Transformations of Latinity: The New-Old Civilization of Latin America

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TRANSFORMATIONS OF LATINITY: 
THE NEW-OLD CIVILIZATION 
OF LATIN AMERICA

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As far as I can determine, most of the great scholars in the 
comparative study of civilizations, scholars like Arnold Toynbee, 
Oswald Spengler, and William McNeill, ignore Latin America, or 
treat it only in passing, or consider it to be simply an extension of 
western civilization.* That is, they admit that there were two 
civilizations thriving in Latin America before 1492; then they say 
that these civilizations were destroyed and replaced by western 
civilization. “Destruction” is equated with “disappearance,” and 
with that step it logically follows that into that empty space 
marched western civilization. From that interpretive moment on, 
Latin America ceases to interest world historians or comparative 
civilizationists. After all, why study western civilization over there 
when it can be studied where it is really important, in Europe? 
World historians and comparative civilizationists also tend to 
ignore indigenous cultures of Latin America.

I will admit to some rhetorical exaggeration in all this, but I will 
not admit to much. For example, in Spengler’s The Decline of the 
West there is but one reference to Latin America after the con-
quest period, and that is to its dictatorships and its dictators, those 
“self-styled Caesars.”2 That description has an ironic echo for me, 
as will eventually be evident. In the detailed charts which accom-
pany his work, Spengler refers to America only once, and that is 
to the North American Revolution. The conquest of the New 
World is described as Faustian Man’s “irrepressible urge into 
distance;”3 overlooked for the moment is the fact that in that 
distance were cultures and peoples. Toynbee gives the Mayas, 
Aztecs and Incas reasonable coverage, but he mostly lumps Latin 
America with a number of cultures on the fringes of the Western

*Presidential Address, 1989.
world which in his view never completely ceased being medieval. Carroll Quigley says that the Aztec and the Inca civilizations died by 1550 at the hands of the Spanish invaders. McNeill, whose *The Rise of the West* is directed in part against Spenglerian pessimism, seems barely conscious of Latin America after the conquest period. He discusses it about as often as he does the Seleucids, the people whom Toynbee considers one of the most unjustly neglected civilizations. I think that, in terms of neglect, Latin Americans are the Seleucids of today. There is an excuse concerning the Seleucids: a paucity of documentation. A comparable excuse does not exist concerning Latin America.

Why, then, the lack of serious attention? Partly, I believe, it is a matter of a certain kind of bias. Scholars of civilizations have a fondness for cultures, societies and peoples which are dead, or for those living civilizations whose status as civilizations is not in doubt, for example, India and China. They do not know what to do with those parts of the world which, for whatever reason, do not fit our conceptual civilizational schemes, places like Latin America or Africa which can be living laboratories for civilizational analysis.

The civilizing process in Latin America is enormously complex, for it both is and is not a westernizing process. The problem is complicated by the fact that the notion of "civilization" itself is not one on which there is likely to be agreement. "Civilization," like "life," is finally indefinable. But something, however rudimentary, must be said about the term. I do so less to define it than to put on the table some of the principal issues involved in civilizational studies relevant to Latin America. What I have to say is not new. Following comments made by Vytautas Kavolis, let me briefly juxtapose two prominent civilizationists on the question of what defines a civilization and holds it together. For Louis Dumont, a civilization must have stability with a controlling principle or dominant ideology; "pollution," for example, is a controlling principle in Hindu society. For Max Weber, a civilization is characterized less by ideological coherence than it is by struggle and change, by transformations which may be either external or internal or both. For Weber, also, a civilization depends on whatever is "at hand" for its constituent elements.

In considering Latin America, I will be focusing on a controlling principle or two, on the issue of transformation in a few of its guises, and on what is "at hand" in Latin America itself, both...
before and after 1492. To say that Latin America is merely the extension of western civilization, or is some deformed version of it, is false. To say that it is a mixture of the Iberian with the Indigenous and the African does not go deep enough. One needs to probe a number of problems. First, one needs to examine what lies behind western civilization and its particular manifestation in the Iberian peninsula: Rome, variously transformed. This I call the message of Latinity. Second, one needs to consider what happened on numerous levels in Latin America as a result of the momentous encounters and clashes in the 15th and 16th centuries. Here one needs to be conscious of another set of transformations which may be discussed under the general rubric of "mixture." This I call the message of mestizaje. Third, one needs to consider the implications of the fact that the indigenous civilizations and cultures "at hand" at conquest time were not simply assimilated and did not disappear. Indeed, indigenous cultures are still "at hand" today. Their clashes and contacts with western society may be studied in their beliefs and in their narratives. This I call the message of myth. Any one of these messages is subject enough for a book, let alone an address or an essay. With apologies, then, for the compression in what follows, let me proceed.

The Message of Latinity:

T. S. Eliot writes in the first of his *Four Quartets*: "My words echo thus in your mind." The words Rome and Latinity should also echo in your minds. They should lead you to remember the Roman Empire, the armies of Caesar, the rise of cities, the *pax romana*, Romanization as a process, Roman law and Roman architecture, Roman roads, plantations and slave culture, the Mediterranean. If your mind turns toward the fall of Rome in AD 476, then you will recall barbarian invasions, Latin as the language binding early western Europe intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. To the signifier "Rome" your mind should then attach the religious signifieds of papacy and Catholicism. The signified expanded through the centuries: from a small city-state on the banks of the Tiber to all of Italy, to the Mediterranean, to all of western Europe, and finally to all of Christendom.

As Chester Starr puts it in his brief but lucid treatise, *The
Emergence of Rome, “the Romans stumbled into empire.”⁹ Though Starr exaggerates, I believe his comment to be largely correct. Roman imperialist policies, as would be the imperialist policies of Spain and Portugal in the 15th and 16th centuries, were often ad hoc and reactive, the post hoc justifications of events or actions which were not deliberately planned. Be that as it may, Rome’s success in establishing an empire depended on a number of factors. It depended, as Toynbee and others have commented, on a Hellenistic world which was politically divided but culturally unified.¹⁰ Rome’s success depended also on the prior weakening of the highly independent and individualistically minded Greek city states, on Hellenistic trade practices which emphasized the corporate (that is, the large landowner) rather than the single individual, on the rise of large estates which, when confiscated, would immediately transfer a great deal of land to Roman control. By 150 BC, in fact, there were a great number of such large estates, and these were worked largely by slaves. Rome bound the upper classes of other societies to it with grants of citizenship and other acts, in effect making them into representatives of Rome itself. The empire also destroyed local culture and educated the colonized peoples in Rome’s language, bureaucracy, and cultural values. Two of the most effective ways of romanizing conquered people were through involving them in the bureaucratic system and through military conscription. These and other processes were all part of what is known as Romanization; the colonization of Latin America was accomplished through a set of similar processes.

The editors of Imperialism in the Ancient World, in summarizing M. I. Finley’s views on imperialist activities in 5th-century Athens, list six ways in which an imperialist or expansionist state generally exercises power: 1) the restriction of freedom among local governments; 2) judicial, political, and administrative interference in local affairs; 3) compulsory service in the armed forces; 4) tribute; 5) the confiscation of land; 6) economic exploitation and subordination.¹¹ Rome, of course, broadly resembles Athens in these six ways of imperialism. These ways—with the possible exception of military conscription, for which slavery might be substituted—were put into practice in the New World in the 15th and 16th centuries. Imperialist powers, it is true, probably tend to act alike; beyond that, however, it is important that precedents for the
policies of Spain and Portugal could be found in the classical world.

Conquest cannot be successful or have lasting political and cultural consequences without consolidation. For Rome, that consolidation came after the conquests of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BC), with the rule of Octavian, known as Augustus Caesar, inaugurator of the so-called Augustan Age (until AD 180) and with it the pax romana. It was the Roman peace which allowed, essentially, the synthesis of the three cultures—Greek, Roman, and Christian—which became western civilization.

Since it was the Iberian peninsula¹² which was responsible for discovering, conquering, and colonizing that part of the New World now known as Latin America, it is useful to ask what Iberian culture was like before 1492. In addition to first being a Roman colony, Spain was the site of a very long process known as la reconquista or the reconquest of its territories and culture from the Moors, who invaded in AD 711. It has been pointed out, however, and with some justification, that a reconquest which takes almost 800 years can scarcely be called a “conquest.” More like a reapropriation of land, it represented the intermittent extension of Spanish and Christian hegemony throughout the peninsula. During these seven hundred-odd years, Spain developed a set of practices and policies which it applied to the New World. For example, conversion was seen as a means of bringing Moors and Jews within the Spanish sphere. Yet along with that religious intolerance there was a practical tolerance of Jews and Moors as phenotypically different from the Spanish. Since intermarriage was common, racial mixing or mestizaje was familiar to the Spanish long before they set foot in the New World. A second policy, perhaps learned from the Romans, involved the use of settlers in frontier lands as “civilizing influences.”¹³ To make the resettlement or the repoblación last, the settlers needed to be protected, first through armies and then especially through bureaucracies which looked after their interests. By the early 16th century, the Spanish, as had the Romans by the Augustan Age, had developed an extensive bureaucracy; many of its practices and traditions were transferred to the New World.

By 1492, Iberian bureaucracy was experienced in both internal and external colonization. The Portuguese incursions in Africa and especially along the coast, and the Iberian activities in general
in the Canary Islands prepared them well for the New World. One of the most important effects, I believe, of Iberians' experience with people in the Canary Islands or along the African coastline before 1492 was the evolution of a set of attitudes toward other peoples, attitudes reminiscent of those of the Greeks toward whomever they considered "barbarians" and of the Romans toward the people they conquered. In each instance the attitude depended on hierarchizing human worth; it was, if you will, civilizational snobbery. More than snobbery was at stake, however, given the new element added to the attitude since the Roman Empire: Catholicism, with its universalist ideology and the consequent belief in the damnation of all people outside the Church of Rome. The transformation of civilizational snobbery into a kind of religious self-centeredness and conceit was a natural one for Christian Iberia. Just as the Romans believed that they were "God's own people," so, too, did the Iberians believe that they were on a holy mission to civilize their own peninsula and other parts of the world. In 1496, for instance, King Duarte of Portugal formally petitioned the Pope to lift the ban (imposed in 1436) on the Christian expansion into the Canary Islands in this way:

The nearly wild men who inhabit the forest [of these Canary Islands] are not united by a common religion, nor are they bound by the chains of law, they are lacking in normal social intercourse, living in the country like animals. [The people have] no contact with each other by sea, no writing, no kind of metal or money.

A Roman could have written this. Later, a Spanish king and queen would write similar descriptions of New World peoples, which they then used to justify all sorts of practices, from a tributary system redefined into the encomienda or the mita, to vast projects for resettlement disguised as reducciones or congregaciones for missionary purposes, to outright enslavement. In fact, the Spanish "theory of empire" was essentially Roman in two senses of the term; it was influenced by the precedents of pagan Rome and by the teachings of Christian Rome. It is no accident that the major theorists of empire in 16th-century Spain came from two professions primarily: law, a major legacy of pagan Rome; and theology, the legacy of Christian Rome.

In sum, Roman imperialism, which influenced Iberian imperialism during the Middle Ages, shaped Iberian imperialism in
the 15th and 16th centuries. This is why one reads with skepticism Montaigne’s rather sentimentalized plea in his essay “Of Coaches” for a repetition of Greek and Roman imperialism in the New World. That repetition was already there, or here.

Latinity functioned in yet other ways to shape the discovery, conquest and colonization of the New World. Latinity influenced, for example, the mentality of the first discoverers and colonizers. Columbus, in his diary of 1492 and in his letter to Sánchez of 1493, saw himself as, among other things, an emissary from Rome to the heathens of India. Later in his life this view reached messianic proportions: he saw himself destined by God to fulfill the prophecy made by the Roman and Spanish Seneca many centuries earlier about the discovery of new worlds in the distant future:

> Years now there will come an age in which the Ocean shall loosen the bonds of things, and the whole broad earth shall be revealed, and Tethys shall disclose new worlds, and Thule shall not be the end of the earth.

Cortes likened himself to Caesar crossing the Rubicon when he beached his ships on the shores of Yucatan in 1519. He then proceeded, as had the Romans almost two millennia before, to divide and conquer, to call upon a series of indigenous allies to help him fight his battles, to exact tribute and allegiance from those he conquered, to set himself up as ruler of conquered territories, to build new cities on the foundations of those he destroyed, to replace indigenous governments and institutions with those from Spain, to confiscate properties and to set up large estates for himself and his men, and to do everything in a legally proper manner in the name of his emperor back in Spain. Cortes, trained in the law, was the most Roman of the conquerors in the New World. Finley could well have been describing his actions when he described imperialism in the ancient world. His policies and practices, then, were not really new, as some have thought; they had old and venerable antecedents.

The transforming power of Latinity is evident linguistically almost immediately at the moment of discovery. The first island on which Columbus landed, known as Guanahani to the Indians, was not allowed to retain its indigenous name; it became San Salvador. One small island became Fernandina, after King Ferdinand; another became Isabella, after the Queen. Most of the New World was linguistically baptized—or re-baptized—with
European names. It was European cartographers, of course, who named the New World “America.” All these and many others are examples of linguistic colonization, the linguistic appropriation of New World reality.

Colonization through language latinized the course of people’s lives. The most famous 16th-century example is El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca princess, who moved to Spain, became a Humanist scholar, and wrote in Spanish about the New World. El Inca was caught in the middle, between both worlds, the living exemplar of a new civilizational reality, a reality founded on race mixture, on mestizaje.

The Message of Mestizaje:

“Every civilization,” writes Quigley in The Evolution of Civilizations, “indeed every society, begins with a mixture of two or more cultures.” Given such a statement, especially given the fact that “mixture” is the first of Quigley’s seven stages of civilization, it is surprising to find him ignoring one of the most thorough cases of “mixture” in the history of the world. Had he fully considered the implications of his statement in relation to Latin America and had he considered the meeting of Europe and the New World to be a meeting of civilizations in every sense of that process, he might not have concluded in effect that the Incas and the Aztecs came to an end as Universal Empires and that western civilization simply took their place. Indigenous culture—and not just the two indigenous civilizations here mentioned—did not disappear with the advent of the Spanish. When indigenous cultures collided with European culture, they mixed with it, and to that mixture were later added the cultures and peoples of Africa. Just as mixture was at the heart of the formation of the Roman Empire, so, too, was mixture at the heart of the formation of Latin America. What was “at hand,” however, to use Weber’s phrase, was different in each case.

“At hand” distinctively in Latin America was race, people different from any known in Europe up to that time. An understanding, therefore, of the mixing of the races that ensued, a mixing known in Spanish and among Latin American historians and thinkers as mestizaje, is crucial to an understanding of Latin American civilization. Mestizaje may be defined in two senses, one
physical, the other cultural. The result of physical *mestizaje* is the *mestizo*, the person who in himself combines two or more races. The result of cultural *mestizaje* is a society which combines the properties of two or more cultures which produced it. Cultural *mestizaje* is a common enough historical process, though it generally is not known by that name. It occurred in Rome,\(^{24}\) for instance, as well as during the Arab invasion of Spain, during the Muslim presence in India, and with the migration of Buddhism to China. Physical *mestizaje* is usually not pervasive enough to be culturally significant in most intercivilizational encounters or, indeed, in the history of most nations. For instance, there is race mixture in the United States but not enough of it to make for a new sense of national identity, at least not yet. *Mestizaje* is just not part of the national consciousness of the United States; it is for Latin America. The reasons for this are sociological, political, and demographic.

Early in the history of Spain’s colonization of the New World the attitude of the Crown toward race mixture was positive. Royal provisions urging intermarriage were passed early and were periodically repeated during the early 16th century. On the 20th of March of 1503, for example, Governor Ovando is instructed to make sure that some Christian men marry some Indian women, and that some Christian women marry some Indian men, and [that] this is so they may better communicate with them and teach them, indoctrinate them in the teachings of our Holy Catholic faith, and teach them how to manage their properties and farms, so that the said Indians, both male and female, become men and women of reason.\(^{25}\)

The first *mestizos* in the New world were considered “Spanish” and had all the civil rights that Spaniards did.\(^{26}\) Many *mestizo* children born out of wedlock were “recognized” and thus legitimized by their Spanish fathers. Some were even designated heirs to their father’s *encomiendas*. During the early part of the 16th century, most of the legislation passed concerning the *mestizo* was for his protection. By mid century, however, the attitude of the Crown changed and legislation was enacted to protect Indians from *mestizos*. In addition, a number of professions formerly open to *mestizos* in the Church or in the bureaucracy now were closed them. They were socially controlled almost as rigorously as were African slaves.
Why the change in Spanish legal opinion? As long as their numbers remained small, mestizos were treated with tolerance, even kindness. But when they multiplied to such an extent that they threatened the quality of life for the colonizing Spaniards, sympathy for them diminished. By mid 18th century, the mestizos comprised the largest social category in the civilized or domesticated areas in the New World, and negative feelings against them were high in colonial society.27

The period between 1600 and, say, 1750 or 1760 was one of the consolidation of empire much like, I would say, the Augustan Age was for Rome. I think of this period as a pax iberica or as a pax latinoamericana. What the stability allowed, significantly, was the attainment of a definitive demographic profile that made colonial society in Latin America ethnically different from any other colonial society in world history. The pax iberica or latinoamericana saw the numerical ascendency of the mestizo as a social class, and henceforth all formulations of cultural identity in the New World had to take the mestizo into account.

Simón Bolívar, though personally ambivalent about mestizaje, recognized the uniqueness of the society that had come to be established in the New World and exploited the idea of mestizaje in speeches urging liberation from Spain. Mestizaje became part of the ideology of revolution. Bolívar considered New World people to be a new human species not seen before in the history of the world. These new people, he wrote in the “Letter from Jamaica” and in his “Address at Angostura,” were neither Indian nor white but an intermediate species born—he says—of the mixture of races.

In the generations after Bolívar, as scores of Latin American essayists, poets, intellectuals and politicians debated the question of the newly independent world’s cultural identity, the drive toward finding cultural symbols was often broadly formulated in terms of Latinity and mestizaje. In fact, it was in 1856 that the term “Latin America” was used for the first time, coined by the Colombian José María Torres Caicedo in his attempt to outline the emerging pan-Americanism of the culture to the south of the Rio Grande. With some exceptions, notably those societies characterized by the enormous importation of African slaves or by their being dominated by Northern European powers, the cultures of this geographical area he considered to be defined by their rela-
tionship to Latinity. He meant Spain and Portugal primarily, but France used Torres Caicedo’s opinions to stake out a claim for its importance in the region.\(^2^8\) If the exceptions could not be brought in under the rubric of Latinity, they could, however, be included in that of mestizaje, increasingly defined as the mixture of all three major races in the New World, the White, the Indian and the African.\(^2^9\) It is important that one of the most eloquent proponents of mestizaje as a unifying ideological principle for Latin America, José Martí, was Cuban, Cuba being perhaps the most African of the Spanish-dominated nations.

Perhaps the most extreme of the ideologists of mestizaje is José Vasconcelos of Mexico. In the 1920s, in books like La raza cósmica and Indología, Vasconcelos proclaimed the mestizo—which for him included all races—to be the natural result of the historical process generally and the best hope for the salvation of mankind. The cosmic race, thinks Vasconcelos, is what the world is tending towards, and Latin America points the way.

It might be rhetorically effective to end this address on such a climactic note of cultural and racial hegemony. I believe, however, that to do so is to misread the reality of contemporary Latin America. An examination of that reality should lead not only to an appreciation of the complexity of civilizational issues in contemporary Latin America but also to a reconsideration of the civilizing process itself, both in a contemporary setting and in relation to the conquest period. To bring the matter closer to home: the civilizing process is understood in certain ways because most practitioners of civilizational analysis belong to civilizing powers. But there are other perspectives. Some of these may be explored in the transformations of both Latinity and mestizaje which find expression in myth.

**The Message of Myth:**

Claude Lévi-Strauss, who did his fieldwork in Latin America, did it a great though unintended disservice when he advanced the notions that the key to myth lay in its structure and that societies themselves can be categorized as “hot” or “cold,” depending on their attitude toward change. Hot societies like western societies are characterized by change; they are “historical.” Cold societies like indigenous societies of Latin America are characterized by
their resistance to change; they are “a-historical.” Hot societies are “advanced,” cold societies “primitive.” Cold societies are societies of myth. But myth is not necessarily a-historical. Myth may be based on history; myth may represent a culture’s attempts to come to terms with historical change; myth may be a way both of embracing historical change and controlling it. Beyond all this, myth may be a way of articulating the civilizing process in nativist terms.

What is happening in Latin America in the 20th century confrontation between western and indigenous societies may be analogous to what happened in the 16th century and analogous to what happened in other confrontations between societies at different stages of technological development. Not possessing the technological means finally to defeat westernization, indigenous societies have incorporated historical change within their myth-making. The resulting myths are examples of mestizaje on the cultural level. Further, they are strategies for understanding, coping with, and controlling change, as well as being strategies of ideological resistance. I cite two examples of cultural mestizaje in myth-making, the first involving a mostly 16th-century appropriation of the religion of Rome, the second a contemporary appropriation of western technology.

To the Spanish, Santiago—or Saint James—was the patron saint of la reconquista. For this he was known as Santiago Matamoros, or Saint James the Moor-Killer. Irene Silverblatt has shown how Santiago the Moor-Killer was transported to the New World and became, first, Santiago the Indian-Killer and later Santiago the Indian-Protector. The Andeanization of the Christian saint unfolded along the following lines. Before going into battle with the Indians, the Spanish would shout Santiago’s name. The name became thus associated in the minds of the Indians with the sound of gunfire which, by analogy, they also associated with thunder. In his description of the fall of Cuzco, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, a 16th-century mestizo chronicler, says that during the defeat eye-witnesses saw Santiago descend from the sky, his appearance preceded by thunder and followed by lightning. The terrified Indians said that it was Illapa, their God of Thunder and Lightning, who had come down from the sky to help the Spanish destroy the Indians. Since then, thunder and lightning, formerly identified with Illapa, also became identified
with Santiago. Santiago Matamoros becomes first Santiago Mataindios and then Santiago-Illapa.\(^3\)

In Andean mythology, Illapa was a conqueror.\(^3\) In attempting to come to terms with what had happened to them, the Indians grafted “Santiago” onto “Illapa” and incorporated this supreme conqueror into their Andean mythology as a powerful thunder-god. Ever mindful of the paganization of Christianity, Spanish clerics considered the figure of Santiago-Illapa to be subversive and “devil-inspired.”\(^4\) They condemned the name and prohibited Indians from naming their children Illapa or Santiago or Rayo (meaning lightning).\(^5\) Indians, fearing that the Church would kill Santiago-Illapa through clerical rites or ceremonies, performed their own ceremonies to endow Santiago-Illapa with an immortal soul. Moreover, seeing how apprehensive the Spanish were about Santiago-Illapa, Indians began to invoke his name against the Spanish. This is how Santiago-Illapa the Indian-Killer was transformed into Santiago-Illapa the Indian-Protector. By appropriating a Christian symbol of oppression and transforming it into a symbol of resistance and protection, in effect creating a new, syncretistic myth, Indians both made sense of their recent history and erected a mythological defense against their conquerors.

The appropriation of technology I exemplify with a contemporary mythic narrative from the Amazonian region of Brazil. This is a story by and about Arapaço Indians, a society at one time almost utterly destroyed by the Brazilian advance into the jungle.\(^6\) This Arapaço narrative has been transcribed by Janet M. Chernela, whose version and discussion I follow.\(^7\)

An anaconda named Dia Pino is the “grandfather” of the Arapaço, who are the result of the copulation between Dia Pino, transformed into a human being for the act, and a woman. The first issue of this primordial act is a snake-man named Unurato, who escapes from his mother’s body through her mouth and enters the river. There, transformed wholly into a snake again, he grows larger and larger until the river does not have enough water to contain him. Seeking more water, he swims downstream, first to the Rio Negro and then to the Amazon. He continues on to Manaus. At Manaus he transforms himself into a man again and goes drinking and dancing several times. He makes friends with a white man. One evening they decide to meet at midnight at the river’s edge. The white man appears early and waits. Suddenly an enormous anaconda (Unurato) rises out of the water and the white man, petrified with fear, shoots him with his rifle. The bullet penetrates Anaconda-
Unurato's eye. Anaconda-Unurato loses his magical anaconda powers and becomes an ordinary man. He moves to Brasilia and works in the construction industry. There he learns everything about white society: he learns about houses, furniture, and taxis, all things that the Arapaço do not have.

One year, the Amazon's waters rise very high. This is because Unurato has become an anaconda again and is swimming back upstream to be with his people. Now he is going not only as a snake; he is also a gigantic submarine. When he gets to his home village he rises out of the water at midnight, and the people know that he is there because they can see his lights. Inside the Anaconda-Submarine, magical snake beings are building an enormous underwater city. People can hear the noises of building. When the city is completed, Anaconda-Unurato-Submarine will give back to the Arapaço their prosperity and make them a numerous people again.

This syncretistic myth combines western technology with indigenous consciousness. The downfall of the Arapaço, metonymically represented by Anaconda-Unurato, comes about through contact with civilization, through drinking and dancing, and through friendship with a white man who cannot control his emotion in the face of nature. The bullet which takes out Anaconda-Unurato's eye, rendering him only partly sighted and physically human, represents the symbolic penetration of indigenous culture by western technology. Recognizing that technology is the source of power, the Arapaço narrator, as did 16th-century Incas vis-à-vis Santiago, seeks to appropriate that technology by incorporating it into Arapaço myth. First Anaconda-Unurato must acquire the wisdom of civilization. Then, armed with such civilizational knowledge and transformed into a technological marvel, he can return to save his people. “The Anaconda Submarine” may be considered an example of the colonization of the colonizer’s technology.

Both of these mythic revisions of history—that of the 16th-century invasion of Peru and the 19th and 20th-century invasion of the Amazon—are attempts to make sense of defeat. Nowhere in these mythic revisions do the Indians consider themselves *humanly* inferior to the Spanish or to the Brazilian-Portuguese. But almost every society in world history has considered itself superior to others, placed itself at the center, the core, and placed other, lesser peoples at the margins, at the periphery. Core and periphery are at the heart of cultural and even ontological distinc-
tions between self and other, civilized and non-civilized, human and non-human.

For some indigenous societies of Amazonia in the 20th century, the humanity of the foreign invaders is questionable, regardless of the reason for the invasion. In Quechua, for instance, the term for human is runa, which as puna runa indicates “ourselves,” and while there is no term in direct opposition to “human” the most marginal being is machin runa, or monkey person, a term also used to designate the foreigner, the outsider. The Canelos Quichua of Amazonian Ecuador have a myth which, in effect, puts the foreigner in his place. At the end of a narrative in which the foreigner has captured two Indian women and they have been freed by the efforts of the toucan bird, who is a mighty warrior, the women blow their magical breath on the foreigner and make him into a machin runa, “foreign monkey person.” They marginalize him, and from that moment on machin runa’s humanity is questionable.38

The issue of whether or not foreigners or white people are human is sometimes related to whether or not they have souls, and that is bound up with the issue of whether or not they have “culture.” Sometimes the Indians view the white man in very much the same way in which “civilized persons” have viewed “barbarians” at various times in world history. For instance, the Wakuénai people of Northwest Amazonia ask why white men have “failed after so many years to become fully cultural, historical beings.”39 Part of the answer lies in the shape and nature of white men’s souls. The Wakuénai’s souls are animal-shaped and are collective. The souls of white people, however, take the form of books or papers, which leave them when they sleep at night. The soul of a missionary, for example, is in the pages of the Bible, a trader’s soul can be found in his financial log, an anthropologist’s soul in his field notes. White men can be destroyed through witchcraft if their books and papers are destroyed while they sleep. Writing, according to the Wakuénai, has prevented white men from becoming fully human because it has made them into specialists, knowing only one thing, and has alienated them from nature.40 Further, because they are dependent on writing, white men do not have their culture with them all the time as the Wakuénai do. In other words, the Wakuénai are profoundly
puzzled why, after all this time, the white man is still so reliant on texts, why he has not learned to advance beyond a writing culture and to adopt an oral one.

The pattern usually focused upon in civilizational and conventional historical analysis is that of acculturation, of the incorporation of the indigenous within the western, of the periphery within the core. This pattern is certainly there, but to insist on it at the expense of other processes is, I believe, misleading. The other side of the story must be told as well. This is the message of indigenous myth.

The Message of Latin America:

In the best uroboric fashion, here at the end let me circle back toward the beginning. There I cited Kavolis citing Dumont and Weber. Those theorists were presented as being in opposition. That is, either we define civilization, along with Dumont, according to a controlling principle, ideology and stability, or we define it, with Weber, according to transformations, change. But must we privilege one over the other? What happens if the controlling and stabilizing principle is itself a principle or ideology of transformation? Surely this is largely the case in Latin America. *Mestizaje* is both a controlling principle and a process. Perhaps this is one reason why some civilizationists seem to have difficulty with Latin America. It won’t stand still for a single definition; it is in process; it is, as Goethe might say, *im werden*.

The circling of the Uroboros brings me back also to Quigley. The first of his seven stages is, as I have noted, that of mixture. The other six, in order, are 2) gestation, 3) expansion, 4) conflict, 5) universal empire, 6) decay, 7) invasion. Where is Latin America in this scheme? It is “beyond” gestation and it may have elements of expansion and conflict, as the mythic evidence suggests and as the sometimes violent confrontations between white and indigenous or between white and maroon communities, have shown. But in some senses all four stages co-exist. Mixture of *mestizaje*, for example, is still very much with us. In Latin America these stages are not diachronic or successive; they may be synchronic and simultaneous. Different levels of civilizational development can exist at the same time in a small geographical area. If this is true of Latin America, might it not also be true of some other intercivili-
zational encounters, both in the relatively distant past, as in the case of Rome, and in the contemporary world, as is probably the case in Africa, China, the Soviet Union, and India?

In five hundred years Latin America has not “advanced” to the stage of universal empire. Does this in itself disqualify it from civilizational attention? I venture to predict that Latin America will never reach this stage. Why? Because the world is full. A universal empire needs to be able to expand in space; it needs to overrun peoples. But, given the kinds of international alliances and transnational networks in the world today, a new Universal Empire would be difficult to attain and to maintain. The only universal empires left to achieve, in fact, may be those of the mind. Here Latin America became a “universal empire” some time ago with the doctrine of mestizaje and the cosmic race. Here Latin America may be said to make a distinctive, if somewhat naive, contribution to the issue of universal empires.

Perhaps, however, the idea of a cosmic race is not all that new. According to Sir William Tarn, Alexander the Great was driven by a single idea, that of the unity of mankind. This idea, in Tarn’s words, had three parts to it:

[First,] that God is the common Father of mankind, which may be called the brotherhood of man. The second is Alexander’s dream of the various races of mankind, so far as known to him, becoming of one mind and living in unity and concord, which may be called the unity of mankind. And the third, also part of his dream, is that the various peoples of his Empire might be partners in the realm rather than subjects. I very much doubt that Vasconcelos was influenced by Alexander the Great. The point is, rather, that mestizaje as an ideology had already been articulated in some form in the Hellenistic Age. It seems to me to be no accident that these views by Alexander were first put forward by Plutarch at a time when Rome was busy unifying the world. Seen in this light, mestizaje as a concept was already part of Latinity itself.

At the beginning of José María Arguedas’s novel, Los ríos profundos, a novel about mestizaje in 20th-century Peru, the hero, a young boy, is walking with his father in Cuzco at twilight. Looking at the massive Inca stones on top of which are constructed Spanish buildings—an architectural reminder of the clash and results of an intercivilizational encounter—the boy realizes that the stones are talking to him. He realizes that if he listens carefully...
enough, he will understand their message. For us civilizationists, too, the stones of Latin America can and will talk if we but listen.

Notes

1. I would like to thank a number of colleagues for their help, both direct and indirect: Matthew Melko, who every year for the past five or six has urged me “to do something about Latin America as a civilization”; John Hord, Elpidio Laguna-Díaz, Ann McBride-Limaye, Tony Stevens-Arroyo, and Juan Adolfo Vázquez, among others, who have discussed with me some of the issues presented here; Vytautas Kavolis, who has been sympathetic where it counts, in offering me the pages of the Comparative Civilizations Review; Joseph Labat, who in conversation in effect contributed the first part of the title of this address (I did not know exactly what he intended by “Transformations of Latinity,” and certainly do not know if he would agree with what I have made of it, but the phrase has echoed in my mind ever since); and my colleague at Illinois, Norman Whitten, who has taught me much about contemporary indigenous and African people of Latin America.


8. Unfortunately, I must leave largely unanalyzed here the fascinating example of maroon communities in various parts of Latin America. Given sufficient time, I would have discussed them—in particular the Saramaka of Surinam—in the section of myth. See Richard and Sally Price, First Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).


12. What is today the Iberian peninsula was known as Hispania in the Middle Ages. I call it “Iberia” here because, though historically inaccurate, it now connotes both Spain and Portugal, and “Hispania” does not.

13. This is a commonly known fact of the reconquest. See, for instance, Lyle N. McAlister, Spain and Portugal in the New World, 1492-1700 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 5.

14. It is not insignificant that Columbus lived for a time in the Canary Islands and that many of his references during his first voyage were to the Canaries, both to its flora and to its people. Indians and Canary Islanders, for instance, were said to resemble each other.

15. See, for instance, Barry Cunliffe, Greeks, Romans and Barbarians: Spheres of Interaction (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1988), an archaeological and historical approach exploring core/periphery relationships. See also J. P. V. D. Balsdon, Romans and Aliens (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), passim, but especially the chapter entitled “Snobbery Begins at Rome.”

16. See Balsdon, Romans and Aliens, chapter 1. See also Chester Starr, A History of the Ancient World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 466: The Romans believed that their easy victories in expanding their empire were due to their being favored by the gods. This kind of belief, when added to the Augustinian-inspired Just War theory in the 16th century, made the Spaniards feel invincible on religious as well as military grounds.


19. In an otherwise excellent book entitled Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz do not go back far enough in describing the nature of imperialism in the New World. For them, “Spanish America” is more properly Castilian America. For the Castilians, expansion still meant conquest in the classic kind that was practiced first by the Moors and then by the Christians in the centuries of struggle for the peninsula: permanent settlement by a good number of immigrants, formal rule and the collection of tribute, and, over time, the change of religion and the general incorporation of the new area into the homeland” (p. 19).

22. “Would that so noble a conquest had occurred under Alexander, or under the old Greeks and Romans; and that such a vast change and transformation of so many empires and peoples had fallen into hands which would have gently trimmed and done away with what there was of
barbarism and would have encouraged and strengthened the good roots that nature had there implanted, not only introducing in the cultivation of the soil and the adornment of the cities the arts of this part of the world so far as they might have been necessary, but also adding the Greek and Roman virtues to those native to the country!" Michel de Montaigne, "Of Coaches," Essays, trans. George B. Ives (New York: The Heritage Press, 1946), vol. 2, p. 1237.


22. Quigley, p. 79.

23. The closest Columbus could come to making them familiar was to describe them as resembling the Canary Islanders.

24. Looking back from the perspective of the Augustan Age, Horace writes about cultural mixture between Greece and Rome when he states, "Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium." Quoted by Starr, The Emergence of Rome, p. 35.


26. "Spaniards" in the 16th century were of three kinds: whites from Spain, whites born in the New World (these were known as "criollos"), and legitimate or legitimized mestizos. See Magnus Mörner, Race Mixture in the History of Latin America (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 41.


29. Some might consider the use of the term "mestizaje" to include black as well as Indian race mixture to be a mistake. For them, "mestizo" refers to the issue of white and Indian; "mullato" to the issue of white and black; "zambo" or "sambo" to the issue of Indian and black, etc. But I take "mestizaje" to signify in the context of my argument race mixture of any kind. Even the etymology of the term "mullato" supports the notion of "mestizaje" as a generic term for race mixture between white and African. "Mullato" does not derive, as Websters and the American Heritage Dictionary assert, from the Spanish "mula" or "mule" but rather, according to the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy, from the Arabic "muwallad" or "muladi", both of which mean "mestizo." That is, during the Middle Ages a "muwalladi" or "muladi" was a Spanish Christian who embraced Islam and lived among the Muslims, intermarrying with them. The folk etymology given in English dictionaries is, I believe, of later origin and racist in its derivation.

30. This summary of certain ideas of Lévi-Strauss depends on a recent book edited by Jonathan D. Hill, Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous
South American Perspectives on the Past (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), passim, but see especially the introduction by Hill. Hill and his colleagues, who are cited in a number of the following notes, have been concerned to revise Lévi-Strauss's ideas and to demonstrate that myth in indigenous societies can be a form of history. As such, myth should be of interest to historians and, I would argue, to comparative civilizationists. The neglect of indigenous societies is not confined to world historians or to comparative civilizationists. Scholars of comparative religions are similarly negligent. A large and impressive recent book which attempts to address that negligence, and to show the immense richness of South American Indians' religious life, is Lawrence Sullivan's Ichneuth's Drum (New York: Macmillan, 1988).


32. The preceding details are from Guaman Poma as cited by Silverblatt, p. 174.

33. Silverblatt, p. 178.

34. Silverblatt, p. 184.

35. Silverblatt, p. 184.


40. Hill and Wright, pp. 92-93.