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This Land is Our Land:
The Origins of Euro-American Land Tenure

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Abstract:

Columbus’ discovery of the New World in 1492 has come to be one of the formative events in human history. Over the past 5 centuries, populations have shifted to the extent that in nearly every nation within the Americas, Europeans comprise the majority. Many historians have sought to explain this phenomena and general consensus is that a combination of disease and militaristic technological advancements provided European colonists with a distinct advantage over indigenous peoples. Although the question of “how” Europeans came to dominate the Americas has been well answered, little work has been dedicated to the “why”. This presentation seeks to provide an explanation for the motivation of European expansion and its success by exploring both Spanish and Aztec understandings of land. By exploring both religious and societal influences on environmental interpretation we can see the birth of societal frameworks which allowed and encouraged the seizure of land by Spanish Conquistadors.
History is a fickle beast. Constantly changing and shifting history is by no means static but rather a living organism altered by the perceptions and perspectives of those who breathe life into it. History, in the way in which it is written, can reveal just as much about the period in which it is written as it can about the events it seeks to explore. This is both the beauty and bane of history. As a human construct history shall always be subject to the emotions, desires, and motivations of the societies and individuals who generate it and as such it will always possess inherent flaw. It is this subjectivity to human agency which can cause history to be dangerous, for just as history is impacted by human nature so too can history impact human nature. History has been and is the collective social memory of the human experience, and consequently humanity often applies history to the contemporary world. When historical interpretations run awry or are applied for selfish reasons the consequences can be disastrous. It is then that the beauty of history's arbitrary nature is best exemplified. For just as historical interpretation may be flawed or misguided the dynamic nature of history means that these mistakes can be rectified, revisited and reinterpreted to create a better, but never perfect version of that social memory.

One such example lies in the chronicling of interaction between the Europe and the America's beginning in the year 1492. The study of history is, at its core, the study of relationships and interactions. Relationships between man and his environment, the relationship between man and himself and finally the relationship between man and his peers. The interaction between Europe and the America's in 1492 is one of the paramount exchanges in human history, marking the reunification of two societies which for millennia had existed in nearly complete isolation from one another. Historians have consequently long held a fascination for this event, for over five centuries they have striven to provide explanations for the factors surrounding its occurrence. For much of those five centuries they failed; shackled by the ideologies and
perceptions of their times historians shared heavily Eurocentric interpretations of this exchange which served more than anything else the purpose of vindicating European colonization of the Western hemisphere. These early histories portrayed racially superior Europeans discovering a virgin landscape inhabited by an inferior race of savages whom the Europeans bravely by vainly attempted to Christianize. In these early histories the reader and Western society saw how, with the divine guidance of God, colonists spread throughout this untamed wilderness to create the nations that exist here today. Thus the “pristine myth” was born and the ideological cornerstone for the future of the world laid. The pristine myth has pervaded nearly the entirety of the historical chronicling of the inter-Atlantic exchange until, in 1960’s, the rise of social historians provided a counterpoint to the popular narrative by sharing alternative perspectives on some of history’s most significant events; bringing with them a degree of moral and societal responsibility and awareness. The study of Amerindian and European relationships was no exception to this revision. By removing the emphasis from the inherent racial superiorities of Europeans and emphasizing the impact of environmental and geographical factors on societal development and providing alternative views of the Americas before Columbus historians such as Alfred Crosby, Jared Diamond and Charles Mann have challenged conceptions of racial inequity and challenged common convictions of history.

One of the first historians to provide a unique and alternative perspective for the expansion of European interests was Alfred Crosby, a professor at the University of Texas, with his 1986 work, Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900. Crosby opens Ecological Imperialism with a simple statement, “European Emigrants and their descendants are all over the place, which requires an explanation.”1 Crosby’s acknowledgment

1 Crosby, Alfred Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) pg. 2
draws its elegance from its simplicity and it is this very plain observation that forms the basis for Crosby's argument. Crosby seeks to examine how and why Europeans have come to inhabit a range of what he calls "Neo-Europes" which are essentially lands thousands of miles from Europe and each other that have predominantly European populations. This definition is important as it draws a clear distinction between European colonial ventures in such regions as Africa or the Far East which, although still bearing severe consequences, did not see the supplanting of the indigenous races with Europeans as was the case in places like the Australia, Brazil and Argentina, regions which are the focus of Crosby's study.

Crosby posits that this expansion was due more to the landscape and environment of Europe than any other factor. Crosby traces this environmental influence back to the earliest benchmarks in history claiming that Europeans owe much of their good fortune to the Neolithic Revolution and more substantially to the domestication of the multitude of animals which occurred during it. The domestication of animals was substantial in that it created two of the other tools which Europeans would unwittingly utilize throughout their expansion, weeds and disease. Over time Europeans became accustomed to both the weeds and diseases of their geographical locations. Both weeds and diseases would develop in conjunction with European society, being transmitted through trade, war and travel throughout the known world. Europe's temperate climate made these various flora and fauna ideal for transplanted to other temperate zones. Europeans would undertake transplantation of a massive scale unknowingly bringing over plants and animals which were mutually beneficial to each other's survival and growth. Thanks

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2 Ibid pg. 2  
3 Crosby Ecological Imperialism pg. 2-3  
4 Ibid pg. 22  
5 Ibid pg. 28  
6 Ibid pg. 29-30  
7 Ibid pg. 31
to favorable oceanic currents and winds Europeans were able bring these three crucial heralds of European success to the Americas. Livestock provided colonists with a renewable source of sustenance, a means of labor and perhaps most important a biological weapon against the indigenous peoples who lacked immunities to the diseases they carried. The term weeds, as Crosby defines it, “refers to any plant that spreads rapidly and out competes others on disturbed soil.” Weeds provided Europeans once again with a steady source of food for both themselves and their livestock, the ease with which these new flora would take to the temperate zones of the new world allowed for rapid expansion of Europeans outwards from their initial zones of settlement. Finally disease proved to be the most successful weapon the Europeans would wield due to the fact that Amerindians had existed in absolute isolation from these diseases and consequently were highly susceptible to them. Due to the significant influence of these natural products of Europe on the creation of Neo-Europes, Crosby concludes that it was not a superiority on the behalf of Europeans but rather the simple matter of the environment that allowed them to expand exponentially around the globe.

Crosby's work, both at the time of its release and now, is of the utmost importance to the field of History. Although the topic of European Dominance in the Americas is one which has been covered extensively Crosby is able to provide a unique an innovative argument thanks to his focus on the environmental aspects which allowed for the creation of Neo-Europes. Crosby supplies an argument which not only answers the question of why Europeans are everywhere but that also explains why Europeans have been more or less successful in particular regions thanks

8 Ibid pg. 105
9 Ibid pg. 172-173
10 Ibid pg. 196
11 Ibid pg. 149
12 Crosby Ecological Imperialism pg. 147-148
13 Ibid pg. 196-197
to their geographical and climactic conditions. By attributing this observable phenomena to the
environment rather than divine providence, or inherent racial distinctions Crosby creates an
argument in which human agency is not the sole determining factor in the development of the
Americas but rather one factor out of many that shaped the event. Although Crosby is by no
means a pioneer in the field of environmental history in of itself his utilization of this lens to
view the expansion and eventual dominance of the Americas as well as other territories is highly
original and consequently makes *Ecological Imperialism* a significant work.

Despite the significance of Crosby’s work it would be remiss not to mention the fact that
*Ecological Imperialism* does suffer from a few shortcomings. Crosby does a good job of
defending himself from numerous criticisms throughout his work by anticipating these criticisms
and proactively seeking to address them, however two major criticisms can be made. Firstly it is
significant to note that Crosby seems to suggest that a very unilateral relationship was
established between colonists and indigenous peoples. Little attention is granted to the
indigenous perspective and the native populations that the colonists interact with are portrayed as
passive to their subjugation, playing very little role in their ultimate destruction. This perspective
generates two potentially vexing outcomes in Crosby’s work. Firstly it ignores the question of
whether indigenous peoples potentially aided in the spread of European Imperialism through
their adoption of numerous European crops and animals. Secondly, Crosby’s lack of attention
towards the Native perspective also contradicts his own argument by implying that the
dominance of Europe was a foregone conclusion against which Native resistance was futile. As
one of Crosby’s central focuses is to prove that there is no inherent inequity between Native and
European peoples it would seem counterproductive to suggest that one party was inevitably
destined to triumph.
In a review of Crosby's work Cynthia Hody also highlights another shortcoming in *Ecological Imperialism* which is grounded in its lack of explanation of the motivations behind imperialism. Hody argues that, “In order to understand Imperialism we need to understand the motives that give rise to it as well as the many forms which it takes. Crosby barely addresses the issue of motive and he is unconcerned with the multiple forms of imperialism.”  

Although the environment can certainly account for the dramatic success in the formation of Neo-Europes it in no way addresses the issue of why it was Europeans sought to expand. To fully understand a historical issue is to not only establish an understanding of what has transpired but also the impetus behind a historical movement. The lack of such an explanation is a major flaw in Crosby's otherwise excellent work and is a valid avenue for criticism. The Second of Hody's critique's is of little relevance however. Hody's argument that Crosby ignores numerous other types of imperialism is voided by the simple fact that Crosby clearly states he is simply looking to explore those instances in which European's have become the dominant population in a region where they initially were not. To claim that Crosby's work is flawed because he does not provide insight on other types of imperialism is fruitless as those situations bare no connection to Crosby's thesis.

As mentioned earlier history is very much a product of the ideals, movements and perspectives of the time and consequently reflects the influence of numerous contemporary stimuli. The 1980's were significant in that they saw the full sovereignty of several former Neo-Europes from Great Britain. Canada, Australia and New Zealand finally eliminated the need for constitutional changes to be reviewed before being approved. It seems very likely that these events, which occurred throughout the early and mid-1980s, would have played some role in

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inciting Crosby to write; if for no other reason that by asking the question of why these nations
are so far from Europe and yet dominated by Europeans. This trend in conjunction with the
increasing globalization of the world during the preceding decades would have provided an
intriguing context through which a study such as *Ecological Imperialism* would be not only
interesting but highly topical. Although Crosby does not openly admit to being impacted by such
movements it is hard to doubt that they exerted some sort of influence over his work.

To make his argument Crosby relies primarily on secondary sources. This is not to say
that *Ecological Imperialism* is bereft of any first hand sources, yet the size and scope of Crosby's
work almost necessitates that he use secondary sources. Crosby is not focused on the exposition
of a particular event but rather providing an overarching argument to explain one of humanities
great dramas and consequently the utilization of presynthesized documents are implicit. Crosby
does occasionally use primary sources and particularly quotations to provide a human quality to
this work, but these only serve to provide more qualitative evidence in support of his claims.
With this in mind it is clear that Crosby is not utilizing new sources, but rather old sources in a
new manner. There is no doubting the novelty of Crosby's argument, and it is from his unique
and ingenious interpretation of these sources that *Ecological Imperialism* draws its strength.

There is a complex relationship between Crosby, Diamond and Mann in that they all
seemingly agree on many accounts and yet they all provide distinctly unique interpretations of
the factors which contributed to the clash between the New and Old Worlds. As the first of the
three historians to present his case Crosby is in many ways providing the groundwork upon
which Diamond and Mann will build. Crosby clearly influenced Diamond and to a lesser extent
Mann with his focus on environmental research and interpretation. Both Diamond and Mann
utilize environmental evidence and analysis in their works and both of them seem to subscribe to
Crosby's idea that it was in many ways the environment that allowed for European dominance on such a wide scale. Crosby and Mann in particular are unified in their insistence that more so than any other factor, epidemic disease was responsible for the destruction of Native culture. In other regards however Crosby's work is highly unique, his focus on strictly Europeans as subject group differs from both Diamond and Mann. Crosby also separates himself by paying little attention the technological advancements of both Europeans and indigenous people, a topic which both Diamond and Mann spend some time in dealing with although they arrive at different conclusions. Crosby also differs from his fellow authors is the lack of agency he gives to indigenous peoples. Crosby portrays indigenous peoples as a group which has been acted upon rather than one which plays and active and significant role in cross Atlantic interactions.

Crosby deserves praise for the accessibility of his work as it is highly readable and pleasantly interesting. There is no doubting however, that Ecological Imperialism falls firmly into the realm of Academic History. Crosby uses a highly theoretical approach to explain the unrivaled expansion of European's around the globe. Crosby's work also resides in the realm of Academic history due to the fact that his argument is meant as a response to the more widely accepted perceptions of historians at the time. His emphasis on generating a new interpretation of this significantly covered event is a clear indication of an academic focus. As an academic historian Crosby clearly adheres to the academic genre of Environmental history. Following the trail blazed by individuals such as Roderick Frazier Nash and William Cronon a decade earlier Crosby is by no means a vanguard in the field of environmental history movement. Crosby's emphasis on the formative role which the environment played in the establishment of European Imperialism is an exemplar of an environmental interpretation and the innovations within his research make Ecological Imperialism a seminal work within the field of environmental history.
Following the legacy which Crosby created, Jared Diamond made his contribution to the debate on the conflict between Europeans and Amerindians with *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. Diamond's work is focused on answering a question which Yali, a local politician in New Guinea, had asked, “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people have little cargo of our own?” To answer this question Diamond utilizes a very similar theory to Crosby but expands his thesis in two major ways. Firstly Diamond finds it necessary to focus on not only Europeans, but Eurasians as he acknowledges the importance that the Fertile Crescent and Far East played in the formation of early complex societies. Diamond agrees that the environmental qualities of Eurasia provided its inhabitants with an ecological edge but also believes additionally that the consequent early formation and spread of this ecological edge throughout Eurasia also enabled a subsequent edge in technological and societal advancement. Thus Diamond's central argument is that environmental factors throughout Eurasia allowed for the early adoption and spread of sedentary agricultural practices which provided a basis upon which further innovation could occur. It was this innovation, which would manifest itself in the forms of guns (military technology) germs and steel (industry), that allowed for the eventual spread and dominance of Eurasian cultures, customs and ideas around the globe.

One of the major criticisms of Diamond's work rests in its originality. Over the years Diamond has been attacked by numerous academics such as J. Philippe Rushton who claims that Diamond's argument is, “neither novel nor unique.” There is no denying that Diamond does

16 Ibid pg. 123-125
17 Ibid pg. 190
18 Ibid pg. 357-359
borrow extensively from numerous sources, and in some cases this certainly could be seen as limiting the innovation and consequently importance of his argument. The counterpoint to this perspective however can be found in David Frum who claims that, “Diamond is one of the very few authors to provide an answer that is both original and convincing.”\textsuperscript{20} It is interesting that two respected academics can disagree so fundamentally over such issues of originality. The fact of the matter however is that both Rushton and Frum are right in some respects. Diamond’s idea that the environmental qualities of Eurasia provided the peoples living in the landmass with a tangible set of advantages over their counterparts is by no means a novel interpretation as exemplified through the work of Crosby, amongst others. Diamond’s expansion of the theory of environmental impact in both region and consequences, however is highly original and in this regard \textit{Guns Germs and Steel} must be lauded for its well thought out addendums to a well-documented historical trend.

As mentioned earlier Diamond has received some criticism for his work over the years. Although generally these criticisms are well founded it is necessary to observe the fact that some of this criticism can be attributed to the scope of Diamond’s work rather than the substance. \textit{Guns Germs and Steel} is a work which covers thousands of years of history, and consequently it would be an unrealistic task for Diamond to provide a highly detailed account of every development which has transpired. To criticize Diamond or attribute bias to Diamond as a result of these historical oversights is not only unfounded but ignorant as it misses the purpose of Diamond’s work which is not to provide a narrative of human history but rather to provide an overarching argument for why the historical narrative has unfolded in the way which it has.

That being said there are some valid biases which can be observed in Diamond’s work

\textsuperscript{20} Frum, David “How the West Won: History That Feels Good Usually Isn’t” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 77.5 (Sept-Oct 1998) 133
which are worth recognizing. The first of these is that Diamond's work is written in a highly apologetic manner. Much of the apologism can be attributed to the fact that one of Diamond's major objectives is to account for the success of Eurasians not on racial terms but rather environmental factors. Frum argues that ultimately Diamond's apologetic tone takes away from the significance of his work as in Frum's perspective, “History should not be written with the intent to help: it is scholarship, not social work, and its only criterion of success is truth.”21 Diamond's bias can in some ways detract from his argument as it may cause him to overemphasize the influences of the environment, which are undoubtedly substantial, to the detriment of other contributing factors, institutions and ideologies. J. Philippe Rushton ascribes to this criticism of Guns, Germs and Steel by arguing that Diamond's focus on environmental factors and insistence on racial equity has caused him to ignore some very real and scientifically observable discrepancies amongst races. Rushton asks, “Does Diamond want to argue that natural selection stopped when anatomically modern humans arose in Africa 100,000 years ago?”22 Rushton cites scientific evidence including racial differences in brain size and density as well as IQ's. Clearly Diamond is biased by his focus on proving that there are no inherent differences between races.23 The degree to which Diamond's bias detracts from his credibility is difficult to establish however as his substantial research and comprehensive argument are difficult to refute. Despite its inherent slant in perspective Guns, Germs and Steel proves a valuable addition to the question of racial homogeneity.

The question then must be asked of what inspired Diamond to undertake such a momentous project as to explain all of human history. One answer to this question can be found in the fact that Diamond wrote this work in a time of increasing globalization. The modern world

21 Frum “How the West Won: History That Sounds Good Usually Isn't” pg. 135
22 Rushton, “Book Review: Guns Germs and Steel” pg. 106
23 Ibid pg. 106
is one in which all peoples and societies are inexorably linked by factors ranging from religion to online games. This increasing global community has served to bring to light many of the social and cultural distinctions between peoples and naturally one would question where these distinctions originated from. In addition to the impact of globalization another answer to this question would reside in Diamond's own travels. As a biologist Diamond has had the chance to traverse much of the world and his interactions with individuals of different backgrounds, races and ethnicities would have undoubtedly impacted both his desire to research the question of why the world is the way it is as well as his conviction that all races are inherently equal.

As with Crosby the majority of documents used by Diamond are secondary and in most cases well known. Diamond draws heavily from the works of those who came before him and melds their arguments together. This utilization of sources is exemplified by his citation style. *Guns, Germs and Steel* is almost entirely without footnotes and citation, a fact which is detrimental to his credibility as questions of originality abound. Diamond instead uses a “Further Reading” section in which he outlines those works which he consulted for each chapter. This is a unique way of acknowledging his sources as the reader has difficulty in tracing claims to their origin. Although this approach could be open to criticism bear in mind that Diamond is dealing with largely accepted facts and simply providing his interpretation of them. Diamond therefore does not rely on new sources or texts, but rather revisiting well established texts and bringing them together to weave a tangible answer to the question of European dominance. In this regard Diamond's novelty stems from his ability to unify these various sources into a single grand argument.

Diamond's work is also highly similar to Crosby in his acknowledgment that human societies are highly impacted by the areas in which they live. His argument borrows significantly
from Crosby and consequently they possess an extreme amount of congruencies including but not limited to the significance of the domestication of plants and animals and germs, the role of the environment in determining European success and their mutual omission of a tangible motive for European expansion. Diamond in many ways expands Crosby's argument through his aforementioned acknowledgment of Asian contributions to European imperialism. Diamond recognizes that both the Middle East and Far East played a high formative role in the formation of European dominance through the diffusion of technology, goods and ideas; a concept which Crosby does not acknowledge. Diamond also distances himself from Crosby in his analysis of the significance of technology. While Crosby posits that technologies had a minor role in dictating the course of relations between Amerindians and Europeans Diamond feels that it is of great significance going so far as to claim that, "Rivaling germs as proximate factors behind Europe's conquest of the America's were the differences in all aspects of technology." Mann does discuss technology in his work but comes to a significantly different conclusion than Diamond as we shall see later. Diamond, and for that matter Crosby, differ distinctly from Mann on interpretations of Amerindian life. To Diamond and Crosby there is a clear indication that Native Americans lagged far behind their European counterparts in their development technologically, socially, and agriculturally. This observation is distinctly different from Mann's interpretation of Amerindian life. Diamond separates himself from both his counterparts however in the sheer scope of his argument. While Crosby and Mann tend to focus on the expansion of Europeans and Native Americans respectively Diamond seeks to discuss the development of society around the globe. The grand scale of this narrative is distinctly unique.

Diamond's philosophy of history is difficult to pinpoint. Diamond's argument on the

24 Diamond, Guns Germs and Steel pg. 416
25 Diamond, Guns, Germs and Steel pg. 358
environmental factors which contributed to the expansion of Europeans is by all accounts a highly intellectual and academically grounded thesis. Although Diamond's argument is fairly straightforward it is by no means obvious and in order to fully comprehend the complex interplay of environment and social structures would require at least a familiarity with academic history. Diamond's utilization of an environmental lens may be enough to denote his work as academic in nature. Alternatively, one could make the case that *Guns Germs and Steel* is best described as a public history. It is difficult to give credence to the lack of citation and reference which Diamond shares. Yes, Diamond does provide a list of the works he consulted but the lack of any direct correlation between his evidence and sources is highly uncharacteristic of academic history. Additionally, the style of Diamond's writing is well geared towards a public history, a notion best symbolized by the *Guns Germs and Steels'* status as a *New York Times* best seller. Accessibility of one of Diamond's greatest strengths and his clear and direct approach to analyzing events and developments around the globe along with his utilization of simple language to explain complex concepts allows most readers to comprehend the basis of his argument. Taking all of these factors into account it seems that Diamond's work may be a hybrid of public and academic history and would be of substantial value in either application. If one acknowledge Diamond as an academic historian it is also quite clear that he ascribes to the genre of environmental history. Little explanation is required for this conclusion. Diamond's argument is blatantly environmentalist in nature and although he may discuss social and cultural factors on occasion this is always done with the understanding that these factors resulted from environmental influences.

The third and final source consulted was *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* by Charles Mann. Mann takes a different approach from Diamond and Crosby as his
focus is not on the hemispheric clash of 1492 but rather on the state of Amerindians in the era proceeding this momentous exchange. Although this means that Mann does not directly deal with the same topic Crosby and Diamond do he fills the void left by their lack of analysis on the Americas. Mann is one of few authors to provide a well-researched and convincing argument countering the traditionally perpetuated histories of the Americas and as such *1491* is not only topically relevant but invaluable in gaining a better understanding of the interaction between New and Old World.

Mann's central focus in *1491* is to rectify “Holmberg's Mistake.” Allan Holmberg was a doctoral student who spent time with the Soriono, a tribe native to modern day Bolivia. Holmberg published his account in the 1940s and although he sympathized heavily with the Soriono he portrayed as culturally backward and essentially bereft of any of the modern standards of society. This interpretation is one which has been applied to many Indians and consequently perpetuates a misinformed narrative of American history. Mann counters this argument by claiming that Indians were present in greater numbers, formed highly complex societies, were technologically advanced and altered their environment on a level incomprehensible to contemporary Europeans and even many modern historians. As Mann himself argues, “the Americas were immeasurably busier, more diverse and more populous than researchers may have imagines.” In order to prove that this is the case Mann utilizes a variety of new information from various sources weaving a complex narrative in which Native's had not an inferior but significantly different society from those of their European counterparts. Mann argues that Natives may have had populations in the range of 90-112 million individuals.

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27 Mann, *1491* pg. 15
28 Ibid pg. 94
number far exceeding population estimates in Europe. He also argues that many Indian technologies were far in advance of those in Europe such as the botanical gardens of the marvelous city Tenochtitlan. 29 Perhaps the greatest testament to Indian innovation and ingenuity resides in Mann's claim that the Amazon rainforest actually an artificial construct. 30 By bringing together various sources which further emphasize that Native American's were in fact a highly populous and advanced people Mann intends to paint a picture of an alternative pre-Columbian America.

Mann's argument is highly innovative as it provides a uniquely distinct account of the Americas prior to the interaction of the two hemispheres. Such a work is an essential complement to humanity's understanding of the world. It is likely that the work has some mistakes and omissions due to the limitations of available information on the topic. The simple fact that Mann adroitly and academically challenges many widely accepted notions grant it a value far surpassing most other works. It is worth noting that most of the research is not Mann's and consequently his argument is more the accumulation and presentation of numerous sources. When combined these sources paint a composite picture of what life may have been like in an era which we will likely never fully understand. In this regard Mann deserves praise not only for providing a different interpretation to widely accepted truths but rather inverting accepted truth altogether and providing an alternative and just a feasible representation of the human experience.

The biases of Mann's work are notably minimal due to the presentation of his argument. Mann understands that his work is highly speculative and as such takes pains to discuss not only findings that would support his perspective but also those that may counter it. This is a refreshing

29 Ibid pg. 126
30 Ibid pg. 279
change of pace to many histories as Mann presents his work not as an irrefutable truth but rather as a point which may help to better understand a highly misunderstood subject. That being said, Mann himself is certainly biased in favor of more modern proposals of what the Americas actually looked like at the time of Columbus. Mann tends to give slightly more time and thought to those authors who are favorable on promoting this alternative perspective and ensures that their points are clearly examined. This bias is relatively minimal however and does not detract from Mann's argument. Mann makes it no secret that he does not subscribe to the traditional interpretation of the Americas and that his work is primarily focused on debunking this myth. With this in mind it is actually quite remarkable that Mann provides as much reflection as he does on those authors who would refute his claims. Ultimately this stylistic quality only serves to strengthen Mann's argument and make his claims all the more feasible.

Mann's motivation for writing 1491 was clearly heavily influenced by new archaeological and anthropological research which has been conducted over the past few decades. Thanks in large part to the increasing application of social histories many historically marginalized parties including Natives now have the opportunity to have their stories told. This trend away from top down approach to history is also present in other disciplines and many curious researchers are returning to the Americas in an attempt to rediscover and reinterpret Native American society. The push from anthropologists and archaeologists is not only influential to Mann's work but essential to it. Much of the information that Mann utilizes in his work is the direct product of this movement and as Mann is really attempting to bring together many of the findings of these scholars 1491 is dependent on the information they gathered.

One a related note it is necessary to discuss the sources which Mann utilizes. Mann in many ways is similar to both Crosby and Diamond in that he utilizes almost exclusively
secondary sources for his argument. Mann acquires many different sources and condenses them into a single coherent argument about the realities of the Americas. Mann differs from both Crosby and Diamond in that many of the sources which he uses are newly researched and published. The implementation of new sources in his argument means that by virtue of synchronizing these various documents Mann is creating a novel and unique interpretation of Native American history. Mann is fully invested in a symbiotic relationship with his documentation as he is dependent on the novel concepts they share, while by weaving these numerous sources together he reveals a more complete image of Native society than otherwise could have been conveyed.

Mann is certainly the most unique of the historians discussed thanks to his focus on exclusively the Americas. Although Mann may reference Eurasia to highly comparisons or contrasts with Indian societies Mann ensures that his specific focus is on the Americas prior to Columbus. That being said despite the differences in content many of his methods and research techniques are highly similar. Stylistically Mann's work is renowned for its ability to bring numerous sources together and synthesize them into one grand narrative, a characteristic of both Crosby and Diamond. All three authors also are unified in their belief that the concept of racial inequality between Europeans and Amerindians is more an artificial construct than a reality. The way in which Mann argues this point however is unique from Diamond and Crosby who both attempt to suggest that Europe was more advanced than the Americas but that this was only the result of natural environmental factors. Mann disagrees with this statement. That is not to say that Mann disregards environmental study in his work, but rather views the land as a cultural artifact, a man made entity which can reveal a great deal about the peoples who shaped it. Mann offers an alternative perspective by asserting that it was not a question of Europeans being more
advanced than Natives but rather differently advanced as Natives had pioneered some social, cultural and intellectual traditions which far exceeding anything in Europe. This emphasis on empowering Amerindians rather than lessening the significance of European exploits is unique of the authors and raises some interesting questions about inherent biases which many historians may hold onto despite efforts to remain neutral.

Thanks in large part to the academic sources upon which his argument is grounded Mann's work is distinctly deserving of categorization as an academic work. The bulk of Mann's sources originate from academic peer reviewed journals and studies and although the views presented in them may be somewhat contentious they are all firmly grounded in academic research. Also as Mann's argument is distinctly academic in nature and focused on countering one of the most commonly held assumptions in academia, 1491 must be considered first and foremost an academic work. Mann, similarly to Diamond and Crosby, does not sever ties to the public sector however and his simple presentation, concise argument and clear explanation of terms and ideas allows 1491 to be understood fairly easily by most audiences. It would not be out of the question to claim that Mann's work could also be considered a public history with the aim of increasing knowledge of Amerindian history.

Academically speaker there is no doubt that Mann aspires to the genres of cultural and social history. Mann utilizes sources of numerous fields including archeology, anthropology and environmental studies to create a multidisciplinary approach to understanding Native American history. His emphasis on highlighting the story of a marginalized group places him firmly within the realm of social progressive history and his emphasis on the peoples of the ancient Americas gives it a cultural edge. This approach is highly effect due to the fact that he is attempting to counter the conception that Natives are a people without history, and hence without culture by
recreating that history. By providing a history of the Native experience Mann also provides a sense of culture to Amerindians. In some ways this ignores much of the culturally heterogeneity that was undoubtedly present within the Americas, however it opens to door for future studies which may serve to further illuminate the lives of those who inhabited the continent before Columbus had ever set foot there.

Of all the works studies it must be concluded that Crosby's research is most adroitly done. Both Mann and Diamond skillfully present their arguments, yet the originality of Crosby's argument in addition to his ability to compose this argument in an intellectual yet clear way set him apart. All sources rely heavily on the research of others and although at times they all make original arguments both Diamond and Mann rely on the arguments which their sources make. Crosby's greatness stems from his ability to take well known sources and interpret them in a way which none who had come before him had. His conclusions on the significance of environmental influences on European expansion were unlike anything else and consequently have gone on to influence generations of historians. For this reason Crosby, more so than any of the other historians discussed, deserves recognition for his historical expertise.

Mann also deserves recognition for his contributions to the study of history. Of all the authors studied it is Mann who's work will most likely hold the longest lasting legacy due primarily to the fact that he comprehensively challenges some of history's most sacred beliefs. Because of the provocative nature of Mann's argument it certainly seems to this author to be the most interesting account. The significance of Mann's work will greatly transcend the current age of history as it is likely that his work will spur on further explorations into reinterpreting Amerindian history, a subject which is ripe for revising. Mann's presentation is stellar and in many ways his clear attempts at presenting both sides of the argument serve to strengthen his
perspective. As such it is likely that Mann's work will remain as significant as it is now for years to come.

Due in large part to the exceptional research on behalf of Crosby and the sheer magnitude of Mann's argument both works undoubtedly deserve a place within the broader “canon” of history. Their claims and arguments although still controversial provide an essential explanation for one of the formative events in the history of the world and these two works in themselves serve as a dynamic counter to some of the more popular interpretations of the hemispheric clash of 1492. Diamond's work although still significant may not be on par with Crosby in Mann due to the fact that he lacks both the originality and credibility of his counterparts. Crosby is responsible for the premise of Diamond's argument and although Diamond does add some interesting new interpretations his lack of significant citation is a major hindrance to his work firmly residing in the realm of historical excellence. It is these flaws in Diamond's work that also make it probably the least valuable to the study of history and a study of European exceptionalism. This is not to say the Diamond's work is by any means of poor quality, but rather that his argument is neither as innovative nor as credible as Mann's or Crosby's.

Three different authors, three different accounts of the same event. The beauty of history lies in the fact that although these three historians drew unique conclusions out of their research and that all of these conclusions are valuable to the overall study of history. The question we must ask is what can we know for sure about the initial contact between Europeans and Native Americans? Several common themes make themselves quite apparent. First and foremost is the fact that the concept of an inherent European superiority is erroneous. Each author may take a different route but they all arrive at the same conclusion of debunking this social myth. It also seems to be safe to conclude that the triumph of European expansion was largely due to the
pandemic diseases which were brought to the Americas. It is likely that the world will never fully understand the toll which disease took on Indian populations as an accurate figure remains elusive. In this same vein all three authors agree that there were likely far greater numbers of Indians in the Americas than originally believed but any definitive figure can be little more than speculation at this point. What is certain however is that Europeans would come to dominate the Americas, supplanting indigenous peoples, plants and animals over the coming centuries. In many ways it is this event that is responsible for the modern world, as goods, ideas and influences originating in both of these continents now flow incessantly around the globe.

Although the authors are able to reach a general consensus that European exceptionalism is a myth they all leave one question disturbingly blank: What was it that motivated Europeans to expand and come to the Americas? The Chinese had the abilities and actually made their way to the Americas first and yet they neglected to pursue a sphere of influence in the region. By and large in fact colonial ventures have been predominantly European in origin. This seems to be one of the great questions of our time. What was it that caused a continent, which in the early 16th century was in no way superior to its contemporaries to collectively embrace the concept of imperial expansion? This question is of the utmost importance and the lack of information on it in these books is a major oversight that must be addressed by the historical community.

Based on thoughtful research, pointed arguments and keen observations Alfred Crosby, Jared Diamond and Charles Mann all stand as titans in modern historical study. Their works have challenged commonly held assumptions and helped broaden understanding of the ancient world. Although it is certain that errors and mistakes reside in their works, future histories shall bring these to light just as they brought the mistakes of their era to light. The significance of their work lies in their ability to interpret the past in innovative ways thus ensuring that the chronicling of history
continues to progress in an intellectual and responsible way preventing the tyranny of a misguided social memory. Through their research and exposition they clearly debunk the myth of European exceptionalism and in many ways allow man to view himself not as an omnipotent force, but rather a single entity actively participating in the highly interconnected web of relationships that comprise planet earth. It is only through embracing the realization that we are not exempt from, but completely invested in this essential connection that humanity can truly embrace its full potential. The study of history, when done in a responsible and intellectual manner provides humanity with a tool through which this objective can be accomplished. By broadening man’s understanding of his past Crosby, Diamond and Mann take him a few more steps down the road to his future. The meeting of the hemispheres in 1492 is one of the paramount events in the entirety of the human experience. Two sets of cultures which had lived in almost complete isolation for thousands of years, and which had developed uniquely and independently would reunite and shape the modern world. The Colombian exchange, the establishment of European colonies throughout the Americas and the establishment of much of the world as we know it today can be traced to the interaction between Europe and the Americas. Many historians have set out to provide an explanation for this event and the ultimate dominance of European culture and society within the Americas. Often times early accounts of this event were focused on establishing that European dominance was a result of some sort of racial superiority. Recently however, many scholars have thought to provide alternative and scientifically researched answers to this question. As discussed earlier, new archaeological research and evidence suggest that more so than any other factor it was the environment that accounted for the eventual European triumph. Researchers such as Alfred Crosby and Jared Diamond believe that the geographical and climatic features of Eurasia early European conquerors found themselves possessing diseases and technologies far surpassing their American counterparts.

This is not to suggest by any means that Europeans were inherently superior to the Indians. Authors such as Charles Mann have taken this argument one step further and posited that not only
should we temper our view of European exceptionalism but we should also revisit the Americas and recognize the fact that it is likely that Native American societies were far more populous and advanced that has been originally thought. Bernal Díaz, a conquistador fighting alongside Hernan Cortez claimed that on approaching a river in Southern Mexico, "The river, the river banks and the mangrove thickets were swarming with Indians... In addition to this there were assembled in town more than twelve thousand warriors." New research and access to sources provide an opportunity to rethink the past and the way it is studied by providing new credible explanations for one of the most significant questions in human history, "how did Europeans come to dominate to the Americas?" Evidence clearly indicates that Europeans, although not necessarily superior in their overall societal development, possessed two key advantages which they carried over the Atlantic, disease and technology. Disease decimated Indian populations, killing an estimated (MANN) percent of Natives on the continent. After being ravaged by the diseases of their colonizers Natives were then confronted by firearms, steel weapons and a variety of other technologies which they had never before encountered. Their ignorance to these technologies was so defined that Cortez actually led one group of Natives he encountered to believe that cannons and horses could make war on the Indians independently of human soldiers. Although the conflict between Europeans and Indians waged for centuries and some would argue continues today, Europeans possessed a decisive advantage and consequently would dominate the Americas coming to make the majority of the population in nearly all nations in the Americas.

Although a plethora of work has been dedicated to the "how" Europeans came to dominate, little has been dedicated to the "why". Why was it that Europeans so voraciously dedicated themselves to expanding their sphere of influence over the new world. Evidence suggests that early Chinese explorers had arrived in the Americas before Columbus, but saw no reason to establish any

33 Díaz The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 61-62.
sort of lasting presence in the region. Vikings also may have visited Greenland and even some of the Maritime regions of North America, yet they also never sought to expand into the Americas. Why was it, then, that in the aftermath of the meeting of these hemispheres Europeans sought not only to return to the Americas but also to impress their will over them and their peoples? Europeans pursued this complete imperialism with a vengeance, pouring resources into expeditions and companies that often times resulted in catastrophic failure. Men were willing to leave their entire lives behind to cross an ocean and search for a future in a continent which two decades earlier was nonexistent. What was it that made this commitment to expansion a reality? This is a major gap in the chronicling of contact and one which is essential to fill in order to fully understand the complex societal systems which allowed for both the attempted expansion of European influence and its eventual success.

One of the central themes at the core of European expansion was the idea of land itself. Since the dawn of time mankind has been inexorably entwined with land. It has been a source of life and death. A realm in which creation and destruction exist in a forced harmony. Humanity has relied on the land for sustenance, for shelter, for tools and resources, and as we have developed so too has our understanding and usage of the land. The land has been altered, shifted, and moved in some cases irreversibly to fit man's interest and even now questions abound over the correct way for humanity to engage in this reciprocal relationship with our home. Although attempts to work with land are often misguided or naive they are always also a necessity. Despite claiming to have conquered the wilderness, man is and will always be tied to his environment, tied to the land, and consequently man's understanding of land will continue to be a dynamic entity.

Land is not just a source of survival, it is a source of pride. The American dream is based on home ownership, a concept which in itself requires possession of land. And beyond its intrinsic values it is clear that land has come to symbolize so much more. Land is power, land is wealth, in many ways land is a measure of success. Early criteria for voting within the United States was
dependent on an individual’s status as a land owner. The connection between land ownership and power is by no means a new phenomenon, quite the opposite, it is actually one of the oldest societal constructs in Western Civilization finding precedent in some of the world’s most ancient complex societies. Consequently, interpretations of land and its significance can be highly influence in a larger social framework and possession of land holds far grander implications than merely the material goods which land provides. In any situation where dispossession of land is discussed it is essential that some sort of exploration of perceptions of the land itself is also included. The dispossession of the Americas by European nations is not an exception and it seems as though there is a clear relationship between European ideals of land ownership and the dispossession of land in the early 16th century and beyond.

It seems necessary then to explore differences of perspectives between Europeans and Native American’s in regards to land. In order to accomplish this, the land perceptions of the Spanish, who were in large part accountable for the dispossession of nearly all of Central and South America, will be looked at and compared to perceptions of the Aztecs, one of the preeminent Amerindian societies at the time of contact. These societies possess several glaring differences as well as some interesting similarities in their understanding of their relationship to the land. These differences seem to in fact suggest that Spanish perceptions of land led to the adoption of social systems which not only enabled, but supported a massive investment into colonization and provided both the resources and the manpower to see the objective of expansion realized.

Before these unique societies are explored they must be briefly defined. In her study, Aztecs: An Interpretation, Inga Clendinnen identifies the fact that the word “Aztec” has come to mean a number of things, ranging from the dominant group of the Nahuatl speaking empire which crossed Mexico to the empire as a whole.34 For the sake of this work the terms Mexica will refer to the people

specifically of Tenochtitlan who dominated the empire while Aztec or Nahuatl will be used to reference the people of the broader empire.

To truly obtain a Spanish interpretation of man's relationship with land it is necessary to briefly explore those historical factors which would so potently influence its development and eventual manifestation. One of the central influences in Spanish expansion would undoubtedly be the influence of Catholicism. Spain's Catholic inclination had been reinforced at the dawn of the 16th century thanks to the Reconquista and the subsequent establishment of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, more commonly known as the Spanish Inquisition. The Reconquista had lasted the better part of eight centuries and through those years an unyielding intolerance towards religions other than Catholicism had been firmly entrenched throughout Spanish society. The Inquisition sought to uphold this precedent and maintain the dominance of the Catholic faith throughout Spanish lands.  

The significance of Catholicism was by no means lessened across the ocean and the objective of Christianizing Indians was a major focus of the Conquistadors. Cortez frequently referenced the fact that everything which he and his men did was for the benefit of "God and King." In fact in one situation Cortez actually spared a mutineer's life because the man happened to be a priest. In this context Catholicism is not only a motivating factor behind Spanish conquest of New Spain, but one of the most important influences. Surely within this context it must be understood that religious ideals would impact their understanding of man's relationship with land.

The Catholic Bible is rife with references and ideas in regards to man's relationship with land and provides an excellent framework through which this relationship can be understood. Perhaps the clearest and most significant difference which can be demarcated between the Spanish Catholics and their Nahuatl counterparts is their conceptualization of land as an entity. Catholicism privileges man

35 Jose Manuel Soria, "Columbus' Spain" OAH Magazine of History v5.4 (1991) 18-19 retrieved 4/18/12
37 Ibid 108-109
as he is made in God's image.\textsuperscript{38} This sense of human exceptionalism is further emphasized by the fact that the Lord decrees that mankind shall "subdue" the earth.\textsuperscript{39} This sets a biblical precedent in which humanity and land are not engaged in an equal relationship. In fact land is instantly objectified as something which is to be possessed and exploited by mankind. Subsequently land does not necessarily bear an intrinsic value but is instead assigned value by mankind. Often times this value is merely a representative of the ways in which land can be utilized to produce products which man values. Essentially this initial passage of the Old Testament serves to create a unilateral relationship in which land has been subserviently commodified to fit the needs of human society.

Trends of dominance over the land are further revealed throughout the New Testament. Perhaps the most famous of these references lies in Jesus walking on water.\textsuperscript{40} Although the connection may not at first seem obvious it becomes apparent that Jesus reveals his true nature through his ability to control and utilize the landscape and environment to his advantage. As water is also a central need for man’s survival Jesus’ ability to control the resource is of undoubted significance. Particularly important is that in the aftermath of the event those with him claim, "Truly you are the Son of God."\textsuperscript{41} It is interesting that this extraordinary event which is tied directly to Jesus’ ability to manipulate his landscape is a formative moment in the establishment of Jesus’ divinity.

The biblical perception of land as an objectified entity meant for exploitation by man also creates a system which by necessity involves conflict. If land is important as a commodity then there must be means of exchanging and obtaining this commodity amongst communities. The Bible also covers this concept by outlining courses through which land might pass amongst humanity. Although inheritance and trade are certainly acceptable means of passing land the Bible also clearly vindicates the usage of violence, particularly against those who are not chosen by God. The book of Joshua is essentially an account of Joshua’s military campaigns of conquest throughout Canaan and

\textsuperscript{38} Genesis 1.27  
\textsuperscript{39} Genesis 1.27  
\textsuperscript{40} Matthew 14.22-23  
\textsuperscript{41} Matthew 14.23
his consequent distribution of the land. Important, for instance, is that fact that God is the motivating force behind the destruction of the peoples currently inhabiting Canaan and the redistribution of this land to the twelve tribes.\textsuperscript{42} The story of Joshua establishes two important practices in land dispossession from a Catholic perspective. Firstly Joshua suggests that violence is an acceptable means of claiming land from others. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, Joshua clearly implies that land should only be possessed by those who follow the word of God. This same sentiment would lead to the vindication of Spanish land seizures as the Spanish believed that they were taking the land both in the name of God and secondly from a people who, due to their heathenish qualities, required Spanish intervention to save them.

Interpretations of Nahuatl religious beliefs are necessarily far less defined and more the result of interpretive exercise than concrete knowledge. This is due simply to the dearth of accurate and unbiased accounts of religious practices, as the majority of what was available was destroyed by Spanish Conquistadors. Additionally, the complex interplay of various tribal belief systems within the Aztec empire makes it nearly impossible to establish some sort of concrete religious tradition, as each tribe contributed its own subtleties to the religious tradition as a whole. However, there are some general truths that can be established and may help with a basic understanding of Nahua religious perspectives on land. For instance, it is known that the Nahua were engaged in a highly polytheistic religion.\textsuperscript{43} In this religious tradition various gods are accountable for a particular phenomenon and consequently draw their significance from what exactly it is that they represent. For example the god Tlaloc was known as “the provider” and consequently rain was attributed to him.\textsuperscript{44} Chicome coatl, a Nahua goddess who represented sustenance and more significantly maize can be seen to embody a completely different function than Tlaloc.\textsuperscript{45} Nahua polytheism thus led to a

\textsuperscript{42} Joshua 1.2-1.5  
\textsuperscript{43} Bernardino Saguan \textit{Florentine Codex} trans by Arthur Anderson (Sante Fe, The School of American Research 1979) v.1 The Gods  
\textsuperscript{44} Saguan \textit{Florentine Codex} V.1 “The Gods” 13  
\textsuperscript{45} Saguan \textit{Florentine Codex} V.1 “The Gods”. 13
system in which gods were directly accountable for particular functions of landscape and environment. This adds a level of sanctity to land and stresses a degree of intrinsic value in land. By placing value on the land, the Nahua placed a degree of importance on land beyond merely what it could yield. This added value may actually have served to tie the Nahua more closely to the land and more importantly to particular lands.

The relationship between Tlaloc, who provides rain, and Chicome coatl, who represents a product of that rain, also serves to expose another quality of Nahua life, that of reciprocity and interconnectedness. Concepts of reciprocity dominated both Nahua social and spiritual beliefs as reciprocity was expected between both groups of people as well as between people and gods. In fact the purpose of human sacrifice was to actively engage in this practice of reciprocity with the gods. The Mexica believed that all people, regardless of who they were, bore a debt to the various deities of the earth as they relied on them for sustenance. Sacrifice was in many ways an attempt to reciprocate that relationship by providing the deities with sustenance in the form of bodies. In this regard land, is not merely objectified or commodified but rather an active participant in the series of relationships that make up and define the world. Consequently, the idea of possession of land would have been completely incompatible with Mexica religious thought.

It is clear that religion was of the utmost importance to both the Nahuatl and Spanish customs and traditions. In both of these societies priests were of the highest importance and frequently saw special privileges extended to them. The significance of religion in these societies meant that inevitably religious ideals would come to become closely aligned with social ideas. Consequently both of these cultures saw land as important but for very different reasons. To the Aztecs the land was something to be revered and worshiped because of its ties to the divine. Europeans on the other hand saw land solely as something to exploit for personal gain. Eventually

46 Clendinnen Aztec: An Interpretation 74-75.
these religious understandings of land would extend to also impact the social structures for
maintaining land.

Spanish land tenure was by no means an independent creation, but rather the product of
countless developments from preceding societies. No society impacted the Spanish as much as the
Romans who dominated the Mediterranean for nearly a millennium. The Romans are regularly credited
with providing the ideological foundation for much of Europe and the Western World. The Romans
were responsible for the establishment of one of the most stringent social systems in history. This
system divided Romans into two distinct social classes, the Patricians and the Plebeians. Although this
distinction was based off of a variety of characteristics one of the dominant differences between
these classes was that Patricians were denoted by their status as land owners.47 One of the most
common misconceptions about Plebeians is that they were denoted almost exclusively by their
economic standing. In fact many Plebeians were actually quite wealthy, but were still a member of
the lower class.48 The basis for this division most likely stems from the earliest days of the Roman
Republic as those who were the senators under the Monarchy most likely retained their positions
and consequently imported this social system into the Republic.49 This distinction was so ingrained
in the early Republic that the Twelve Tables, one of the oldest legal codes established in the Western
World, stated that, "Those who belong to the Senatorial Order and are styled Fathers, shall not
contract marriage with plebeians."50 The fact that this social construct was significant enough to
warrant legislation maintaining social immobility is remarkable in of itself. Although over time
Plebeians would obtain much of the legal protection the Patricians enjoyed the social implications of
these class distinctions would in many ways flourish throughout the entirety of Ancient Rome and
beyond, forming the foundation of numerous later social structures. These later societies would

47 http://www.roman-republic.net
48 http://www.roman-republic.net
49 http://www.roman-republic.net
50 Twelve tables of Roman Law retrieved from http://www.constitution.org/spis/sps01_1.htm
inherit similar associations of land and power and consequently perpetuate and modify these structures over the following centuries.

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century led to the rise of new, but equally stringent social structures throughout Europe. The Feudal system which would come to dominate Western Europe provides perhaps the best association of land with power. The fall of the Roman Empire left Western Europe completely without any form of centralized political authority. The lack of central authority meant that local lords had increased authority over their lands and consequently sought to consolidate their power to protect their lands from competing lords. This social system was completely dependent on the commodification of land as it was the distribution of land from which Feudal Lords gained their power. Essentially the Feudal system revolved around an exchange of land rights in return for fealty. A lord would provide a lesser lord with a plot of land in return for the lesser lord's allegiance in times of conflict. This lesser lord would then provide a plot of land to lesser nobles on the same conditions. The feudal system further ingrained the concept of a landed aristocracy into orthodox Western thinking. In feudalism there was no distinction between wealth and power and the ownership of land. Land provided a clear and undeniable means of social stratification and because little to no centralized government existed at the time, trade sharply diminished leaving many individuals to fend for themselves. In this sense, land provided power because it literally had the means to provide life for many who otherwise would not have been able to obtain the goods necessary to survive. Although the rise of a merchant class would allow for the procurement of wealth without possession of land, these individuals were stigmatized by the landed aristocracy. This trend suggests class would be determined now not only through wealth, but also implicitly by land possession. The Feudal system reinforced the association of power and land

51 Britannica online
52 Britannica online
ownership and, in Spain, would provide the framework for the ultimate tool of land distribution amongst Spaniards in New Spain, the *encomienda*.

Spanish perspectives of land tenure would differ from those other European nations that would cross the Atlantic and take up residence in the Americas. Based on systems such as feudalism the Spaniards established the *encomienda* as a means to allow for the colonization of New Spain. The *encomienda* was unique from other European methods of land tenure in the Americas in that it was not actually a land grant but a labor grant. This would be a significant distinction from the feudal system, as it did not grant title to land. In a way, the Encomienda was the manifestation of the feudal system in a society which by the 16th century had become highly centralized behind the crown. In this context the *Encomendero* gained control of the labor of a certain amount of Indians based on the terms outlined in the *encomienda*. This allowed *encomenderos* to assign the Indians working their *encomienda* to tasks ranging from mining operations to agricultural pursuits. As the *encomienda* was utilized throughout New Spain its function matured and developed as a result of practicality. In addition to being a labor grant the *encomienda* would also develop to entitle the *encomendero* to tribute from those people over whom he had control.

Perhaps the most important quality of the *encomienda* was the political influence which it gave to the *encomenderos*. It is in this regard where we see the influence of previous social structures present in the *encomienda*. Encomiendas were not overseen by the Spanish Crown but rather by local governors or viceroys and consequently receiving one was significant not only for the materialistic benefit it entailed but also the social status which came with being an *encomendero*. This meant that a new social hierarchy was being born in New Spain and the influence which these *encomenderos* held over their fellow Spaniards was by no means insignificant. Bernal Castillo relates

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54 Lockhart, James *Spanish Peru* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press 1994) 11.
55 Lockhart *Spanish Peru* 11.
57 Lockhart *Spanish Peru* 11.
a story of how captains for an expedition to New Spain were chosen because they were
*encomenderos*. Castillo’s account clearly embodies the growing social significance of the
*encomienda* in New Spain and the social status it represented. Politics in New Spain were a highly
controversial issue and *encomenderos* sought to establish themselves as the premier figures of New
Spain. Cortez’s clash with Diego Valasquez and his emissary Panfilio Narvaez was in many ways a
clash over power in New Spain.

The importance of the *encomienda* to the society of New Spain created a very rigid criteria
for their dispersal and *encomenderos* were forced to abide by strict guidelines to maintain possession
of the *encomienda*. Several considerations were put into place when considering potential
*encomenderos*. Among these were the social background of the individual in question, the
individual’s military service in the conquest of New Spain and finally whether or not the individual
bore any connections to governors or members of the court. These criteria helped ensure that
encomiendas staying in the hands of those who deserved to hold political and social significance and
helped establish a hierarchical structure in New Spain that would mirror that of Spain itself. To
ensure that *encomenderos* remained loyal to the best interest of the crown, they needed to meet
certain requirements. The *encomendero* “was obliged to keep a horse and arms for defense against
Indians or rebels, to reside in the city in whose jurisdiction his grant fell and, to maintain a house
where he had to receive and feed guests when the need arose during military emergencies.” These
requirements ensured that the *encomenderos* remained loyal to the Spanish crown as the *encomienda*
did not provide the grounds for land possession but rather a sort of stewardship that could be
revoked should the *encomendero* not uphold the terms of the agreement.

The emphasis on stewardship of land rather than possession suggests that the allure of the
*encomienda* was not actually founded on land, but rather the social status that came with it.

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58 Diaz *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* 17.
59 Ibid 255.
60 Lockhart *Spanish Peru* 18.
61 Lockhart *Spanish Peru* 22.
Interestingly, these two characteristics of the *encomienda*, labor and social status, find precedent in earlier systems of land tenure throughout Europe as mentioned earlier. Land tenure had developed to the point where land was no longer as significant as the status and power it represented and what it could provide in a materialistic and societal sense.

The *encomienda* would become the central vehicle for the establishment of New Spain in the Americas. It pulled conquistadors from Spain and provided the manpower that would eventually allow for the eventual expansion of Spanish interest in the New world. The allure of the *encomienda* resided in the potential it held for social mobility. The majority of individuals who left Spain behind were younger brothers and lesser nobles who had little hope of obtaining distinction in Spain, but who were of adequate stock to be considered for *encomiendas* should they prove themselves worthy. The opportunity for power and social advancement created a system which encouraged young men of fighting age to come to Cuba and Mexico in hopes of earning an *encomienda* and consequently establishing themselves as a member of a new aristocracy in New Spain. Bernal Diaz is a perfect representative of the influence which the potential of an *encomienda* could exert over young Spaniards. Diaz was not of the highest birth but identified himself as a kinsman of Diego Velasquez who had just conquered Cuba. Diaz came to Cuba seeking an *encomienda* but after three years he and “other Spaniards of Cuba who had no Indians assigned to them,”62 determined that they would need to go to mainland Mexico to obtain them. Diaz would take part in numerous *entradas* (entrances), which were colonizing ventures throughout New Spain. Eventually, Diaz was recognized for his work and received a sizable *encomienda* of his own.63 Diaz is not an enigma but rather a representative of many of the young men who came to the New World in an attempt to establish themselves and in the process formed the foundation for the subsequent domination of the Americas by Europeans.

The Nahua social system was in many ways similar to the Spanish in that it too was comprised of a rigid social hierarchy topped by an essentially static nobility. The key distinction in the basis of this nobility was in many ways birth as Mexica or as a member of one of the other tribes that made up the Nahua Empire. By default Mexica were already the elite of the Nahua empire, a fact which will become significant in a discussion on the ease with which the encomienda system took hold. That is not to say that all Mexica were equal, in fact there was likely as much distinction between Mexica commoners and nobles as there would have been amongst the Spanish. Generally speaking priests came from the noble classes while tradesmen more frequently came from the common class with warriors coming from both. As is the case with the Spanish, there was also little room for social mobility. Rulers were chosen from the ranks of the current lords, and although noble houses had a degree of freedom they were all subservient to their lords. The Mexica maintained this rigid social order through the collection of tribute from their various subservient tribes. This was overseen by a bureaucracy of collectors who ensured that each tribe met the quotas set for them. The collection of tribute served both a practical and symbolic necessity. Tribute provided the empire with the raw materials necessary to survive and thrive but also inadvertently implied a superiority on behalf of the Mexica which helped ensure their stability as the dominant peoples of a diverse empire.

The majority of the Nahua were tied together by kinship groups. These kinship groups were known as calpulli, a term which seems to denote both the group itself and the particular area in which it was located. These groups served as a means of ensuring social cohesion amongst the different segments of the Nahua social hierarchy by establishing a sense of communalism. Calpulli

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64 Clendinnen Aztecs: An Interpretation 3.
65 Ibid pg. 38
66 Sahagun Florentine Codex v 8 “Kings and Lords” 61
67 Sahagun Florentine Codex v.8 “Kings and Lords” 44
68 Clendinnen Aztecs: An Interpretation 24-25.
tied all members of the Aztec Empire together through kinship bonds and in many ways generated a vested interest in a highly rigid social system. Despite this, one major opportunity for distinction and advancement on a social scale manifested itself within the Warrior Class.\textsuperscript{70} The opportunity for social mobility was somewhat remarkable in that it was one of the few venues for advancement in \textit{Nahua} society that transcended birth. As mentioned earlier, individuals of noble and common birth alike were eligible to distinguish themselves as warriors. Warriors who distinguished themselves on the field of battle received many incentives including material goods, a desirable female for marriage, and, most importantly, prestige, honor and fame.\textsuperscript{71}

Although little is known about \textit{Nahua} land tenure in general one point of general agreement is that it was the king and wealthy nobles who controlled the majority of the land.\textsuperscript{72} It is worth remembering however, that their concept of control would not have reflected the European ideal of possession. These individuals would not have perceived themselves as owners of the land. The remaining land available for use by common classes was broken down in a particular way. Perceptions of land tenure amongst the commoners once again reflected the kinship ideals of the Aztec empire. Land was not divided into individual plots but rather stewarded communally with members of the various \textit{calpulli} having rights to a particular tract of land.\textsuperscript{73} The term \textit{calpulli} as referenced before was used to refer to a region which a particular group established themselves on.\textsuperscript{74} These lands were designated for cultivation and adjoining \textit{calpulli} would be tied together and established as agricultural villages throughout Mexico. In addition to the \textit{calpulli} other lands were designated as \textit{altepetlalli}. These \textit{altepetlalli} were also communally owned but were to be utilized for hunting rather than cultivation.\textsuperscript{75} The significance of kinship groups with \textit{Nahua} culture means that

\textsuperscript{70} Clendinnen \textit{Aztecs an Interpretation} 40.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid pg. 113
\textsuperscript{72} Ramon Fernandez “Land Tenure in Mexico” \textit{Journal of Farm Economics} v.25.1 (1943) 219: retrieved April 10, 2012
\textsuperscript{73} Fernandez “Land Tenure in Mexico” 219
\textsuperscript{74} Foreman “Changing Land Tenures in Mexico” 65
\textsuperscript{75} Fernandez “Land Tenure in Mexico” 219
it is very likely that the land on which a particular calpulli resided bore an intrinsic value because of its importance to that particular group. This identification with a particular plot of land would make the Nahua far more apt to remain entrenched in a particular area thus maintaining social stratification. This complex system of land ownership may have in many ways contributed to the success and implementation of the encomienda as the calpulli and altepetlali bore many similarities to that system.

In both the encomienda and nahua society Americans were tied distinctly to land which they did not possess and were expected to pay tribute to a ruling class. Whether by intent or sheer luck the Spanish conquistadors were able to so effectively implement the encomienda system not because of superior strength but rather because it was in many ways an extension of a land tenure system which was already in existence throughout Mexico. Similarities in the land tenure system established by the Spanish and already in place throughout the Aztec Empire meant that the transition would have maintained many social realities for the vast majority of Indians who would be tied to the encomienda. Surely social differences would have arisen, but Don Francisco de Onate, a Tlaxcalan who had helped Cortez defeat the Aztecs, captures the sentiments of many Indians in a letter to Charles V. Don Francisco felt that he was still being treated as a second class citizen even under this newly established social system.76

It was the differing perspectives of land in these two societies which allowed both of their social systems to flourish. The Nahua, by necessity of their religious and social beliefs, saw themselves not as owners of the land, but rather as communal stewards, engaged in a reciprocal relationship between land and man. This perspective would inadvertently tie them distinctly to the land and prevent many of the lower classes from challenging what they saw as a natural communal existence with land. The rigidity of their social structure and the lack of a tangible perception of land possession ensured that they never consciously connected land possession with power, and if

76 Letter from Don Francisco de Onate to Charles V
they did come to that conclusion by the end of their empire, the concept of communal stewardship over land would have impeded most attempts to claim land as an individual. Spaniards, on the other hand, had been taught both religiously and socially that land was an entity that humanity was meant to control and exploit for his own gain. Consequently, ownership and possession of land was not only an option, but advisable in most situations. This provides an ideological framework through which land could and should be possessed and although the *encomenderos* were technically stewards of the land the associations of power, wealth and land were quite apparent in the *encomienda* system. *Encomenderos* thus were ideally situated to inherit a possession of superiority in the Americas as they had been both socially and ideologically conditioned to dominate land and those who resided on it. In this sense, perceptions of land created an ideological framework to provide both a motivation and a means for the Spanish conquistadors to establish themselves in the New World, thus setting a precedent which has defined the modern age.
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