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## Deception and Control

Why were the indigenous people of the Americas savages? Of course, they were not, but this was the narrative for a long time because some people with an agenda a long time ago said they were. This narrative is a myth with origins from the Spanish conquest of the Americas. This is one of many myths used for deception and control, which could be understood through the theory of mind. Theory of mind will also help us understand how the language barrier between the Mesoamericans and the Spanish colonizers was broken.

Let us begin with laying out a basic understanding of what theory of mind is. The theory of mind could be defined as “The ability to attribute mental states to ourselves and others, serving as one of the foundational elements for social interaction” (Ruhl *Theory of Mind*). Theory of mind begins to develop around the age of a year and a half. It is what helps us understand that other individuals may have different beliefs or different ways of thinking than our own, which explains why people behave differently. As the individual ages, their theory of mind evolves to understand beyond their reality that they know. There are several ways children develop their theory of mind. Some ways include mimicking, playing pretend, and observing others.

“The foundations of social understanding include interest in attending to and interacting with other people and initial understanding of other people and oneself.” (Siegler and Alibali). Observing is especially important as it was an especially useful tool at breaking the language

barrier between the indigenous and the Spanish colonizers. There are few notable figures that helped foster communication between the two languages. A woman known as “La Malinche” is one of the most recognized. The reason for this is that she was the primary translator for the conquistador Hernan Cortez. However, another important person who helped break the language barrier was Pedro de Gante. “Pedro de Gante llegó a la Nueva España en 1523 con el propósito de atraer a los indios a la religión Cristiana.” (Lopez de la Torre) He was a Franciscan friar sent to Texcoco in the colony of Nueva España for missionary purposes, he also set up the first European school in the Americas called the School of San José de los Naturales. “Gante y los otros frailes emprendieron la compleja tarea de aprender las costumbres locales y la lengua náhuatl para utilizarla como medio de comunicación con los indígenas e irles inculcando la fe cristiana.” (Lopez de la Torre) Gante’s focus was to convert the indigenous to Christianity, but language was obstructing that goal. The solution he came up with was to spend time with locals. He and his fellow friars would go into the town of Texcoco and observe the children. During the observations, Gante would write down the words he would hear (using the Latin alphabet) and take note of actions and objects that followed the words. They also learned the customs of the Nahua to better understand their culture. Through observation, Gante and his fellow friars were able to gain a better understanding of the language and culture; and figured out more efficient ways of converting the indigenous.

How does labeling a group of people “savages” help create political and capital gain? Quite easily. “The sum of all this is what I call the ‘myth of the king’s army.’” (Restall). One commonly misunderstood thing about the conquistadors and their conquests is that they were not directly sent by the crown. They did need permission from the crown, but these men were not proper soldiers. The conquistadors were essentially businessmen who got permission mostly

because of political connections, and the men who accompanied them had many different occupations. The main reason to conquer these new lands was for the opportunity of financial gain. Labeling a group of people as “savages” is a form of demonizing and dehumanizing them. The demonization of the Mesoamericans was a key factor for justifying the conquest of the Americas. This was a tool to deceive the people back in Europe, who had no capital interest, and get them involved or in support of the conquest. Religious motive was easily manipulated by the conquistadors to gain support and resources. The Mesoamerican cultures were deemed as satanic because they worshiped “false idols”. People like the Mexica were portrayed as barbaric because they sacrificed people to their gods. However, these were misrepresentations of the cultures. For example, human sacrifices in Mexica culture are usually described with the notion that they were forced, but the sacrifices were volunteers and were proud to do so. The conquistadors twisted the truths of the indigenous to manipulate people into believing that there was good cause, but this “good cause” just lined the pockets of the conquistadors and brought on the fall of some of the greatest empires in our history.

Theory of mind is a great power that we humans possess. Unfortunately, it has been used throughout human history to cause great pain and destroy whole nations of people. The conquistadors used it to create a common enemy, even using rivaling Mesoamerican nations to kill each other. And the church used it to assimilate people, essentially erasing whole cultures. However, we are now in the information age, where getting both sides of a story is possible to do and in real-time. Technology will help us see into the lives of people deemed our enemy. And as we evolve our societies, I believe our uses of theory of mind will also.

## **Works cited**

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