
Albrecht Classen
*University of Arizona*

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Bartolomé de Las Casas's critical account of the impact that the Spaniards had on the new continent has long been recognized as one of the major sources for the study on the interaction between whites and American Indians during the sixteenth century. The present translation of *The Devastation of the Indies* is based on the 1965 edition and appeared for the first time in 1974. The reprint is now accompanied by a penetrating introduction by Bill M. Donovan. He provides a brief biographical sketch of Bartolomé de Las Casas and contextualizes his ideological crusade on behalf of the Indians in historical, anthropological, and political terms. He is particularly interested in Las Casas's motivation to write his treatise and in its reception back in Europe. Donovan assumes a rather critical stance against the Bishop and questions the validity of some of his statements.

It is disturbing, however, that for Donovan the question regarding Spanish cruelty hinges upon the actual number of Indians who died at their hands (r8ff.). Moreover, Donovan points to the many allies the conquistadores found among some Indian tribes and emphasizes that European diseases might have had a much larger effect in decimating the native population than did their actual, and undeniable, mass murder. Donovan makes a valiant attempt at introducing a more balanced view in the interpretation of Las Casas's account but opens, in the process, a Pandora's box with a host of uncertainties regarding the moral legitimization of the conquest in the first place. Donovan is of course correct in attacking the "Black Legend," considering the innumerable crimes committed by English, French, German, Portuguese, and Italian colonists, emphasizing that only in Spain were the problems discussed publicly and were laws issued to prevent further crimes. And finally, Las Casas was certainly influenced by a black-and-white image in his criticism of the Spanish activities in the New World.
All this makes the introduction to a provocative and stimulating essay, preparing the reader for the actual text by Las Casas. I observed one major mistake. The Spaniards did not migrate to the Indies at the beginning of the fifteenth, but of the sixteenth century (13).

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The title, *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*, itself indicates clearly the direction of Rabasa’s theoretical thrust in his investigation of how Europeans discovered and perceived the New World. After the significant anniversary of Columbus’s achievement (1492/1992) with its flood of historical, literary, anthropological, and ethnographic studies, Rabasa’s claim does not really come as a surprise. Mary B. Campbell (1988), Urs Bitterli (1991), Anthony Grafton (1992), and Valerie I. J. Flint (1992), among others, have repeatedly and convincingly argued that America was not discovered in the proper sense of the word, but was rather reappropriated from past texts dealing with the exotic Orient, the imagery of which then was projected onto the new continent.

Rabasa, in his Ph.D. thesis submitted at the University of Santa Cruz and revised for printing, tackles his theme from a different angle, however, since he aims for a semiotic, text-critical perspective. In other words, he suggests we read the discovery as a textual phenomenon, as a reading and writing process, in which even allegedly scientific, objective approaches to the New World in the form of an atlas, a map, and icons reveal their rhetorical function of making a case to “effect the real” (in Barthes’s terms). Rabasa believes,