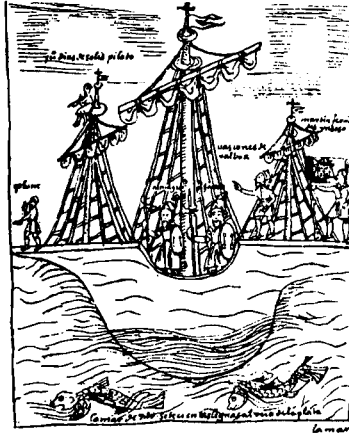


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Sahagún or the Limits of the Discovery
of the Other

DISCOVERING
THE AMERICAS



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Sahagún or the Limits of the Discovery of the Other

The discovery of America was the beginning of a new stage in history, a stage in which we still live. Cultures, separated until then, began their encounter, and the world ceased having a center. Then a new challenge began: the need to recognize the radically other. The challenge is still on. Upon the answer we give, to a great extent, may depend the future of man.

On arriving at the plateau of the Anahuac, the Europeans found themselves for the first time in their history with a complex culture which was completely alien to them. In the course of the centuries they had accumulated news of other pagan cultures, no matter how far they were from the West, which allowed them to place them. There were always some points in the other cultures with which a comparison of similar traits in Christianity could be established. Some, like Judaism or Islam, had common spiritual roots, or were, at least, a proven war contender; others, more remote, like India or China, were known through the accounts of historians and travellers, through occasional commercial and diplomatic contacts, or even through the indirect influence of their old wisdom on some Western thinkers; for centuries, since Ancient Greece, Europe knew of their remote presence; it had learned to live with it and dream of it.

Now, instead, a new human reality, a completely different reality is confronting it. First there are the naked Indians, which seem taken out of Paradise in the first instant of Creation. Then, the greatest shock: a strange civilization which unites the most subtle refinement with the bloodiest cruelty. It does not resemble anything known, nor does it remind them of any learned notions. It lacks the elements which seemed to be the conditions of every superior civilization: for example, iron, the wheel, and the horse, are unknown to it. However, it reaches a high moral and artistic standard, an unexpected political "rule": order and wisdom coexist with bloody actions to worship horrible images of stone. The European no longer knows if he is facing civilization or savagery. A strong fascination is reflected in all of the conquerors' and chroniclers' accounts, a confused and contradictory feeling of admiration and horror for this completely "new" world, which has emerged from the waters, unpolluted and strange, unapprehensible and alien. The Indian culture is the "never seen before," the radical other.

It is not possible to deal with the other without understanding it; this is even more true if we want to dominate it. The need for understanding the other is not borne out of a desire of communication between equal subjects but, rather, of a will for power.

For the first time in its history, the West asks itself in America about the problem of communication with the other. Is it possible in principle to understand the entirely different? What are the bounds of this understanding? Are they insurmountable? During the sixteenth century, New Spain offers a privileged laboratory to answer these questions.

In the attempt to understand the other, we may distinguish at least three levels.

The system of beliefs of every culture is ultimately based on a way of seeing the world according to certain basic values and categories. In every culture, the world "is shaped" in a specific way. Let us call this basic belief, on which all the other's beliefs are built, a "picture of the world." The picture of the world is, in every culture, the collective presupposition of any belief. Now, the first level in the understanding of the other consists in exorcising its otherness, that is, in translating it into terms of known objects and familiar situations in our own world, thus making it liable of falling under familiar categories and values within the framework of our own representation of the world.

Understanding the other through the categories in which our own interpretation of the world is expressed, presupposes establishing analogies of traits of the other culture with those similar to ours, thus banning the difference. Since Columbus and Cortés, this is what the Europeans have done. The unfaithful Americans resemble the Moors, and their conquest extends the Christian crusade; a "cacique" is a king, when not a messenger of the Great Khan; the "Tlatoani" is an emperor in the Roman style; an Aztec temple is a mosque; its idols, other Moloch; its cities, new Venices and Seviles. But the analogy in known terms has a limit. There are deep traits of the alien culture which resist being placed under usual categories, because they do not fit in the subject's picture of the world which establishes the frame and the boundaries of that which can be understood. Those untranslatable traits are then the negative *par excellence*. Because they are *out* of our own picture of the world, they have to be judged *either* as something out of every culture and history, *or* as something which contradicts and denies culture. Hence, the interpretation oscillates between two poles. In one, the Indian is seen as the natural

being, as Adam-like, prior to the establishment of any republic and, therefore, of any history. He is the innocent who is ignorant of sin, but also of science and law. This is the view which Columbus holds in his first contact with the Americans, the same which is extended to many writers later on, the most outstanding among them being Las Casas.

But if this interpretation can, in fact, be applied to the tribes of the Caribbean, it cannot be made to fit the complex Aztec State. The irreducibility of the other now has to be understood in a different manner. It is no longer prior to history, rather, it contradicts it. Since it cannot be reduced to our picture of the world, it is something that denies it, it is its "opposite." If the meaning of history is the final triumph of Christianity, if its development is governed by the design of Providence, that which is irreducible to Christianity can only be that which contradicts that design. And the one who contradicts it has, in our cultural tradition, a name: Satan. The other's culture, insofar as it cannot be translated to ours, cannot be but devilish. This is the most common interpretation amongst the missionaries and chroniclers. Their basic belief of the world holds that there can only be one truth and one destiny for man. That basic belief sets the bounds of the understandable. If some other culture intends to have another truth or destiny, it denies our picture of the world. Thus, it can only be understood as pure negativity. The other is the obscure and occult, that which says "no" to the world, the Satanic. Then, by definition, it is what cannot be integrated into our world, that which is open to destruction.

Until now, at this first level of understanding, the alien culture is an object which is liable of determination by the categories of the only subject of history, the member of a Western culture within the frame of the only picture of the world considered to be valid. The voice of the other can only be heard insofar as it can be in accordance with our concepts and values, because the real world can only have meanings which do not differ from the ones the only valid subject, the Western, may lend to them. The other cannot give the world a different meaning which could be recognized as valid. The other is really not accepted as a *subject* of meaning, only as the *object* of the only subject.

On this first level, a second level may be built, the one that only Las Casas has gone through. Las Casas begins with the prior level of understanding. Not even he can overcome the picture of the world which includes the basic belief in Providence as a giver of sense to history. He also has to reduce the other culture to traits which are

in accordance to his view of the world. But his picture of the world holds principles which allow judging the other as an equal. All are God's children, all are free and rational, no matter how different their appearance may be. Before the Natural Law and the divine designs, all have the same rights. The other is not reduced, then, to a pure object which may be submitted to exploitation. Since the other also holds rights which make him equal to the European, he is, like him, a subject. Amongst subjects, a dialogue needs to be established. The purpose of colonization is the conversion of the Indians to Christ, but this has to be attained through respect for the freedom of the other, our equal, our brother. It follows that it has to be accomplished through the path of conviction and never through oppression or violence. Las Casas asks for the other to be listened to, that his own voice be heard. This is a first recognition of the other as a subject. This recognition, however, has a limit.

Las Casas cannot accept the possibility of multiple truths. The Indian interlocutor has only one alternative: to be convinced or to be ignored. It would be unthinkable for Las Casas that the Indian could convince *him* of the validity, however limited, of his own vision of the world. Las Casas's position is on the opposite extreme of the views held by Fernández de Oviedo or by Sepúlveda. They justify the domination of the Indians and the destruction of their culture; the former, on the contrary, condemns Spain for these acts, he curses her for having betrayed its true mission, which consisted precisely in attracting the Indians without violence so that they would freely embraced Christianity. But no matter how great their differences are, Las Casas shares with these adversaries a basic presupposition. All argue on the grounds of a premise which cannot be questioned: the life of the other can have no more sense or destiny than conversion to our own world. The real world cannot have the meaning the other believed he was assigning to it but, rather, only that which is acquired in our shape of the world. The dialogue admits the other as an equal only so that he will willingly choose the values of the only one who knows the true sense of history. Admitting that the alien point of view was, on its own, capable of giving a valid sense to the world would have meant, for both Las Casas and Sepúlveda, waiving the frame of beliefs which allowed them to understand him.

Recognition of the other as a subject of right before God and the law, is recognition of an *abstract* subject, determined by the legal order which governs our own world, without overcoming our frame of basic values and beliefs. The most irreducible otherness has not yet been accepted: the other cannot determine the order and values

according to which he could be understood. The other is a subject of rights but not of meanings. We could say that Las Casas acknowledges the *equality* of the other but not its full *difference*. To do so, he would have had to accept *him* as holder of a different look upon us and upon the world, and he would have had to accept *himself* as capable of being seen through that look.

The possibility of a third level of understanding the other remains open. It would be the recognition of the other both in his equality and diversity; recognizing him in the sense he gives to his world. This level was never enfranchised. There were, however, those who saw it but just to draw back immediately from that view. The first and most outstanding of these was Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. He opened a window and found himself with the alien look, but he could not see himself in that look.

Sahagún is not a learned historian dedicated to bringing back to life an extinct culture. He is a missionary fighting constantly against idolatry, whose life only has meaning in spreading the message of Christ. Knowledge is an instrument to serve this purpose. Like the physician who has to know the illness in order to be able to cure it, the missionary has to understand the other in order to lead him to the truth. "Since the preachers and confessors are physicians for the soul, to cure spiritual illnesses it is convenient for them to have experience of spiritual medicines and illnesses... in order to preach against these things, and even to know if there are any, it is necessary to know how they used them in the times of their idolatry."¹ Knowledge has a practical aim. To achieve it, it is necessary to "know how to understand" the other, it is necessary to listen to him and understand the things of his world "according to the intelligence and practice and language that the same people have of them."²

Sahagún is the first in listening to the Indian with full attention, in systematically giving him the stand. He sends for the old men who kept the memory of their culture; he asks them to express in their own paintings their beliefs about the world, just as they did before the conquest. He then gets his best disciples together, also Indians, so that they transcribe in *nahuatl* the paintings interpreted by the old men. For over forty years of intense work, he collects invaluable testimony on all aspects of Aztec culture; without any middleman, the direct voice of the other is heard. He writes in the language of the

¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, México, ed. Nueva España, 1946, t. I, p. 9.

² *Op. cit.*, t. II, p. 171.

defeated, and spends years in holding a dialogue with his Indian interlocutors in order to understand and discover their world. Finally, the other has the stand, *his* stand. It is the Christian who listens.

And which is the world the words of the other reveal? They paint a grand civilization, completely adapted to its conditions and needs. Sahagún describes the force that builds and nourishes this society: an ascetic and strict education, capable of subduing natural inclinations and of building a virtuous republic. It rested, particularly, on the cultivation of a virtue: fortitude, "which amongst them was the most esteemed of all virtues and by which they rose to the highest degree of merit."³ The sternness of their punishments, the austerity of their life, the discipline and frugality which was imposed on everything, and their diligent laboriousness, allowed them – Sahagún hears – to keep an adequate social regime which offset their inclinations. Only in this way did they manage to build a great civilization. "It was this way of ruling – he comments – much in accordance with natural and moral philosophy, because the temperance and abundance of this land, and the constellations that in it reign, greatly help in making human nature vicious and otiose, tending very much to sensual vices. And moral philosophy taught by experience to these naturals that, to live virtuously and morally, sternness, austerity, and continuous occupations in fruitful things for the republic were necessary."⁴

The moral ideas of the Aztec society were expressed in beautiful speeches (Sahagún seems to have a special predilection for those rhetorical pieces), "in which – he says – there are very curious things concerning the beauty of their tongue, and very delicate things concerning moral virtues."⁵ Fathers taught their children temperance and humility, chastity and love for work, building in them the respect for the elder, honesty and prudence in all their behavior. Their advice was so prudent and elevated, that, according to Sahagún, "these [...] talks, said from the pulpit, would be more to the advantage of these young men and women, in the language and style they are (*mutatis mutandis*), than many other sermons."⁶ The moral code, based on fortitude and austerity, remained in society thanks to the unbending sense of justice, and to the example of a righteous and virtuous nobility, liable of being presented as a model to all the people. In

³ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 13.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, t. II, p. 242.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 443.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 538.

Sahagún's opinion, their republic was a government of the wise and the vigorous.

But that set of morals and policies was very much interwoven into their religion because, perhaps, there never was a people so dedicated to its gods. In dealing with the customs and institutions of Aztec society, religion appears at every juncture as a cultural manifestation which infiltrated all aspects of education and morals, giving them meaning in the Indian's eyes. It was present in all activities of the Indian society; it articulated all speeches; it also gave meaning to social behavior. If the Mexica civilization, in social, and in political aspects, is presented as a work of human reason fighting against vicious inclinations, how could Sahagún exclude from that building one of its strongest foundations, namely, religion?

When transcribing the words of the other, *even* in the area of religion which the missionary is occupied in destroying, we find concepts of great elevation; we discover, through the alien voice, a conception of the world which does not remind us at all of a "spiritual illness." Its highest god is covered with attributes closer to the Christian than to the pagan god. They used to say –transcribes Sahagún– that he was the creator of heaven and earth, almighty, invisible and untouchable, like darkness and air. The god was everywhere and everything was clear and manifested to him. The god had unlimited power "whose will everything obeys, on whose disposition depends the order of all the earth, and to whom everything is bound."⁷ Not only was he the source of all power but also of the greatest liberality and good. "Oh, our lord –they prayed– in whose power lies giving all joy and comfort, sweetness, softness, richness and prosperity [...] you alone are the god of all good!"⁸ They thought that the designs of god were occult and conceived divinity as an autonomous being, like absolute freedom. ("Everything is his –they said– and everything he gives, and everything comes from his hand, because it is not suitable for anyone to say that he wants to be this or he wants to have this dignity, because no one chooses what he wants, only god gives what he likes, to whom it pleases him, and he has no need of advice from no one but rather only his will."⁹) In this way they came to the concept of a self-sufficient god who creates for his own amusement; of creation as a spontaneous expression of his free

⁷ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 447.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 452.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 528.

will. "We men – he was told – are your show and theatre, at whom you laugh and with whom you are amused."¹⁰ Conscious of his nothingness, man jumps in the hands of the juggler god: "because he has us all in the middle of the palm of his hand, and he is tossing us, and we are like round balls and spheres in his hand, since we go about rolling from one place to another and we make him laugh, and he uses us when we roll from one part to another on his palm."¹¹

The saintly lives of his priests correspond to this conception of divinity. Every description of Fray Bernardino leaves the reader with the crude impression of constant devotion and penitence in the life of the Aztec priest: of the terrible severity of their education in the *calmecac*, "the house of god"; of the rigidity of a life steeped in fasting and prayer, in humiliation and penitence. This life of perfection reached not only males but also those females who, in the *calmecac*, were consecrated to their god, "the perfect sisters of H.H. [god]... the beautiful virgins which are like precious stones and rich feathers."¹²

In spite of their different spirit, and of some ideas which must have seemed great mistakes to a Catholic; in spite, especially, of their cruel and inhuman practices, like human sacrifices and ritual anthropophagy, the Indian's morals and religion present a high figure, often sublime, which would amaze even the most orthodox Franciscan. The other has spoken and what we hear is a fascinating world.

The invitation made to the other to reveal his own world should have led to his recognition. However, something stops Sahagún from taking this last step. Sahagún shares the interpretation of the world, common to his time, which provides the only paradigm to understand history. The only meaning of America is given by its role in the divine economy. This points out as the aim of history, the coming of the kingdom of Christ and the conversion of all people to the Gospel. The evangelization of America is the only act which allows him to understand his existence. God had kept America hidden until the moment of its discovery. "It has also been known as quite certain – Sahagún writes – that our Lord God (on purpose) has kept hidden that half part of the world until our times, that by its divine ordination has preferred manifesting it to the Roman Catholic

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* t. I, p. 461.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 494.

¹² *Op. cit.*, t. I, pp. 641-642.

Church."¹³ How could he admit, then, that the Indians could have reached on their own a high form of religion, comparable in points to the Christian, if they had been hidden to Revelation and grace? Sahagún would have to admit that they were not that lost after all, and that perhaps they did not have much need of his medicine. What meaning could the European presence then have in America? What meaning could evangelization have? And Sahagún's life itself, and the lives of his brothers?

No. Sahagún can admit the reasoning of the other up to a point: up to the moment in which he denies the basic belief which grants meaning to his own life and to the presence of Christianity in America. He cannot deny what the other shows to him, but neither can he deny his own interpretation of the world, that which constitutes him. He then has to exorcise the vision of the world that the other presents to him in order to place it within his own. His solution is a doubling of the world.

What appeared to the Indian eyes as gods, were actually demons. The point of view of the other is opposed by a criterion of truth that is alien to it. "The true light to know the true God – argues Sahagún – and the false and misleading gods, consists in the intelligence of the divine Scriptures."¹⁴ Let us not be amazed, then, that he deduces the malignity of the alien religion from the sacred texts more than from direct observation. The syllogism now replaces experience. "By the account of the divine Scriptures we know that there is not, nor could there be more God than one... It follows clearly from this that Huitzilopochtli is not a god, nor is Tlaloc, nor..." etcetera.¹⁵ The Indian world will then appear as an antipode to Christianity. Whilst in this the Scriptures are fulfilled, in the other they are denied. People in sin will be the Indians, people redeemed by grace the Christian; kingdom of Satan the former, of Christ the latter. So, Texcatlipoca, that great god, which presented such high attributes was... Lucifer disguised. "That [Texcatlipoca] – Sahagún proclaimed to the natives – is the evil Lucifer, father of all evil and lies, extremely ambitious, that which deceived your ancestors."¹⁶ (No god which the Indian believed to be a god was one. "Oh unfortunate those who worshipped and venerated and honored such evil creatures, and so

¹³ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 83.

adverse to the human race, like the devils and their images are, and for honoring them they offered their own and their children's blood, and the hearts of their fellow beings, and pleaded with them with great humility every necessary thing, thinking falsely that they were powerful to give them every good and free them of every evil."¹⁷) Every object of the Indian religion has a double face: in the Indian mind Texcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli appear as divine, gifted, and with sublime attributes, but were they so *in fact*? The law dictated by the true God tells us, on the contrary, that they were demons. The holy becomes nefarious according to the intention. Texcatlipoca is no longer covered now with the meanings which the Indian attributes to him, but rather with the traits which the Catholic reveals in his face. The same object is doubled; a distinction is made between the intentional object of the belief of the Indian and that same object as a reality outside of him, before the eyes of the Christian God. But both levels cannot be *real*. In order to save his own picture of the world, Sahagún declares the Indian's as an appearance, and as reality that which the Scripture reveals. In this way, our missionary can recognize the beauty and elevation of the prayers of the Indian without ceasing to think of his radical deceit. With this attitude, he saves the intention of the other, and to his eyes the value of his world, at the same time, however, he condemns his true being.

Sahagún wants to listen to the other subject, but when both visions clash, only one criterion, that of the evangelizer, may in principle reveal reality; the other can only be illusory. The true being of the alien culture is not the one its own subjects attribute to him, but, rather, the one the other look reveals.

In allowing the other to reveal his own world, Sahagún has confronted an unavoidable contradiction. The world of the other, just as he interprets it, questions the only frame within which he may be understood. Sahagún cannot accept it then, he must reinterpret it to be able to integrate it into his own vision. This movement is clearly seen not only under this interpretation of the indigenous religion, but also in his practical proposals.

Aztec civilization was adapted, Sahagún holds, to the natural inclinations of its creators. This is why it reached great virtue. The Spaniards, instead, destroyed the regime which the Indian had built, annihilated its social structure, and tried to replace it with another completely different order. Subject as their personal inclinations were

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 79.

to customs, laws, and beliefs, when these were destroyed, the Indians fell into vice, sensuality, and laziness. No one can survive the destruction of one's whole cultural world without losing oneself. The superiority of the old education and regime is proven in the bare success of colonization. A consequence of it, Sahagún points out, is that "fathers and mothers cannot be understood by their sons and daughters in order to draw them away from the vices and sensualities that this land raises; good judgement did the old inhabitants of this region have in raising their sons and daughters with the power of the republic, and in not allowing their parents to raise them; if that way of ruling were not so infected with idolatrous rites and superstitions, it seems to me to have been very good."¹⁸ And, further on, "It is our shame that the natural Indians, discreet and wise men, knew how to solve the damages this land imposes on those who dwell in it, obviating the natural things with contrary exercises, while we lose ourselves with our evil inclinations; and indeed this land raises a person both Spanish and Indian, who is intolerable to rule and very difficult to save."¹⁹

Sahagún then fights for a return to a social regime analogous to the Aztec, within the educational and institutional means which could be equivalent to it in Christianity. "If that way of ruling – Sahagún holds – were not so infected with idolatrous rites and superstitions, it seems to me to have been very good; and if cleansed of every idolatrous aspect it had, and making it all Christian, it was adopted by the Indian and Spanish republics, it would be a great good, and would thus free in this way both republics of great evils, and those who rule them of great hardships."²⁰ In his monastery, Sahagún put this idea into practice, introducing similar practices to the ones the Indians had in their schools, the *tepochcalli* and the *calmecac*, translated, naturally, into Christian beliefs and uses. But it failed. The Indian's world was very different; in lacking its own religious dimension and its own mentality, the new practices turned out to be empty and inefficacious. Sahagún understood the cause of his failure. The ancient regime was intimately linked to the religious world of the Indian. Its culture constituted a whole without fissures; once its religion had been destroyed, its moral education and the practice of its civic virtues could not be helped from dying. And Sahagún

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, t. II, p. 245.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

acknowledges that the destruction of all of the indigenous culture was unavoidable once the eradication of its "idolatry" had been decided. With a bitter aftertaste, he verifies that: "Because they [the Spaniards] overthrew and tore down all the customs and ways of governing that these naturals had, and wanted to reduce them to the Spanish life-style, in divine as well as in human aspects, believing them to be idolaters and barbarians, all the organization which they had was lost; it was necessary to destroy every idolatrous object, and every idolatrous building, and even the customs of the republic, which were mixed with rites of idolatry, and accompanied by ceremonies and superstitions, which were present in almost every custom of the republic by which they were ruled. And for this reason it was necessary to break everything up, and put them under a different order, in a way that there was no remnant of idolatry."²¹ Trying to keep a part of the world of the other without accepting the whole was impossible. Thus the failure of Sahagún's attempt. What has happened?

The picture of the world has a vital function, not only theoretical but also practical. It supposes a choice of ultimate meaning and value. Denying it, for Sahagún, would have been to deny himself as a European, as a Christian, as a Franciscan; it would have been to give up the overall project which granted meaning to his life. He would, on the other hand, remain empty and defenseless before the alien look; he would then have to see himself as the other saw him, he would run the risk of being dominated by him. He then has to interpret his own world as real, and the alien vision as illusory. This means, after trying to discover the other as subject, denying him and submitting him to us, that is, to dominate him.

Our picture of the world cannot be denied, insofar as it protects us from being dominated by the other, and insures our domination over him. This function is manifested in conquerors and jurists like Cortés, Fernández de Oviedo or Sepúlveda, who hold the right of Spain to submit the Indians. The other can only be understood insofar as his role of subject is denied and therefore reduced to an object determined by the categories of the European. Then he can be dominated. It would seem that in Las Casas and Sahagún that attitude of domination would disappear by granting the Indian equal rights and by listening to him. In fact, Las Casas bravely opposes the political domination of the Spaniards over the Indies and its right to

²¹ *Op. cit.*, t. II, p. 243.

conquer them. Against the ideological speech of conquerors and chroniclers at the service of the Crown, his language is a disruptive one, it is seen, by everyone, as subversive and even as treason to the interests of Spain. Although with less acrimony, the work of Sahagún is also perceived as dangerous for the colonizing enterprise, both by the Crown and by the ecclesiastic hierarchy. The spreading of the Indian's point of view of his world, of his beliefs, and even of his tongue, is considered subversive. A decree issued by Philip II in 1577, expressly forbids knowing and, with more reason, spreading the work of Sahagún. In fact, his work would remain unpublished during the entire colonial period; it was to be published, and then only partially, in the nineteenth century. Nothing more dangerous than giving the stand to the other when one wants to dominate him.

However, even these authors, subversive for the colonizer, cannot free themselves of the unconscious will of dominion before the other. Las Casas accepts the Indian as an equal and gives him the rights that the law of nature gives to every man. But he does not completely accept his difference for he cannot conceive of another paradigm of interpretation of the world but his own. Sahagún, on the contrary, listens and understands the difference of the Indian world, but he cannot grant him a validity equal to his own. In both Las Casas and Sahagún, the picture of the world cannot be *a priori* overcome. The exchange with the other subject can only lead to its reassertion. From the beginning, the discussion occurs within the limits that the only paradigm, that of the European, sets; he can never conceive that the result of the dialogue would question him. Only the colonized can "convert himself," never the colonizer. When he perceives this risk, as Sahagún did, he immediately has to set a limit. Is there not an unconscious attitude of domination here, prior to any exchange with the other?

The study of the work of Las Casas and Sahagún can show the boundaries in the discovery and recognition of other subjects. Precisely because their works opposed the domination to which the other was submitted, precisely because their lives were examples of the will for openness towards the other, their failure in recognizing him properly is more meaningful. It cannot be attributed to bad faith or selfish interests; it must have a deeper origin: the impossibility of questioning a basic belief that insures a vital function: asserting themselves and protecting themselves from the domination of the other. That is an ideological function. What we have called "picture of the world" is a final ideological resource which prevented the

recognition of the other as an equal, as well as of someone who is different.

If Las Casas and Sahagún point to a limit in the acceptance of the other, would it be possible to overcome it? It would only be feasible on the basis of another picture of the world which would be radically different from theirs, and from that of all of the men of their time. It would only be possible if we started from a basic belief which accepted, in principle, that reason is not one but many; that truth and meaning are not discovered from a privileged point of view but, rather, that it can be made accessible to other infinities; that the world can be understood from different paradigms. For this, an essentially plural reality would have to be accepted, both for the different ways of "shaping itself" before man, and for the different values which give it meaning. One would have to break up with the idea of the whole European history that the historical world has *a center*. In a plural world, any subject is the center.

Only one picture of the world, which admits the plurality of reason and meaning, can understand both the equality and diversity of subjects. Recognizing the validity of the equal and different from us, is giving up every previous idea of domination; it is losing the fear of discovering ourselves, equal and diverse, in the look of the other. Is this possible? I do not know. And, nonetheless, only this step would allow banishing forever the danger of the destruction of man by man, only this change would permit raising human history to a higher level.

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