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The Ethnography of the Old World Mind

Indians and Europe

Peter Mason

Right from the first contacts between Europe and the New World, the inhabitants of America were perceived in terms of a dual image. Columbus' initial view of the new continent as akin to Paradise soon degenerated in the course of his voyages, and later debates in the 16th century, such as the famous dispute between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda in Valladolid in 1550-1551, centred on the question of whether the Amerindians were noble savages or primitive barbarians. The main effect of contact on these beliefs

was to produce a more differentiated picture. Instead of debates about the virtues or vices of Indians and Americans in general, we find attempts to discriminate between "good" and "bad" Amerindians, which are often simply a sort of shorthand for "submissive to European domination" and "resistant to European domination" respectively.

Discussion in terms of stereotypes was by no means wiped out by the experiences of day to day contact. In the Enlightenment "the Indian" served as a rhetorical figure within European discourse to point up the contrasts between the degradations of European "civilisation" and the merits of life in the New World. Both the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement used the constructed image of the Indian as a means of criticizing the world of Europe from within a European discourse. Particularly in the 19th century, the Romantic image gained the upper hand, with the popularity of novels like "The Last of the Mohicans." When Amerindians were brought to Europe, they were scrutinized by European audiences to see whether they matched up to expectations or not. From the 16th to the 19th century, therefore, Europe had a variety of pre-fabricated images of the American Indian, and despite the possibility of adjustments to these images in the light of actual experience, these images display a remarkable tenacity which has not lost its hold on us today.

With 1992 in view, perhaps the time has come for drawing up a balance sheet of the merits and weaknesses of the European vision of America. The shifts in emphasis described above have their own periodisation; they vary from country to country; and they vary depending whether the object of focus is North America, South America, or the allegorical figure of "America" as an organic whole.

"Who else but European scholars should be qualified to assess the importance of and finally make available the many important pieces of information on North American Indians/Native Americans hidden from general view in European repositories? Who if not the Europeans would be able to read and recognize the importance of records written in odd and exotic languages (which for the majority of North American Indianists still includes everything that is not just English)." Thus does the editor of a new collection of essays, Christian Feest,¹ announce the scope of the collection and its

1 Christian F. Feest (ed.), *Indians and Europe. An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays*. Aachen: Ed. Herodot, Rader-Verl., 1987. 643 pp., illus. (Forum, 11) Price: DM 128.-