

INDIANS AND SPANIARDS IN THE NEW WORLD:
A PERSONAL VIEW

SINCE I AM NEITHER AN INDIAN NOR SPANIARD, I owe you an explanation for describing my remarks as "a personal view." Historians rarely write or talk much about themselves or their methods. They have grander subjects to discuss, larger canvasses to paint. Occasionally an Edward Gibbon tells of his moment of inspiration while contemplating the ruins of ancient Rome when he determined that his lifework would be the study of the fall of its far-flung empire; or a William H. Prescott records in his diary the long search he undertook to find a suitable subject before he decided upon the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru. Historians are not noted for devotion to methodology, though Hubert Howe Bancroft defended himself and his historical methods in that remarkable final volume, number 39, which he correctly and perhaps impishly entitled *Literary Industries*; Halvdan Koht in our own time has narrated his own role in Norwegian history because he was an important part of it; and J. H. Hexter has given us a blow by blow account of how he spends his days as a prelude to explaining why history is constantly being rewritten. But these are exceptions: even while in prison Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch wrote not about themselves but about history.

Perhaps I have been influenced in my presentation today by Carl Becker and his views on "Everyman His Own Historian." Forty years ago as the most junior member of the faculty of the American University of Beirut in Syria I had the audacity to write him on the subject of historical interpretations, and he had the generosity to reply wittily and at length. Ever afterward I followed his writings with special interest. At a time when graduate students in history are being urged "to get with it" and learn the mysteries of the computer in order to portray the past more quantitatively, it may seem downright exhibitionary to talk about how I discovered the Indians and what an impact their relations with the Spaniards made on me. But I hope that you will see

that the subject can be approached meaningfully in this personal way. Indeed, that there are so many parallels between the days of the Spanish empire and our own time that new insights or at least new approaches are possible if we analyze those parallels.

The first contact I had with the Indians was to see an exhibition of arrow heads in the Public Library in Piqua, Ohio, a small town in which I grew up and where I began to study Spanish under a lively teacher who first roused in me a curiosity about all things connected with Spain and the Spanish language. But neither then nor in my undergraduate years did Indians of any part of the Americas particularly interest me. They were part of the scenery as the Spanish conquistadores performed their great exploits; their ancient civilizations were for archaeologists to dig up for exhibition in museums, of purely antiquarian interest. Indians were buried for me under a mass of particular facts about innumerable tribes.

Then followed my first teaching experiences at the University of Hawaii and the American University of Beirut. Let us kindly draw a veil over this four year period — I am sure that I learned much more than my students — but these years did give me some first-hand contact with other peoples, with different cultures than that of the United States under Calvin Coolidge. Following this apprenticeship in teaching, I returned to undertake graduate work and by chance a brief but suggestive study by a Spanish scholar in the field of law and political science, Fernando de los Ríos, came to my attention which brought out the fact that many theories of government were involved in the Spanish conquest of America¹. When it became necessary to prepare a term paper for a course on the history of political theory from Aristotle to Rousseau, I discovered that the writings of the sixteenth-century Spanish Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas were full of ideas, and worked out a monograph on this subject which was limited largely to the theoretical and legal aspects of Spain's attempt to rule the Indies by just methods². This approach emphasized the juridical treatises by those who preceded Las Casas — such as Matías de Paz and Juan López Palacio Rubios — and by his own views as well as those of his great

¹ Fernando de los Ríos, *Religión y estado en la España del Siglo XVI* (New York, Instituto de las Españas, 1927).

² *Las teorías políticas de Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Buenos Aires, 1935. Publicaciones del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas N° 67, Universidad de Buenos Aires).

contemporaries of the first half of the sixteenth-century, Francisco de Vitoria and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. But as I penetrated farther and farther into the great legacy of law political theory that has come down to us from the sixteenth-century, I began to be aware of some of the larger problems of the history of Spain in America, and its interpretation.

The laws devised by Spain to govern her vast American dominions also formed a part of this juridical approach, for many of the ordinances had been drawn up to protect the Indians by regulating the behavior of the Spaniards toward them. As political enemies of Spain and others have been quick to point out, these thousands of laws could not all be enforced throughout the empire from California to Patagonia. The phrase with which royal officials in the New World received a new law which they did not intend to put into effect — "Let this law be formally obeyed, but not enforced" — has become embedded in all the textbooks as a clear case of Spanish hypocrisy. It could be more correctly interpreted as a means by which the execution of an unpopular or unsuitable law could be suspended until an appeal could be made across the seas to authorities in Spain. Yet of course laws were broken throughout the enormous Spanish empire, and one of the best ways to find out what evils the Spanish crown was attempting to abolish is by analyzing the laws themselves. Some of the most telling descriptions of Spanish cruelty to Indians, for example, are found in the texts of royal orders, so much so that the seventeenth-century jurist Juan Solórzano y Pereira was ordered to remove from the manuscript of his fundamental work *Política Indiana* some of the ordinances designed to prevent mistreatment of Indians to keep notice of these things from reaching foreigners.

Laws also reflect attitudes and practices of society. Consider the significance of N^o 24 of the Laws of Burgos, the first formal and detailed regulations drawn up to govern relations between Spaniards and Indians on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola only 20 years after Columbus landed: "We order and command that no person or persons shall dare to beat any Indian with sticks, or whip him, or call him dog, or address him by any name other than his proper name alone."³ I have long suspected that some Spaniards, given their legalistic nature,

³ Lesley Byrd Simpson, ed., *The Laws of Burgos of 1512-1513* (San Francisco, John Howell, 1960), 32.

must have had an Indian or so baptized with the name of *perro* (dog) so that they could call them by this name with entire legality! The laws of many peoples of course contain similar revelations. For example, the 1967 state legislature of California passed the following law: "It is unlawful to drive an automobile under the influence of glue fumes or other chemicals classed as poisons." How useful historians in future years will find this ordinance as a clue to the more of California today!

Las Casas knew his people and their veneration for legal principles, and once said: "For 48 years I have been engaged in studying and inquiring into the law. I believe, if I am not mistaken, I have penetrated into the heart of this subject until I have arrived at the fundamental principles involved."⁴ These fundamental principles Las Casas expounded in great and at times painful detail in the many treatises that I read as preparation for my study of his political theories. For this apostle, who burned with a fierce zeal on behalf of the newly discovered Indians, the true title of Spain and the only possible justification lay in the donation by the pope, which was made in order to bring the Indians to a knowledge of Christ. He was bitterly scornful of the justifications which some persons brought forward. To those who suggest that Spain's proximity to the Indies gave her a superior right, Las Casas points out that Portugal really lies closer to the New World. To those who urge the greater wisdom and understanding of Spaniards as justifying their lordship over the Indians, he replies that many other nations are wiser and of greater genius than Spain — witness the Greeks, the Africans, the Asians. To those who cite the opinion of the medieval thinker Ostiensis to the effect that all infidels are unworthy of exercising jurisdiction, he retorts that these persons do not really understand the true meaning of Ostiensis as he proved in detail in a Latin treatise. As for those who establish Spain's title because Indians are idolatrous or commit unnatural crimes, they do not seem to realize that the Indians live for the most part an orderly, political life in towns and in some respects are superior to Spaniards. And the worst reason of all is that advanced by those who justify Spain's title by her more superiority in arms, which is an "absurd nefarious argument unworthy of being advanced by reasonable and Christian men."

⁴ This section of the paper is based on *Las teorías políticas*, cited in note 2 above.

Francisco de Vitoria, the Dominican professor at the University of Salamanca, never went to America but this cloistered thinker also confronted the problem of how to establish relations between Spain and the Indies. His was a more academic mind than that of Las Casas, though on many fundamental points their views coincided, and in addition he had a sense of humor for he once remarked that if a canoe-load of Indians had somehow reached Spain and "discovered" it, this fact would by no means justify Indian sovereignty over Spain. Today Vitoria is honored as one of the first and most important founders of international law, whose development in modern times we owe in considerable part to the many political theorists who sprang up in sixteenth-century Spain to argue over the true nature of her rule over the Indies.

But the legal approach is never wholly satisfactory; besides, even after the course on political theory was over, I was faced with the necessity of making "an original contribution to knowledge" in the shape of a doctoral dissertation. So in the fall of 1932 I took my wife and two small sons to Sevilla, after a summer in Germany where Adolf Hitler was beginning to reach for power with the help of his doctrine of racial superiority. My hope was to find in Spain the papers of Bartolomé de Las Casas and with ample documentation to adequately treat the life of this passionate and determined friar whose influence in history has been so marked. But the papers of Las Casas, which during the last few years of his life were so voluminous that they made it difficult for visitors to get in and out of his cell in San Gregorio monastery in Valladolid, simply could not be found. After some months of desperation, I came to realize that the story I wanted to tell did not depend upon finding more Las Casas papers. His essential doctrines and ideas, for the most part, had been published. My real discovery was that he was only one, the most aggressive and articulate one, to be sure, of those Spaniards who sought to have the conquest follow Christian and just principles.

Therefore, during nearly two years of work in Spanish and other collections, I abandoned the plan to write about one man, Las Casas, and decided that my aim would be to demonstrate that the Spanish conquest of America was far more than a remarkable military and political exploit; that it was also one of the greatest attempts the world has seen to make Christian precepts prevail in the relations between peoples.

Since those far-off days in the Spanish archives, my life has consisted of teaching and more study followed by observation in the field. Sometimes these essential activities of historians were combined. In the summer of 1935, a grant enabled me to visit Latin America for the first time, to consult some original Las Casas documents in the Convento de San Felipe in Sucre, Bolivia. The Chaco War between Bolivia and her neighbor Paraguay was still raging, and the young German pilots in my hotel in Sucre constituted a convincing illustration of the way in which outside forces and foreign nations have so often influenced or tried to influence the course of events in Latin America. As is frequently the case, I found a manuscript in the convent archive I was not looking for; besides the Las Casas material there was a copy of the formal record made in Spain of a deathbed statement made by the Dominican friar Domingo de Betanzos which began as follows: "In the very noble city of Valladolid on September 13, in the year of Our Lord 1549, before me Antonio Canseco, notary public of Your Majesties, being in the monastery of San Pablo of the Order of Preachers, in a room in that monastery there was an old man with head and beard shaven, lying in bed apparently ill but in his right mind, called Friar Domingo de Betanzos. And he handed over to me, the aforesaid notary public, a sheet of paper on which he told me he had written and declared certain matters, which concerned his conscience, and which related specially to the affairs of the Indies, which manuscript and declaration he delivered to me."⁵

This declaration referred to a written memorial Betanzos had presented to the Council of the Indies some years before in which he had declared that the Indians were beasts (*bestias*), that they had sinned, that God had condemned them, and that all of them would perish. Now on his deathbed the friar believed that he had erred "through not knowing their language or because of some other ignorance" and formally retracted the statements in the memorial.

As I walked through the streets of Sucre after the archive closed for the day I realized that for those of us interested in Latin American history the archive is not a sepulchre of dead information, but living documentation of a society much like the present. For on my way home after my archival work had ended, I visited the ancient silver mining center of Potosí and there observed a Bolivian army officer

⁵ See my *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 12.

viciously kicking Indian recruits brought together in the great Casa de Moneda for despatch to the front. This officer also called the Indians "dogs" and other unpleasant names. Later when philosophic-minded historians eager to split hairs denied that any Spaniard had ever called Indians "beasts" in the full scientific and philosophical sense of the word, I found it difficult to follow their subtle reasoning. For I had seen with my own eyes the retraction of Domingo de Betanzos of 1549 on his deathbed in Spain and also the treatment meted out to Indians in Bolivia in 1935.

On my return to the United States I plunged into the final struggle to organize in some meaningful way the material dug out of the solid historical rock in the archives and completed my dissertation which had this dull title, the kind all too often given to such academic exercises, "Theoretical Aspects of the Spanish Conquest of America".

Then in the next year I observed living Indians closely in Mexico, Guatemala, and Brazil while studying anthropology and geography. For I had emerged from the long process of graduate study as a "depression doctorate". No jobs were available, as Latin American history was still considered a kind of fringe subject, and besides our universities were not expanding. Today, of course, the situation is reversed. Our newly minted Ph.D. kindly allow chairmen of departments and deans to compete eagerly for their services. Young scholars enquire into the fringe benefits offered and summer research grants available before they decide which position to accept. But in 1937, faced with the prospect of no job, I applied for a Social Science Research Council post-doctoral Fellowship, and for 18 months my family was supported while I studied cultural anthropology under the aegis of Robert Redfield and human geography with Preston James. The purpose was to broaden my interest, and this the fellowship did. Besides library study, I studied Redfield in the field as he studied the villagers in Agua Escondida above Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, a kind of parasitical existence! I discovered that this experience, brief as it was, deepened my concern with native peoples and enlarged my understanding of the problems which the Spaniards met in their far-flung explorations. Because in the written records of this now distant time Spanish voices spoke so much more loudly than those of the Indians, the historian in the Latin American field must never fail to try to keep aware of the Indian realities that were so meagerly documented and sometimes only reflected in Spanish documents.

And I had an opportunity to see how Indians and Indian problems were still of enormous concern to a number of Latin American countries; and also that historians and historical interpretations were often influenced by present-day attitudes toward the work of Spain in the New World, particularly its actions toward Indians and Indian civilization. This feeling was deepened during the 12 years I served in the Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress, 1939 to 1951, a position which enabled me to travel widely in Spanish — and Portuguese — speaking lands and to discuss historical problems with their scholars. I published rather regularly in Latin American reviews, and received valuable suggestions for the improvement of my work from my colleagues. My 1949 volume on *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* was based upon my doctoral dissertation but also reflected my experiences and discussions over a dozen years or more.

These were the days before the phrase "publish or perish" came to have such sordid connotations. Spanish-speaking historians taught me that publication was the way to express one's ideas to engage in discussion and argument with other historians in the world and thus to learn from your peers. The most regrettable result of the present "publish or perish" syndrome is not that the world has to suffer some articles and books that are too green for human consumption but that our younger colleagues, and some older ones too, have not come to realize that unless they do let the world know what they are thinking they will not only have no evidence to be weighed on the scales outside the Dean's office but they will cease to grow intellectually. Reluctance to write, through is no new phenomenon. The official Spanish chroniclers of the Indies were not paid the last quarter of their annual salary until they had handed in some writing to the Council of the Indies.

To conclude on the subject of publication, a historian who does not write may become isolated from the world. There are few ivory towers today, and none should be inhabited by historians. The functions of a historian have been long debated, but surely one of them is to communicate what he has learned and thus to add to the sum of usable knowledge gained in his own time.

My experience in the Library of Congress not merely gave me an opportunity to travel widely in the Hispanic world and to discuss with many scholars their ideas and their preoccupations but also to experience the changes going on in Washington, D.C. The years 1939-1951

saw in the nation's capitol many significant changes, specially in racial matters. One of my secretaries for a time was a young Negro whose husband was a lieutenant in the army, for government agencies then began to work steadily against job discrimination. The Library cafeteria was opened to Negroes, and I still remember my sense of adventure when the late Professor E. Franklin Frazier of Howard University had lunch with me there. One day I noticed that a Negro was eating in the Methodist Cafeteria, opposite the Supreme Court, and discovered that this excellent eating place had been desegregated without fanfare. So I invited my old friend from graduate school days, Professor Rayford W. Logan, then Chairman of the History Department at Howard University, to lunch with me there. He had not heard of the quiet revolution at the Methodist Cafeteria, but characteristically accepted, remarking that if any difficulty arose he would speak French so that he could pass as a Haitian diplomat.

All these experiences naturally affected the way I looked at the Spanish struggle for justice in America. Now this struggle on behalf of justice for the Indians appeared to have a more universal significance than before. This feeling was reinforced on our removal to Texas in 1951, to re-enter the academic world. Those were the days when the United States government and foundations alike had apparently forgotten Latin America and poured millions of dollars into the study of other areas of the world. There was some advantage in this poverty, for one had an opportunity to think.

Texas, moreover, was a stimulating place to be in the decade 1951-1961. For this southwestern state was searching its soul on the question of justice for Negroes, and the Regents of the state University of Texas admitted Negroes before the Supreme Court required them to do so. But the power and the rigidity of the social structure which had for so long maintained segregation there helped me to understand the bitter battles Las Casas fought. This intemperance alienated many in his own time, and later too. His vehemence, his exaggeration, his unwillingness to sugar-coat the pill of his continuous and unpalatable criticism, and his incorrigible habit of speaking his mind freely to king, courtier, or conquistador roused much resentment. His central idea was itself shocking to many of his contemporaries. To practical conquistadores and administrators, men struggling for immediate worldly goals, and perhaps to the crown as well, jealous as it was of all royal prerogatives, his reiteration that the only justification for the presence of

Spaniards in the New World was the Christianization of the Indians by patiently peaceful means alone seemed dangerous nonsense. What they must have felt when he declared that it would be better for the Spaniards to leave the New World, with its Indians un-Christianized, than to remain and to bring them into the fold by forcible, un-Christian methods is not difficult to imagine.

As I observed the events of the ever-increasing battle over civil rights in Texas — for those citizens of Mexican origin as well as for Negroes — the sixteenth-century seemed to me to be drawing steadily closer to our own time. It was no superficial notion, but a fact that the social turbulence aroused then by the question of justice for the Indians had an important connection with the world situation today. In particular I saw this with respect to the confrontation at Valladolid in 1550 and 1551 between Las Casas and Sepúlveda over the application of Aristotle's doctrine of natural slavery to the Indians⁶.

Some controversies over men and ideas of the past are no more relevant to men today than the famous medieval disputes over the number of angels that can be accommodated on the point of a pin. But the struggle for justice between men of different races and cultures, which Las Casas and other Spaniards of the sixteenth-century waged, was of a different order, I believed. For it concerned the fundamental challenge men of Europe had to meet when they first encountered on American soil men of different cultures and different religions in that tremendous chapter of history known as the expansion of Europe. Viewed in this perspective, the Valladolid dispute lives on principally because of the universality of the ideas on the nature of man which Las Casas enunciated, when he set forth in dramatic and compelling fashion his doctrine that "all the peoples of the world are men" and his faith that God would not allow any nation to exist, "no matter how barbarous, fierce, or depraved its customs" which might not be "persuaded and brought to a good order and way of life, and made domestic, mild, and tractable, provided the method that is proper and natural to men is used; namely, love, gentleness, and kindness."

One of the finest passages in the Valladolid argument of Las Casas serves to illustrate the simple grandeur of which he was capable at his best:

⁶ The following material is based on my *Aristotle and the American Indians* (London, Hollis and Carter, 1959).

"Thus mankind is one, and all men are alike in that which concerns their creation and all natural things, and no one is born enlightened. From this it follows that all of us must be guided and aided at first by those who were born before us. And the savage peoples of the earth may be compared to uncultivated soil that readily brings forth weeds and useless thorns, but has within itself such natural virtue that by labor and cultivation it may be made to yield sound and beneficial fruits."⁷

Las Casas was here arguing against Sepúlveda, but he was also stating a proposition which has rallied men in many parts of the world. And he was basing his argument on the belief that the way to civilize any people was to bring religion and education to them, and not just accustom them to the material goods hitherto unknown to them⁸. The recommendation of Bernardo de Gálvez in eighteenth-century Mexico that Indians were to be given "horses, cattle, mules, guns, ammunition, and knives" and were to be encouraged to "become greedy for the possession of land" would have been anathema to Las Casas.

Las Casas may have been wrong in his bold declaration that "all peoples of the world are men", if this is taken to mean equality in all things. Recent scientific investigations demonstrate that on the contrary men vary greatly in many of their physical and psychological characteristics. But few today can be unmoved by his affirmation that "the law of nations and natural law apply to Christian and gentile alike, and to all people of any sect, law, condition, or color without any distinction whatsoever", or by the words in which he set forth the sixth reason for the composition of his *History of the Indies*:

"To liberate my own Spanish nation from the error and very grave and very pernicious illusion in which they now live and have always lived, of considering these people to lack the essential characteristics of men, judging them brute beasts incapable of virtue and religion, depreciating their good qualities and exaggerating the bad which is in them. These peoples have been hidden away and forgotten for many centuries, and [it has been my purpose] to stretch out our hands to them in some way, so that they would not remain oppressed as at present because of this very false opinion of them, and kept permanently down in the darkness."⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

At a time when the conquistadores were bringing to the notice of the European world a whole new continent inhabited by strange races, it was Las Casas, rejecting Sepúlveda's view that the Indians were an inferior type of humanity condemned to serve the Spaniards, who "stretched out his hand" to the American Indians, with faith in the capacity for civilization of all peoples. This conviction, in Las Casas and other Spaniards, and the action which flowed from it, given a unique distinction to the Spanish effort in America¹⁰. Las Casas represents both that "authentic Spanish fury" with which Spaniards confront human and divine matters, and the typical attitude of the Salamanca school of sixteenth-century theologians, who believed that thought and action must be so intimately fused that they cannot be separated, and that spiritual truth must be made manifest in the world about us. Las Casas thought that the end of the world might not be far off—indeed, he wrote his *History of the Indies* in order to explain God's action in the event that He decided to destroy Spain for her misdeeds in America—but meanwhile there was work to be done in the world. He would have agreed perfectly with the seventeenth-century Puritan Matthew Henry who declared: "The sons and daughters of heaven, while they are here in the world, have something to do about this earth, which must have its share of their time and thoughts." He would also have considered as one of his followers Thomas Jefferson who wrote a few days before he died on July 4, 1826: "the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."

In an attempt to put the sixteenth-century struggle between Las Casas and Sepúlveda in perspective, I wrote a small book, *Aristotle and the American Indians*, and there tried to show that it had relevance to the present travail of our epoch of history which might be called the expansion of the world, resulting, paradoxically, from the contraction of the world because of improved transportation and communication¹¹.

The passion aroused in Spain and America more than four centuries ago over the establishing of proper relations between peoples of different color, cultures, religions and technical knowledge, has today a contemporary and poignant ring. For Sepúlveda and Las

¹⁰ *The Spanish Struggle for Justice*, 17.

¹¹ *Bartolomé de Las Casas. An Interpretation of his Life and Writings*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1951.

Casas still represent two basic contradictory responses to the culture clash resulting from the encounter between peoples who differ in important respects from one another, and particularly in *power*. The incomprehension and hostility of those who hold predominant power to those who because they are different (are the *others*, the *strangers*) can be called inferior has been an historical constant. Indeed at times it seems to be the dominant theme in human history. The challenge in our time is not only geopolitical and ideological on the international front but touches us closely within our own society, where the cry for justice is uttered by embattled minorities, articulate as the Indians of Latin America never were (or at least the records of history are largely silent on that matter).

Today, because we North Americans hold so much power, we are beset by the consequences of it, both at home and abroad, and the restlessness in many societies of the dispossessed, the disadvantaged, has stirred up in us the uneasiness of those who now question our behavior and our attitudes to the strangers, the ones who are different. Sepúlveda has many followers who do not know that they follow him in believing that differentness means inferiority. So does Las Casas have followers who are deeply troubled because they cannot believe otherwise than that all the peoples of the world are men, with the rights and just claims of men, and believe that they must work to forward justice at home and internationally.

Now let me bring to a close this personal record of my experiences and my reflections on the Indians under Spanish rule by an account of some recent observations. In November, 1967, I was attended the III Latin American Conference on Political and Social Sciences at the University of Santo Domingo. Of all the troubled lands of Latin America, Santo Domingo is perhaps in the most difficult situation as it suffered for 30 years under the dictatorship of Generalissimo Trujillo and in April, 1965, United States troops invaded it. The marks of those tragic events are still to be seen in Santo Domingo, in the minds of men as well as in the bullet-holes which scar buildings there. The hostility of most delegates to this conference and of apparently all the student body to practically everything from the United States and to the vestiges of Spanish colonial rule, was very marked. Many of the university buildings were festooned with "Go home, Yankee" and "Down with American Imperialism" signs. And speakers at the afternoon session of November 27 could scarcely be heard even with the aid of loud

speakers because just outside the meeting hall students kept up a steady barrage of slogans and rhythmic hand-clapping, broken only by the ceremony of burning the United States flag and by periods of reading passages from the writings of Mao Tse-tung and Lenin.

As a historian I could not forget that on the Sunday before Christmas in 1511 a Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesinos preached a revolutionary sermon in a straw-thatched church on the island of Hispaniola, now called Santo Domingo. Speaking on the text "I am a voice crying in the wilderness", Montesinos delivered the first important and deliberate public protest against the kind of treatment being accorded the Indians by his Spanish countrymen. This first cry on behalf of human liberty in the New World was a turning point in the history of America and, as Pedro Henriquez Ureña termed it, one of the great events in the spiritual history of mankind.

The sermon, preached before the "best people" of the first Spanish town established in the New World, was designed to shock and terrify its hearers. Montesinos thundered, according to Las Casas:

"In order to make your sins against the Indian known to you I have come up on this pulpit, I who am a voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island, and therefore it behooves you to listen, not with careless attention, but with all your heart and senses, so that you may hear it; for this is going to be the strangest voice that ever you heard, the harshest and hardest and most awful and dangerous that ever you expected to hear. . . . This voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged a detestable war against these people, who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own land? . . . Why do you keep them so oppressed and weary, not giving them enough to eat nor taking care of them in their illness? For with the excessive work you demand of them they fall ill and die, or rather you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. And what care do you take that they should be instructed in religion? . . . Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? . . . Be certain that, in such a state as this, you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks."

The struggle thus begun in Santo Domingo in 1511 continues today in that same troubled land, in all America, and throughout the world.

The confusion over what constitutes justice and how to achieve it are also still with us, in the United States and elsewhere. Historians still disagree sharply over their interpretations of the work in Spain in America. I still remember vividly the challenge hurled at me by a Spanish priest as I concluded a series of lectures on Las Casas in Havana in 1950 — a verbal challenge, for he wanted to arrange a three-day debate between us, with secretaries present, on Spanish-Indian relations. And I remember the tremendous denunciation of Las Casas by the 95 year old Spanish scholar Ramón Menéndez Pidal in 1963.

As historians we must recognize that, no matter what conclusion one reaches on Las Casas or on Spanish efforts in America, the struggles for justice —though they often failed— have endowed the history of Spain in America with a unique quality which powerfully influences the researches and the teaching of all who are concerned with Latin American affairs whether of the past or of the present. Cannot the undergraduates in our classes, aware as never before of the imperfections of our own society, now better understand the turbulent events of the history of Spain in America? Will they not see that the aspect of Latin American history most bitterly discussed during all the years since 1492 has been the relations between Indians and Spaniards? The Spanish conquest has been so passionately discussed for so long because it created new societies whose old problems continue to haunt them today.

Thus the conquest is the still living past of both Spain and Spanish America. Can we North Americans, engaged in world relations and our greatest social revolution, not learn something about Latin America's tragic problems and our own by recalling the events and protagonists of the first struggle for justice in the New World?

In the almost 50 years that have passed since as a high school boy I saw those Indian arrowheads in the Schmidlapp Free Public Library in Piqua, Ohio, I have come to see in my studies on the Spanish empire in America the significance of the view that all history is contemporary history.