

CONFLICT IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE AZTEC STATE, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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Many books have been written on the Aztec indians of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. All of these accounts are built around the writers' interpretations of the Aztec way of life. The purpose of this paper is to compare, contrast, and evaluate these often conflicting interpretations.

The earliest of our sources were written by the Aztecs themselves. The Aztecs possessed a strong historical consciousness and recorded "the historical events of each year . . . by day, month, and hour," going far back into the past. However, Itzcoatl, the fourth ruler and the first great Aztec conqueror, ordered the entire accumulation of historical manuscripts (which assigned the Aztecs a secondary role) burnt, "for . . . /it/ containeth many falsehoods."¹ History was rewritten to conform to the official viewpoints of nationalism and religious imperialism. Pains were taken to show that the Aztecs descended from the oldest and most illustrious families in the land. Particularly stressed was the notion that the Aztecs had a god-given duty to conquer the world.²

Not all subscribed to the dominant outlook. The merchants wished to accumulate riches, not fight holy wars. But the view that war and conquest were both good and necessary was the one that prevailed in the literature.³

Non-Aztecs interpreted Aztec society differently. The Spanish conquistadors who came to seize Aztec lands justified their greed

¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, Book 8: *Kings and Lords*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, New Mexico: The School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1954), p. 191; M. Leon-Portilla (ed.), *The Broken Spears, The Aztec account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. xx.

² Alfonso Caso, "Instituciones Indígenas Precortesianas", *Sobretiro de La Memoria del Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, VI (1954), 15-27; Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 316; Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 154, 155, 160-161.

³ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 58, 66, 210.

by speaking of the "natural rudeness and inferiority of the indians."⁴ Because they lacked money, did not use iron, and made human sacrifices, the Aztecs were "a brutal and bestial people without understanding or with so little that they scarcely merit the name of men."⁵ It was said that the Aztec was too stupid to invent anything useful. If he did have something worthwhile, it was only through the aid of some wandering Saint, Carthaginian adventurers, people from Atlantis, or the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Some thought that if the Aztecs were the Ten Lost Tribes, this would explain and solve everything. God said He would punish the Ten Lost Tribes. The Spaniards destroyed the Aztec state; therefore, the Spaniards were instruments of the Lord!⁶

Many of the clergy opposed this interpretation and vigorously combated it. They claimed that "the indians have a natural capacity to be taught, more so than many of our own people," and even exalted the qualities of the Aztecs as better than those of Europeans.⁷ But the long-lived ideas of Aztec savagery and stupidity are still alive. Books still are being written ascribing the Aztec culture to emissaries from lost Atlantis, the ancient Phoenicians, or even the fleet of Alexander the Great.⁸

From a mixture of old ideas of Aztec savagery and the new one of human evolution, there arose in the 19th century a new interpretation of the Aztecs, that which I call the Progressive Cultural Evolutionist.

The idea of cultural evolution developed at the same time as that of biological evolution. Supposedly all cultures were evolving

⁴ Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians* (London: Hollis & Carter Ltd., 1959), p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90; John L. Phelman, "Neo-Aztecism in the Eighteenth Century and the Genesis of Mexican Nationalism," *Culture in History, Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, edited by Stanley Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 763.

⁶ Hanke, p. 53; John L. Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World, A Study of the Writings of Geronimo de Mendocino (1525-1604)* ("University of California Publications: History," LII; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), p. 26.

⁷ Hanke, p. 92; Motolinia, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth A. Foster (Berkeley, Calif.: The Cortes Society, 1950), p. 209.

⁸ Robert Wauchope, *Lost Tribes & Sunken Continents* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 28-49; C. Irwin, *Fair Gods and Stone Faces* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963); Harold S. Gladwin, *Men Out of Asia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947).

toward European Civilization by a single universal sequence of stages. One of these stages was that of the classless, tribal, democratic, and communal "society", which was based on personal relationships. Another of these stages, the "state," was based on property relationships. An early member of this school, being intimately acquainted only with Indians lacking the attributes of the "state," assumed that all other Indians including the Aztecs, never reached this stage. Most other Progressive Evolutionists followed his example.⁹

The Aztec ruler was called a democratically elected official who did not live in a palace but in a "joint-tenement house" . . . occupied on equal terms by a hundred other families in common with his own." He was not an emperor but merely the elected chief of a tribal confederacy.¹⁰

Early Spanish and Indian historians did not support this viewpoint. No matter, they were obviously people who "learned nothing and knew nothing." They were only interpreting the Aztecs in terms of the Spanish Feudal system. If the evidence disagreed with the Progressive Evolutionary's theory, the evidence not the theory was considered wrong. This type of methodology discredited the theory and, although a few popular books can be found which reflect this viewpoint, contemporary specialists have abandoned the concept of a tribal, classless, and democratic Aztec society. Indeed, except in the Communist countries, the whole concept of Progressive Evolutionism is in disrepute. Today, Neo-Evolutionary or avowedly Non-Evolutionary theories are usually subscribed to by the specialist.¹¹

⁹ Adolph F. Bandelier, "On the Social Organization and Mode of Government of the Ancient Mexicans," *Twelfth Annual Report of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, II (1880), p. 557-699; Manuel M. Moreno, *La Organización Política y Social de los Aztecas* (Mexico: Seccion Editorial, 1931), p. 3; Leslie A. White, *Pioneers in American Anthropology, The Bandelier-Morgan Letters, 1873-1883*, ed. George P. Hammond (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1940), I, p. 52; Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society; or Researches in the Laws of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: A. Holt and Company, 1877), p. 186-214; Negrete advances the Aztecs to the stage of the "state," in "Estructura y dinamica de Mesoamerica", *Acta Anthropologica*, epoca 2, v. I, num. 3 (1958), p. 116.

¹⁰ George C. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1960), p. 119; Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), p. 96.

¹¹ Edgar L. Hewett, *Ancient Life in Mexico and Central America* (New

Neo-Evolutionists share with Progressive Evolutionists the idea of a sequence of stages in the development of a single culture or a group of related cultures, but differ in that they reject the idea of progress. They do not believe a culture has to evolve toward any particular goal, nor that all cultures must necessarily pass through the same sequence of stages. They take into account many causes and do not claim any one as the only factor needed to define a stage. Only a few books have explicitly interpreted the Aztecs this way, but it is often implicit in many modern discussions.¹²

An interpretation long discussed and still supported today by a sizable number of scholars is that of the Feudal-Imperialists. They hold that the Aztec culture was comparable to that of medieval Europe. Claiming or inferring an Aztec Empire dominated by a military or theocratic aristocracy, they reject all thought of a democratic, tribal, Aztec society. From commoner to emperor stretched a complicated hierarchy of greater and lesser nobility who possessed many special privileges. As feudal lords, the nobles ruled private hereditary estates worked by serfs. They elected the king. He in turn reigned as emperor over many largely autonomous, tributary provinces. Common people had few privileges and no effective voice in their government.¹³ This viewpoint refers usually to the period of Aztec empire building (that is after 1430).

York: Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1936), p. 71; White, I, p. 12, 24; A. Goldenweisser, "Recent Trends in American Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, XLIII (April-June, 1941), p. 152.

¹² Gordon R. Willey, "The Early Great Styles and the Rise of the Pre-columbian Civilizations," *American Anthropologist*, LXIV (February, 1962), p. 10; Gordon R. Willey and Philip Phillips, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 77, 196-199; William D. Strong, "Cultural Resemblances in Nuclear America — Parallelism or Diffusion?," *The Civilizations of Ancient America*, ed. Sol Tax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, p. 278, 279; John C. Greene, *Darwin and the Modern World View* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1963), p. 98; James J. Hester, "A Comparative Typology of New World Cultures," *American Anthropologist*, LXIV (October, 1962), p. 1014.

¹³ Moreno, *La Organización*, p. 2, 18; Leon-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, p. xxiii, 91; Caso, "Instituciones Indígenas Precortesianas", p. 22, 27; Eric R. Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 137, 141-142, 149; White, *Bandelier-Morgan Letters*, I, p. 32; Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, Book 10; The People, p. 15-22.

It was very easy for the early Spanish Historians to interpret the Aztecs in terms of such a Feudal-Imperialists system, since they were familiar with this system in Europe. They also compared the Aztec State to the Roman Empire, a comparison which came to have very important political implications.¹⁴

The analogy between the Roman and the Aztec cultures was part of the attempt of early friars to show that Indians were, after all, human beings. Friar Torquemada, in 1615, was the first to make this comparison on a systematic and indeed an overwhelming scale. The friars implied that the Aztec civilization was the classical antiquity of the New World. Later historians enveloped the Aztec deities "...in an atmosphere suggestive of the gods of the Greeks and the Romans [and] the Aztecs took on the virtues of heroic Roman emperors."¹⁵

Gradually out of the assumption of an Aztec classical antiquity arose a demand among Spanish Colonial intellectuals for a return to the Aztec virtues, for a restoration of the Aztec Empire. Not that a real revival of Aztec culture was desired, but "this platform of ideas . . . provided a neat although historically dubious rationale for independence. . ." This tendency to glorify the Aztecs died out with the winning of independence. After the 1910 Mexican Revolution it was revived and still is an important influence in modern Mexican historiography.¹⁶

Partly as a result of this program and partly because of the original preoccupation of the friars with Roman-Aztec comparisons, what I call the Central-Imperialists interpretation was formulated at an early date and has achieved great popularity in Mexico. It considers the Aztec state to have been either an incipient or fully developed empire ruled by an absolute monarch, who not only controlled tributary provinces but planted colonies, established garrisons, and abolished local autonomy.¹⁷

¹⁴ Antonio de Solis, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Thomas Townsend and Nathan Hook (London: Printed for T. Woodward, 1738), I, p. 136; Phelan, *Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscan*, p. 110-111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, see also Phelan's "Neo-Aztecism," p. 761.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 768-769; Covarrubias, *Indian Art*, p. 312, 320; *Archaeology in Mexico Today* (Mexico: Petroleos Mexicanos, 1961), p. 23; Eulalia Guzman, *Relaciones de Hernan Cortes* (Mexico: Libros Anahuac, 1958), p. lviii-lxiv, cxix; for an attack on this position see Alfonso Trueba, *Doña Eulalia, El Mestizo y otros Temas* (Mexico, Editorial Jus, 1959), p. 7-10.

¹⁷ White, *Bandelier-Morgan Letters*, II, p. 32; Alfredo Lopez Austin, *La Constitucion real de Mexico-Tenochtitlan* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional

The Central-Imperialists state that separate classes existed, including a nobility based on merit, not hereditary rights. Any commoner, if he was capable, could work his way up into the higher nobility. The emperor was elected, not by the people or the nobility, but by a small group of electors previously chosen by the late emperor from members of the reigning family.¹⁸

Many modern historians in adopting this interpretation have not found it incompatible with the Neo-Evolutionary scheme of successive stages. They reason, and I think quite truly, that the main defect with all these interpretations of the Aztec way of life is that they are non-temporal and unicausal. The Aztec state lasted about two hundred years, and semi-historical records take their history, (before the formation of the Aztec state), back almost another two centuries. Four hundred years ago the ancestors of the inhabitants of the United States lived quite differently from the way their successors do today. Why can't we assume that the Aztecs also experienced many changes in their way of life in an equal length of time?¹⁹

Neither are all of these interpretations necessarily incompatible with each other. The Aztecs could have had both a hereditary and non-hereditary nobility ruling over a common people that elected their own local officials. Both the nobles and commoners believed in their god-given duty to conquer the world, while con-

Autonoma de Mexico, 1961), p. 49, 90; William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: J. B. Alden and Crowell, 1886), I, p. 42; Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, Book 8: Kings and Lords, p. 53-54; Robert H. Barlow, *The Extent of the Empire of the Culhua Mexica* ("Ibero-Americana," v. 28; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949), p. 18-19, 76, 98; Caso, "Instituciones Indigenas Precortesianas", p. 27; "Anales of Chimalpahin" in Paul Radin, *The Sources and Authenticity of the History of the Ancient Mexicans* ("University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology," XVII, No. 1; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1920), p. 129, 130.

¹⁸ Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs, People of the Sun* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), p. 94; Soustelle, p. 45; Caso, "Instituciones Indigenas Precortesianas", p. 20.

¹⁹ Lopez Austin, *La Constitucion Real*, p. 21-52; Soustelle, *The Daily Life*, p. 36; Caso, "Instituciones Indigenas Precortesianas", p. 19; Radin, *The Sources and Authenticity*, p. 148; Alfonso Caso, "Land Tenure Among the Ancient Mexicans," *American Anthropologist*, LXV (August, 1963), p. 863-878.

trolling an empire composed of autonomous tributary kingdoms and provinces ruled by Aztec governors.²⁰

This does not mean all interpretations could be correct. There is no evidence to prove that the Aztecs obtained their knowledge from, or were, Israelites, Phoenicians, or Atlanteans. The evidence does not support the contention that the Aztecs were "a brutal or bestial people without understanding or with so little that they scarcely merit the name of men."²¹

I believe that the Neo-Evolutionist, Aztec, Feudal-Imperialist, Central-Imperialist and possibly elements of the Progressive Evolutionary interpretations are applicable to the Aztec State, Society and Culture, but they were differently emphasized in the three temporal periods into which one can subdivide Aztec history. If the tribal democracy of the Progressive Evolutionists was ever very important, it was in the earliest period. The rewriting of history in the time of Itzcoatl, marking the beginning of a second period of great conquests, was dominated by a strong semi-hereditary military aristocracy and motivated by a religious duty to conquer the world. The third period, the reign of the last Montezuma, was a time of consolidation. Stricter controls were imposed over the provinces. Allied states were subordinated to the central government and Mexico-Tenochtitlan became the single absolute political center of her empire. The end came in 1519 with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, and the Aztec State fell forever.²²

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²⁰ Lopez Austin, p. 49; Caso, "Land Tenure Among Ancient Mexicans," p. 863-878.

²¹ Hanke, p. 90; Wauchope, p. 28-68.

²² Lopez Austin, p. 52; Radin, p. 56, 150; Wolf, p. 132-134, 142; Hernando Cortes, *5 Letters of Cortes to the Emperor*, trans. J. B. Morris (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1962), p. 94.

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