

CHAPTER

3

FROM THE CONQUEST TO THE
COLONIZATION OF THE LIFE- WORLD

Their ultimate reason for destroying such an infinite number of different souls has been only to obtain gold, to stuff their coffers with wealth in a short period of time, and to attain a high status out of proportion to their persons. All this results from their insatiable greed and ambition. And so I must importune Your Majesty not to allow these tyrants to realize what they have invented, pursued, and inflicted and what they call conquest.

—Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevissima relación de la Destrucción de la India*, Introduction

The third figure, *conquest*, involves neither an aesthetic nor a quasi-scientific relationship between person and nature as in the *discovery* of new worlds. Rather, this new practical, political, and military figure concerns person-to-person relationships. Instead of recognizing or inspecting new territories, drawing maps,

or charting climates, topographies, flora and fauna, one dominates Indian persons and nations. *Conquest (conquista)* existed as a juridical-military term in Spain since the beginning of the reconquest in 718, according to the thirteenth-century *Partidas*. In 1479 the Catholic kings used the term by announcing that "we are sending certain of our troops for the *conquest* of the Grand Canary Island, against the Canarian infidels, the enemies of our holy Catholic faith."¹

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE "I CONQUER"

After the geographical recognition of a territory, one proceeded to control the bodies of the inhabitants, since they needed to be *pacified*, as it was customary to say in that epoch. In the Spanish world and later in the European world in general, it fell to the warrior to establish domination over others. The conquistador was the first modern, active, practical human being to impose his violent individuality on the Other. Vasco Núñez de Balboa was the first conquistador-colonizer in *tierra firma* (present-day Panama) and was subsequently assassinated in 1519² by Pedrarias, a Castillian noble of the second degree. But Hernán Cortés was the first who could really claim the name and who epitomized modern *subjectivity*. No conquest had taken place in the Caribbean, from Santo Domingo to Cuba, since no urban culture existed in those regions, but only scattered indigenous tribes and ethnic groups. The slaughter and seizure of small villages could not compare with subjugation of the Mexican empire.

Hernán Cortés, a poor Estremenian noble³ born in Medellín in 1485 (the same year as Luther⁴), left home at fourteen to study letters in Salamanca. Later, Cortés, "tired of studying and lacking in money,"⁵ decided not to leave for Naples but instead departed for the Indies. He arrived in 1504, one year after Bartolomé de las Casas and the same year in which the first African slaves were delivered on Hispanola. He spent five or six years in Santo Domingo as a plantation owner (*encomendero*), exploiting Indians on his farms.⁶ Accompanying Diego Velázquez on the conquest of Cuba, Cortés "with the aid of his Indian servants seized a great amount of gold and became rich in a short time."⁷

After several more adventures, Cortés was finally appointed

captain in charge of the *conquest* of Yucatán, which had been discovered in 1517. From the coast, two previous expeditions had observed "buildings of stone invisible from the islands and people magnificently dressed."⁸ Prior to this, the Spaniards had only observed nude Caribbean Indians lacking any weaving technology and more or less nomadic village cultures of food gatherers and fishermen dispersed from Terranova to Patagonia. Because of the Spaniards' focus on exploring the Pacific, it took them twenty-five years to notice the Mayan and Aztec cultures.

The Same violently reduces the Other to itself through the violent process of conquest. The Other, in his or her distinction,⁹ is denied as Other and is obliged, subsumed, alienated, and incorporated into the dominating totality like a thing or an instrument. This oppressed Other ends up either being interned (*encomendado*)¹⁰ on a plantation or hired as salaried labor on estates (*haciendas*) or, if an African slave, regimented into factories turning out sugar or other tropical products. Likewise, the conquistador constitutes and extends his own subjectivity through his praxis. Cortés "was mayor that year [1518] and felt happy and proud since he knew how to treat each person according to his own inclination."¹¹ Once Velázquez appointed him general captain of the conquest in recently discovered territories, Cortés immediately invested all his accumulated riches in the undertaking. Regarding Cortés's subjectivity, Torquemada comments:

He began *to live as if he were* a captain; he arranged his house with a major-domo, valet, chief waiter, and other officials—all people of honor.¹²

The poor Estremenian noble has become *general captain*, and he knows it. His modern *ego* begins to constitute itself. He readies 11 ships, 508 soldiers, 16 horses, and 10 pieces of artillery for the enterprise of conquest. He envisions himself as Christendom's new Constantine:

During this journey, Cortés carried a banner of black taffeta with a colored cross, and blue and white flames scattered throughout. He inscribed on the border of the banner: *We follow the cross and in this sign we shall conquer*.¹³

Cortés was astute at firing up his troops. In the elegant speeches he delivered before, during, and after battles, he spoke sincerely. Thus he created a profound *consensus* among his soldiers, who "with the fervor of his words were all the more incited and desirous of winning victory," comments Torquemada.¹⁴ Departing Cuba February 18, 1519, he sailed the Yucatán coast and reached the eastern coasts of the Aztec empire (San Juan de Ulúa). There, according to Torquemada, he received reports about the Aztecs and their emperor Moctezuma. Moctezuma's spies had already informed him of the first two Spanish exploratory expeditions:

All of us who were there saw gods arriving on the coast in great houses of water (which they call ships)... Motecuhzuma *remained alone, pensive, and quite suspicious of this great novelty in his kingdom.... and he called to mind his prophet's predictions....* He began to believe that it was Quetzalcohuatl whom they once adored as a god... and who long ago had left for the far east.¹⁵

Moctezuma's ambassador, speaking to Cortés before he disembarked, expresses just this belief:

They responded that they were Mexicans, who came from Mexico to seek the Lord and King Quetzalcohuatl who they knew was there.¹⁶

Cortés becomes aware for the first time that these people considered him a god and he begins to ponder his options.

What are they trying to say when they say that he is their King and God, and that they wish to see him? *Hernán Cortés heard this, and with all his people he thought carefully about the situation.*¹⁷

The emissaries greeted Cortés as God and lord and "then prostrated themselves on the ground and kissed it":

Our God and our Lord, you are welcome since for a long time we your servants and vassals have awaited you.¹⁸

Immediately "they put on his head a gold piece shaped in the manner of an armet and embedded with valuable stones." The first day the envoys were well treated. But on the second day, the Spaniards

decided "to scare those messengers... by discharging their artillery and challenging them to fight." The legates, who did not hold the office of warriors in their highly institutionalized empire, remained terrified and refused to fight. They were tagged as *effeminate* and violently dispatched with the orders:

That they go to Mexico to make it known that the Spaniards were coming to conquer (*conquistar*) the Mexicans, and at their hands all would die.¹⁹

Thus the two *worlds* met. The one, modern, composed of *free* subjects in a commonly decided accord; the other, the greatest empire of the new world, completely limited by its traditions, divinatory laws, rites, ceremonies, and its gods. The Mexicans repeatedly wondered:

Who are these people, where do they come from, and why must they conquer us—we who hold power and inspire fear in all these kingdoms?... Motecuhzuma listened carefully to what these ambassadors said, the color of his face turned pale, and he manifested great sadness and dismay.²⁰

The struggle was never equal:

Cortés overlooked nothing when it came to how it might be possible to augment his own status. He ordered his armies to form in battle array, to fire their arquebuses, and to engage in cavalry skirmishes... but the thunder of the artillery was most impressive, since it was utterly new to these people.²¹

Such pyrotechnic theatricalization aroused awe among the religious-symbol-oriented Indians and disturbed them:

Although warriors, they were not prepared to defend against invasions and maritime wars since they never anticipated that strange peoples would cross the sea, which they did not believe was navigable.²²

Thus the Aztecs established *for the first time* a relationship with their Other, the outsider, the absolute stranger, coming forth like the sun from the infinite ocean of the East. The Aztec new age would commence with this relationship with an absolute stranger who was coming to conquer, subjugate, and kill. In this violent relationship

the conqueror was pitted against the conquered, advanced military technology against an underdeveloped one. At this beginning of modernity, the European ego experienced a quasi-divine superiority over the primitive, rustic, inferior Other. The modern ego, covetous of wealth, power, and glory, reacted predictably when the emperor's ambassadors presented magnificent gifts of gold, precious stones, and other riches:

Those who saw the presents were astonished to see such great wealth, and they wished to be presented to someone greater than this person or someone like him. Gold tends to enliven the heart and animate the soul.²³

Upon reaching the first great city, Cempoalla:

They entered and saw so many vibrant, happy people, whose houses were made of either adobe or lime and stone. The streets were filled with people who had come out to see them. They felt justified in calling this land New Spain.... The city was named Cempoalla, the greatest town.²⁴

Cortés behaved like the Christians in the reconquest and the Catholic kings in the victory of Granada. He formed pacts with some, divided others, and slowly went about routing the enemy. In violent battles a mere handful of Cortés's soldiers demonstrated the techniques of warfare acquired through more than seven centuries of struggle against the Muslims in Iberia. They deployed firearms, powder cannons, bestial dogs trained to kill, and horses seemingly inspired by demons. They utilized duplicities, hypocrisies, lies, and political Machiavellianism with such efficacy that they disconcerted the Mexicans. The Mexicans, themselves experts in the domination of hundreds of villages, appeared ingenuous before modern humanity:

The news that such strange people had arrived spread throughout the land... not because the Mexicans feared the loss of their lands but because they understood *that the world was ended*.²⁵

Truly, a world was ending.²⁶ For that reason, it is totally euphemistic and vacuous to speak of the "meeting of two worlds," since the essential structure of one of them was destroyed.

Even though no one was permitted to look into Moctezuma's face, the emperor realized that he could not escape receiving Cortés at the great city's entrance. How imposing must the city have appeared with its tens of thousands of inhabitants and its army of one hundred fifty thousand to the three hundred Castillian soldiers! Bernal Díaz de Castillo writes:

What men have there ever been with such daring?... The great Montezuma descended from his platform.... Cortés was told that the great Montezuma was coming... so he approached Montezuma, and they did each other homage.²⁷

One can only imagine Moctezuma's feelings when he stood face to face with the conquistador who had freely and personally decided to confront the emperor who was considered a quasi god by his empire. Moctezuma, in contrast, was absolutely determined by the auguries, sorceries, astrological definitions, myths, theories, and other sources that revealed the designs of the gods. The free, violent, warlike, politically adept, juvenile²⁸ modern ego faced an imperial functionary, tragically bound by communal structures like a chained Prometheus.²⁹ Everyone else stared at the earth³⁰ in front of the emperor. The "I-conqueror" was the first ever with the freedom to look him in the face.

This "venturous and daring entrance into the great city of Tenustitlan, Mexico," took place on November 8, 1519,³¹ but Cortés would return August 13, 1521, to seize and destroy it.³² Then Cortés ordered Emperor Cuahutemoc, Moctezuma's humbled and conquered successor, to approach him:

Cortés ordered the construction of the best stage possible to be covered with mats, blankets, and other seats.... Then they carried Guatemuz *before Cortés*, and, when Guatemuz did him homage, Cortés embraced him with joy.³³ When this meeting finished, Cortés declared himself *lord of Mexico and all its kingdoms and provinces*.³⁴

Cortés lords it over an ancient lord, and at this point only Emperor Charles V exceeds him in power. The "I-conquistador" forms the protohistory of Cartesian *ego cogito* and constitutes its own subjectivity as will-to-power. With similar arrogance, the Spanish king

will assert in law 1, of title 1, of book 1 of the *Recopilación de las Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias*:

God our Lord because of his infinite mercy and goodness has served himself in giving us without merit such a great share in the *lordship of this world*.³⁵

The king of Spain proceeded to sign "I, the King," with large, impressive letters in the *Reales Cédulas*. I personally have run across that signature several times in the Archive of the Indies at Seville. This ego's *lordship (señorio)* over the world was based in God.³⁶ Although the conquistador participated in the king's lordship, he surpassed even the king, because he had to opportunity to face another lord and lord it over him. The conquistador exerted his power by denying the Other his dignity, by reducing the Indian to the Same, and by compelling the Indian to become his docile, oppressed instrument. The conquest practically affirms the conquering ego and negates the Other as Other.

This conquest was extremely violent. From among Cortés's first allies in Zempoala no one survived, since a plague annihilated that heavily populated, vibrant, and happy city. This was its repayment for having allied itself with Cortés against Moctezuma. The conquistadores further leveled the village of Cholula. But nothing compares with Pedro Alvarado's treacherous massacre of the Aztec warrior-nobles. After Cortés departed from Mexico to battle Pánfilo Narvaéz, Alvarado invited the warriors to lay down their arms and partake of a feast in the great patio near the temples.

The Spaniards took up positions at the exits and entrances... so that none of the Aztecs could leave. The Spaniards then entered the sacred patio and commenced murdering people. They marched forward carrying wooden and metal shields and swords. They surrounded those dancing and pushed them toward the kettledrums. They hacked into the drum player, cutting off both his arms. They then decapitated him, and his head fell to the ground at a distance. Swiftly the Spaniards thrust their lances among the people and hacked them with their swords. In some cases they attacked from behind, carving out entrails, which spread all over the earth. They tore off heads and sliced them open, leaving bodies lifeless. They wounded those partying in

the thighs, the calves, and the full abdomen. Entrails covered the earth. Some Aztecs ran, but in vain, since their own intestines wrapped their feet like a net and tripped them up. These victims could find no way to escape since the Spaniards slaughtered them at entrances and exits. Some victims attempted to scale the walls, but they could not save themselves.³⁷

Similar acts of cruelty still smolder in the memories of indigenous people, who do not share the Spanish interpretation of the conquest.

THE "COLONIZATION" OF THE LIFE-WORLD

*Colonization (Kolonisierung)*³⁸ of the life-world, the fourth figure, is not a metaphor, but carries strong, historical, real significance. A Roman *colonia* (near the *column* of the law) was a land or culture dominated by the empire and so forced to speak Latin, at least among its elites, and to pay tribute. Latin America was the *first colony* of modern Europe since Europe constituted it as its first periphery before Africa and Asia.³⁹ The colonization of the indigenous person's daily life and later that of the African slave illustrated how the European process of modernization or civilization really subsumed (or alienated)⁴⁰ the Other under the Same. This Other, however, no longer served as an object to be brutalized by the warlike praxis of a Cortés or a Pizarro. Rather, the Spanish subjugated the Other through an erotic, pedagogical, cultural, political, and economic praxis.⁴¹ The conqueror domesticated, structurized, and colonized the manner in which those conquered lived and reproduced their lives. Later Latin America reflects this colonization of its life world through its mestizo race, its syncretistic, hybrid culture, its colonial government, and its mercantile and later industrial capitalist economy. This economy, dependent and peripheral from its inception and from the origin of modernity, gives a glimpse of modernity's "other face" (*te-ixtli*).

Before Cortés arrived in Mexico, "toward the end of March 1519," some Mayan chiefs in Tabasco (Yucatán) offered him luxurious gifts.⁴² They also handed over "twenty women, among them a very excellent woman, who was called doña Marina,"⁴³ la Malinche. This woman symbolizes the American Indian woman, who, educated and fluent in Mayan and Aztec, would eventually mother

"a son from her master and lord Cortés."⁴⁴ A similar event took place later in Tlaxcala:

These same old chiefs came back with five beautiful Indian virgins and five servants, all of whom were daughters of the chiefs. Even though they were Indians [!], they were beautiful and well dressed.... Directing himself to Cortés, the leader said: "This is my daughter, a virgin; take her for yourself." He gave her hand to him, and the other nine were given to the captains.⁴⁵

The modern ego of the conquistador reveals itself as also a *phallic ego*.⁴⁶ No amount of idyllic fantasizing about erotic relationships between the conqueror and the conquered can ever justify injustices such as occurred in Tlaxcala. Such erotic violence simply illustrates the colonization of the indigenous life-world (*Lebenswelt*):

The force and violence deployed in Mexico were unheard of in other nations and kingdoms. Indian women were compelled to act against their own will, married women against their husbands' will, young girls, ten and fifteen years-old, against the will of their parents. The greater and ordinary mayors or magistrates (*corregidores*) ordered them to leave their homes and husbands or to abandon parents who received no compensation for the loss of their daughters' services. These young women were conscripted to labor as far as eight leagues away in the houses, ranches, or workshops of plantation owners who often maintained them in concubinage.⁴⁷

While the conquistador murders the male Indian and subdues him in servitude, he sleeps with the female, sometimes in the presence of her husband. The sixteenth-century practice of secret concubinage with Indian women was illicit, but permitted, never legal, but necessary for many Spaniards, who officially married Spanish women. In satisfying a frequently sadistic voluptuousness, Spaniards vented their purely masculine libido through the erotic subjugation of the Other as Indian woman.⁴⁸ As a result they colonized Indian sexuality and undermined Hispanic erotics since the double moral standard of machismo maintained the sexual domination of the Indian woman in tandem with merely apparent respect for the European wife. Two children were born from these unions: the mestizo

bastard from the conquistador and Indian woman, and the legitimate *criollo*, or white person born in the colonial world.

Carlos Fuentes's narratives preeminently depict the contradiction experienced by the mestizo offspring of these erotics:

Marina cries: Oh, leave now, my son, leave, leave, leave from in between my legs... leave, son of a violated mother.... My adored son... son of two bloods at enmity with each other.. .. You will have to struggle against all, and your struggle will be sad, because you will be fighting against part of your own blood.... However, you are my only heritage, the heritage of Malintzin, the goddess; of Marina, the whore; of Malinche, the mother;... of Mainxochitl, the goddess of dawn;... of Tonantzin, Guadalupe, mother.⁴⁹

The colonization of the Indian woman's body is a thread in the same cultural fabric sustained by the exploitation of Indian male's body for the sake of a new economy. In this epoch of originary accumulation, mercantile capitalism will immolate and transform Indian corporeality into gold and silver. What Marx calls the *living labor* of the Indian is objectivated in the dead value of these precious metals:

The year of the surprise of Innsbruck (1552) witnessed the opening of Spain's cautious floodgates in response to Charles V's tragic situation.... The Fuggers in Amsterdam received an official transfer of silver in 1553.... From the great monetary center of the Low Countries, particularly Amsterdam, American metal passed to Germany, north Europe, and Britain. One will never know fully the role which this redistribution of moneys played in a European expansion that Europe could not have produced by itself.⁵⁰

But the gold and silver of nascent capitalism in Europe spelled death and desolation for America. July 1, 1550, Domingo de Santo Tomás writes from Chuquisaca (present-day Bolivia):

Four years⁵¹ before depleting the land, a mouth of hell was discovered into which a great quantity of people descended each year. These victims, sacrificed by Spanish greed to its god, work in the silver mine called Potosí.⁵²

The mine's mouth represents metaphorically the mouth of Moloch requiring human sacrifice—a sacrifice not to the bloody Aztec god Huitzilopochtli but to the invisible god Capital, the new deity of occidental, Christian civilization. The sacrificial capitalist economy commenced its five-hundred-year history by worshiping money as its fetish and by celebrating its earthly (unheavenly) religion during the week, instead of on the Sabbath, as Marx indicated in *The Jewish Question*. In order that the totality of this nascent economic system might secure free or cheap labor, it subsumed the subjective corporeality of the Indian and the African slave.

In this brief space, one can only suggest the agony of the long history of cultural, economic, and political colonization of Latin America. The colonizing ego, subjugating the Other, the woman and the conquered male, in an *alienating erotics* and in a mercantile *capitalist economics*, follows the route of the conquering ego toward the modern *ego cogito*. Modernization initiates an ambiguous course by touting a rationality opposed to *primitive*, mythic explanations, even as it concocts a myth to conceal its own sacrificial violence against the Other.⁵³ This process culminates in Descartes's 1636 presentation of the *ego cogito* as the absolute origin of a solipsistic discourse.