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Was peaceful co-existence between Europeans and Native Americans possible at any stage?

Before Europeans started to explore and settle America in earnest, after Columbus' expedition, this continent had been isolated from the rest of the world for millenniums. Millions of inhabitants were already roaming its furthest corners, and had developed a wide range of societies and cultures. Some, like the Aztecs, the Mayas or the Incas, were quite advanced, vast empires sustained by impressive cities and intensive agriculture. Others were tribes of hunters-gatherers[1]. The sudden irruption of European newcomers, whose technology was unlike anything anybody on this continent had ever seen, sent a shockwave through these cultures. On their side, the Europeans brought to the "New World" their own set of prejudices, and relatively good intentions quickly collapsed in the face of reality. As Crosby argues, the 'Columbian Exchange' was as much biological as it was cultural, and dramatically reshaped America. Was there any possibility, at any time after 1492, for European and indigenous populations to co-exist in peace? What were the major obstacles? There were many differences between the two sides, be they cultural, technological, social or economical, which will be explored, as well as the attempts to bridge them. Other factors, such as the inadvertent introduction of new diseases or the careless import of domestic animals, played a role in souring relationships. What could have mended them?

[1] See Brogan, Ch. 1, 'Prelude, 40,000 BC-c.AD 1600'.

In Columbus' view, the natives that he met in the Caribbean islands were "to be ruled and set to work, to cultivate the land and to do all else that may be necessary... and to adopt our customs", and he also noted that they would be easy to subjugate[2]. This was an ominous start, although, according to the instructions of Ferdinand and Isabel of Spain, the natives were to be converted to Catholicism rather than enslaved[3]. Indeed, in the European mindset of the Renaissance, the New World was perceived as a paradise, whose inhabitants were similar to Man before the Fall[4]. Naked, peaceful, illiterate, unencumbered by the trappings of civilisation – as defined by Europeans – the 'Savages' would whole-heartedly welcome the opportunity to adopt the religion and customs of their benefactors, who in exchange would be rewarded by worldly goods, such as gold, by a grateful God[5]. At best, colonisation was justified by conversion and missionary work, but even Bartholomew De Las Casas considered the natives as simple souls needing to be protected, not as complete human beings[6]. There was never any question of trying to understand the culture of the Indians, unless it was to facilitate their conversion or to get something out of them. Actually, anything that did not fit into this image of the 'Savage' was ignored, whereas anything that confirmed it was amplified. The initial intentions of the metropolitan elites were often peaceful, based on introducing the natives to – European – civilisation; as Hakluyt planned: "with discrecion and myldenes distill into their purged myndes the swete and lively liquor of the gospell."[7] Basically, the New World and its inhabitants were considered as a blank slate.

[2] Tindall & Shi, p.17.
[3] Tindall & Shi. p.18.
[4] Sheehan, Ch.1, 'Paradise'.
[5] Sheehan, p. 15.
[6] Sheehan, p.26.
[7] Oberg, p.2.

The native populations did not form a uniform group; on the contrary, there were various cultures, hundreds of different languages and customs, complex interactions between neighbours, sophisticated patterns of trade, and sporadic but widespread warfare[8]. The arrival of the European caused an initial shock: boats were perceived as floating islands[9], clothes, guns and steel swords or axes were a novelty. However, in the fluid environment of America, the irruption of a new tribe was not in itself something unusual, which is why in many cases the natives humoured the colonists, who might become useful allies against aggressive neighbours: local tribes helped Cortes overthrow the powerful Aztecs[10], Wingina provided food to the Roanoke colonists[11], Powhatan enabled the early Virginian colonists to survive[12]. As the Spanish learned in Florida, colonisation was almost impossible if the natives were mostly hostile. Local tribes were generally eager to establish trade with these powerful new neighbours, which in Indian society also implied friendly relationships. As they did not have the same concepts of land property as the newcomers, the Indians were ready to give away territories, provided they would keep hunting and fishing rights; or, they did not value land enough, and thought it an easy way to buy the colonists' cooperation[13]. They failed to realise, until too late, that the land lust of the colonisers was unquenchable. Another factor was the powerful fascination for these strangers from another world, and their superior technology[14]. Native populations were quick to adopt and adapt new artefacts and

[8] Brogan, Ch.5, 'Indians'.
[9] *The World Turned Upside Down*, 'The Arrival of the Dutch', pp.35-38.
[10] Tindall & Shi, p.26.
[11] Taylor, p.124.
[12] Oberg, pp.56-57.
[13] See *The World Turned Upside Down*, ch.3, 'Land, Trade and Treaties'.
[14] *The World Turned Upside Down*, Josiah Quinney's July 4th Speech, pp.40-41.

techniques, or indeed the languages of the Europeans, who in comparison did little to try and understand the indigenous cultures[15].

If the Europeans brought guns and steel to the New World, they also inadvertently brought germs, which decimated the local populations and were one of the most destabilising factors. These 'invisible bullets' were instrumental in weakening native resistance and helping colonisation: conquistadors killed more people with smallpox than with their swords, and when the Puritans landed in Plymouth in 1622, they were able to take over lands already prepared by a population exterminated by epidemics[16]. Conveniently, the colonisers saw in this the hand of God, obligingly clearing the land of the pagans, and comforting their feeling of superiority. Discrediting the local shamans, powerless in the face of devastating pandemics, germs pushed Indian population towards the newcomers and their 'magic'. In some cases, Europeans deliberately spread smallpox to weaken their enemies[17]. Missionaries and soldiers thus used this biological advantage to gain ground. The animals and plants brought by the colonists also wreaked havoc in this new environment: rats would devour native corn reserves, cattle would trample fields, and this created tensions[18]. Extensive agriculture introduced by the colonists, such as tobacco in Virginia, was also bound to cause problems with the indigenous populations. The Europeans also often fail to realise to what extent their constant demands for food could destabilise local populations, as was the case for the Roanokes[19].

[15] See *The Indians' New World*, Ch.3, 'Many Nations under That Name: A New Society Takes Shape'.
[16] *The Columbian Exchange*, Ch.2, 'Conquistadors y Pestilencia'.
[17] Tindall & Shi, p.87.
[18] See *Colonial America History*, V.D.Anderson, 'King Philip's Herds: Indians, Colonists, and the Problem of Livestock in Early New England', pp.7-26.
[19] *Dominion & Civility*, Ch.1, 'This New Found Land'.

These problems were also compounded by the cynicism of the colonisers. Only in a few cases did some Europeans genuinely embrace the local cultures; often either missionaries, or captives, such as Cabeza de Vaca, or Mary Jemison, who actually refused to return to white society[20]. Traders often "married" native women, to gain influence and insight into a tribe[21]. The benevolent, if patronising, intentions of the metropolitan elites, however, were rarely put in practise on the frontier. What most colonists wanted was land, and Indian populations were at best a nuisance. Abuses such as the infamous 'Walking Purchase'[22] in Pennsylvania were frequent. Treaties were signed and blissfully violated; debts, alcohol or coercion were used to get more land, means also employed by dishonest traders. This, inevitably, led to wars, such as in Virginia with Opechancanough in 1622 and 1644[23], or in New England with the Pequots in 1637[24], or with 'King Philip' in 1675[25]. Even Indians who embraced the European culture were often treated as second-rate citizens, as the Reverend Samson Occom, a native convert, bitterly underlined[26]. The Europeans never really managed to see the local populations as their equals; they saw them at best as useful, for trade or as proxies in war. The best the 'Savage' could do was to adopt the colonisers' way of life, and even then he was always somewhat suspicious. Native discourses contradicting European claims of

[20] *The World Turned Upside Down*, Mary Jemison, 'A Narrative of Her Life', pp.73-77.
[21] *The Indians' New World*, Ch.2, 'The Power of the Steelyard: The Triumph of Trade'.
[22] *The World Turned Upside Down*, p.95.
[23] *American Colonies*, p.135.
[24] *American Colonies*, pp.194-197.
[25] *American Colonies*, pp.199-202.
[26] *The World Turned Upside Down*, Samson Occom, 'A Short Narrative of My Life', pp.55-62.

superiority, pointing out inequalities, poverty and incompetence in the settlements, were ignored, or exasperated colonists unprepared to question their convictions[27].

The European culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was shaped by wars: Ralegh argued that "the ordinary theme and argument of history is war"[28]. The motor of colonisation was greed. Soldiers and colonists were not going to have much time for tolerance or respect for native cultures. Even when they were interested in trade, more than in conquest or plantation, such as the French or the Dutch, they cared little for the local populations. Although some Indians, such as the Iroquois Six Nations, managed to subsist for a while by playing one European power against another, the recurring patterns for local tribes were to move to the West, die out, or be absorbed by colonies. The view of Indians as "savages" remained until the end: Brown quotes Sheridan in the 1860s as considering any Indian who resisted when fired upon as a "savage" [29] (indeed, he also said that "the only good Indians I ever saw were dead"[30])! Considering the problems faced by the natives and the prejudices firmly entrenched in the European mind, a peaceful coexistence was highly unlikely.

[27] See Chrestien LeClerq, 'A Micmac Responds to the French', in *The World Turned Upside Down*, pp.50-52.
[28] Sheehan, p.145.
[29] *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, p.166.
[30] *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, p.170.

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