth. Paul Hazard, in a study which has become a classic, has described the early part of the period as *La crise de la conscience européenne*; it could be called just as well, if not better, "the crisis of European society." One of the central problems of the seventeenth century was the adaptation of man to the society whose fundamental soundness was not questioned. During the eighteenth century, the terms of the problem were completely reversed and the paramount question was how to devise a society which would be adapted to the needs, the desires, or—to use the terminology of the time—the "nature" of man. Very few eighteenth-century French writers would have been ready and willing to take up arms in defense of a social order to which they reluctantly submitted. But, in order

to reform society or to propose a new social order, one had to find out what was the true nature of man. Here it must be remarked that the so-called optimism of the eighteenth century has been greatly over-emphasized by historians of literature and historians of ideas. Nobody, and least of all Jean-Jacques Rousseau, would have seriously proposed to go back to an imaginary state of nature or to adopt the ways of life of the "good Cannibals" or the "good Indians." What the travel relations offered was not a model to be adopted but arguments and weapons with which to criticize pitilessly certain social institutions which had degenerated and to which were ascribed the obvious and widespread unhappiness of modern man. It must also be remembered that most philosophers and the most rabid reformers never maintained, except in the heat of the battle, that man was naturally good. The most commonly accepted doctrine was on the contrary that the "child of nature" was neither good nor bad but "innocent"; that having no innate dispositions except those resulting from his physical conformation he was absolutely plastic and could be shaped and modelled according to any established pattern. If he had become bad, which could not be denied, it was as a result of the bad laws which had been decreed by fanatic priests and greedy or ambitious rulers.

The descriptions found in the travelers did not represent ideal conditions, but made it possible to assume that many of the evils which afflicted civilized men would have been avoided if, for centuries, they had not been submitted to artificial, arbitrary, and tyrannical restraints. The true ideal of many philosophers was not absolute liberty or, if one prefers, complete anarchy, but liberation from a certain number of social pressures. What was needed to reform society was not a return to the state of nature, but sets of good laws which would make good citizens. Hence the enthusiasm of many philosophers for enlightened despotism, a trend of thought which has not received sufficient attention. The striking parallelism existing between Thomas More's *Utopia* and the government of the Incas has often been pointed out and has puzzled the historians, since More could not have used any written source that we know of, but the philosophers of the eighteenth century could avail themselves of Garcilaso de la Vega, the Inca, whose commentaries, translated for the first time in the seventeenth century, went through several editions during the eighteenth. Such a tendency has been noted only in passing by Dr. Zavala, who barely mentions the résumé of Garcilaso given by Ulloa. It is found again, much more forcefully presented, in Comte Carli, who wrote an apology for the ancient civilizations of America and showed that their patterns coincided with the political philosophy of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, not to mention

Peter and Catherine of Russia, whose achievements were exalted by the philosophers. Let us recall, finally, that the *Royal Commentaries* were the main source of Morelly's *Code de la Nature*, an extraordinary description of a totalitarian regime under which men could not possibly become "bad."

During the last third of the eighteenth century, new aspects of the American problem presented themselves. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the limits of the Old World had crumbled down and during the next two centuries Europe had gradually taken possession of a new continent, an unprecedented occurrence in the history of man. The time had come to sum up the results of three centuries of colonization and exploitation of that immense domain. Perhaps some profits had been obtained from the overseas establishments, but, on the whole, Europe had failed in her mission and had not taken full advantage of this miraculous opportunity. France had finally lost her colonies with the exception of a few islands in the West Indies. The Spanish conquerors were generally thought to have destroyed and gutted the fabulous riches of the Indian empires, and there was nothing to learn from the regimes established in Ibero-America. The unprecedented experiment carried out by the Anglo-Americans after 1763 was the only hope left to the Old World but the ultimate result of the experiment seemed at first to be very doubtful. First of all, one had to be reasonably certain that natural conditions existing in the New World would permit the growth of a new civilization. On this momentous matter only the most conflicting information could be obtained from the travel books. At first, America had been represented as a land of inexhaustible riches and had been seen through a golden veil. As colonists and travelers published accounts of their trials and sufferings, the golden legend had grown fainter and dimmer. The discovery, however, had revealed to the peoples of Europe a new notion of space, of limitless territories, of boundless forests and prairies where every individual could expand and increase his domain without encountering any legal or social obstacle. While in Europe free land was not even a myth, and great domains had shrunk because of the growing strength of monarchies and central governments, in America colonists could carve their own kingdom out of the wilderness. All that was required was courage, persistence and a few agricultural implements.

It remained to ascertain, however, whether the climate was such in the New World as to favor the growth of population, or whether on the contrary, as was maintained by many observers, men as well as animals fatally degenerated in these new surroundings. This was not an academic or philosophical question but a very practical and momentous

problem. From the answer depended, ultimately, the fate of the colonies and European settlements in America. This preoccupation, as much as nationalistic prejudices, explains to a considerable extent the extremely critical attitude of many French writers towards the Spanish and the British colonies. Before any definite answer could be given, before venturing to predict the future of America, it was necessary to find out why the native population had remained comparatively small; whether the whites themselves suffered a loss of virility when transplanted into the New World, whether, also, their intellectual powers did not undergo a similar change. Thus, the problem of the climate, the problem of the "creoles," in a word the problem of population, became of paramount importance. The discussion, which was of long standing, came to a definite point around the middle of the century, as Dr. Gerbi has shown in his study entitled *Viejas polémicas sobre el Nuevo Mundo* (Lima, 1946). It seriously concerned the statesmen as well as the philosophers, both in America and in France, as I have attempted to demonstrate in my study *L'Homme contre la Nature* (Paris, 1949).

The best answer was given by the successful efforts of the "Insurgents" to win their independence and establish a new form of government. It was even recognized that America had given the world two extraordinary figures; George Washington, the victorious general who would not be king and like Cincinnatus had gone back to his "farm" after resigning his commission into the hands of the civil power, and Benjamin Franklin, who was the embodiment of what was best in the philosophy of the eighteenth century. The French admired in him the scientist, the diplomat, the practical philosopher. They also saw in him the herald of a new era. The son of a Boston chandler, the barefoot boy, had signed the Declaration of Independence and had been sent by Congress to sign treaties with European monarchs. He had become "President of the State of Pennsylvania" and given laws to his country. He symbolized the triumph of the common man, *l'homme du peuple*, and announced the triumph of democracy.

At this juncture a new image interposed itself between the French observers and American reality. If, as Condorcet proclaimed, the American experiment had shaken the Old World to its very foundations from Cádiz to St. Petersburg, the American people had a mission to fulfill. They were not free to develop spontaneously and in their own way; they must conform to the ideal pattern which had been the dream of the philosophers. It was the only place on earth where the heavenly city could become the city of man, because only there could man start afresh without first having to destroy the structures cluttering older societies. Whenever Americans departed from the dictates of their

"manifest destiny," they sinned against mankind, they aroused misgivings, apprehensions, and even sharp criticisms such as are found in the strictures of Abbé Mably and Chastellux.

This is not the place to determine how much of that image still remains in contemporary representations of America. What cannot be doubted is that from the very beginning the New World acted as a revolutionary force in the Old. To the reactionaries who prized highly the traditions and the refinements and amenities of long-established societies America appeared as a "horrible example," a view found in de Pauw and still reflected in some contemporary writers like Duhamel. To the liberal thinkers, and to a large part of the public, America was, and probably still is, a land of plenty and a land of liberty in which the many enjoy the kind of happiness available in Europe only to a few. In any case we may safely state that such surveys as we find in Dr. Zavala's book do more than satisfy historical curiosity; they contribute to a better understanding of public opinion and of problems of international psychology.