

COSTS OF AFFLUENCE

By benaxiom@yahoo.com

Affluence can be thought of as a synonym for, a perhaps no less ambiguous term, "civilization". Civilization is simply a derivative of term "civis" meaning "city"(Heinberg 1997). It is important to understand exactly what the development of cities, and the organization of human societies in urban environment represents. Popular knowledge dictates that civilization came about as the agricultural mode of production enabled populations to increase, and food sources to be more plentiful and reliable. In turn, the newfound "liberation" from nomadic foraging, allowed for ever-increasing stratification and specialization of labor, class, prestige, and power. According to our culture's mythology, it was exactly this stratification that paved and plowed the way for the state, technological advancement, and most importantly, so called abundance and affluence. In other words, civilization and agriculture provided the ability, through complex social and political organization, to produce ever-increasing amounts of food, to feed ever-increasing numbers of people, all to be managed by a narrowing elite class of rulers backed by force (the state). Under this hierarchical structure, new wealth of enslaved human and natural resources could be harvested to create abundance and affluence for the few.

Embedded in our culture's consciousness is the understanding that these profound changes in human society, in essence, created the affluent society. What is lost in this romantic view of the ascension of "civilized man", is the understanding of the horrendous inequality within "the affluent societies" and the significance of the effect such societies have on the natural environment, and on other societies and cultures that were brutally assimilated into a civilized and agricultural existence.

The "affluence" that civilizations have created for themselves, or more accurately, for their rulers and elites has always been at the expense of those around them. Heinberg summarizes this well in writing, "...The history of civilization in the Near East, Far East, and Central America, is also the history of kinship, slavery, conquest, agriculture, overpopulation, and environmental ruin (Heinberg 1997)." This quote identifies many of the major costs of civilization, or "the affluent society." The area, in which I will focus on is that of conquest.

As Heinberg suggests, we may think of the history of civilization and affluence as synonymous with the atrocities he listed; of which, conquest may be the one of the most important. This phenomenon has been integral to the creation of civilized "affluent societies" for millennia. Here, I will address the phenomenon of conquest, within the context of modern history. Using the case of New World conquest, and the current case of oil drilling in U'Wa land, I will show that the inherent logic, structure, and ideology that is implicit in building and expanding historic and modern empires is consistent with those of the first ancient civilizations.

The case of New World conquest is, and will continue to be, important to study and understand, as the same fundamental logic and ideology that legitimized mass genocide is still with us today in the form of corporate globalization.

Let's step back in time to 1492. After 32 days at sea the ships found land. At first site of the ships, the natives approached, welcoming with gifts. Columbus' first thoughts, as recorded in his journal, were: 'With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want (Zinn: 1997c: 3).'

His motivation to make this a reality was clear, he would get 10% of whatever riches were obtained, control over the discovered lands, and the honorable title: "Admiral of the Ocean Sea."

Columbus noticed that the natives wore gold in their ears. To him, this was license to capture them and force them to lead his associates to the source. The fever for gold field discovery

took greater hold, upon the sight of gold specks in a river in Haiti and the sight of a gold mask shown by a native chief (Zinn 1997c: 5). Despite the existence of gold, it did not turn out to be quite as abundant as expected. In order to have something to show for this expedition, Columbus took slaves back to Spain. Many of them died in transit. Upon returning to Madrid, he gave a report to the royal court in which he spoke of the rivers, "of which the majority contain gold...There are many spices, and great mines of gold and other metals...(Zinn 1997c: 5)." The report Columbus gave was far from accurate. It ended up being more of a desperate attempt to attribute divine ordinance to the continuation of his mission to provide slaves and gold to the state, and the word of god to the savages. However, his acting before the elites worked; he was given 17 ships this time and over 12,000 men (Zinn 1997: 6).

To officiate the purpose and instructions of the second voyage, a memorial was written on the "settlement and government" of the islands of Indies. This formal document served, more accurately, the purpose of the laying out instructions as to how to deal with the immense amounts of gold expected to be retrieved. Kirkpatrick Sale writes on the nature of this document, "Above all, as we might by now expect, the overriding concern was for gold, with nearly two-thirds of the document given over to the process by which the governor (Colon himself, of course) and local officers would control the gathering, melting, storing, selling, and shipment of the metal (Sale 1991: 127)." He goes on to quote a direct line from the document in which Columbus states, "owing to the greed for gold, everyone will prefer to seek it rather than engage in other necessary occupations (Sale 1991:127)."

The intent of conquest was clear: gold was to be obtained at all cost. At this point, Columbus had many more grand promises to fulfill than he did initially. This fact and many other factors led to the realization of indescribable suffering for the natives. Here I will detail the costs of creating the affluent society in terms of the immediate and gradual effects of conquest on the natives of the New World.

Though, as word spread of the intent of the invaders many tribes abandoned villages, the immanent threat was unavoidable. Those that were rounded up were forced into slavery to seek out gold fields. All individuals that were 14 years of age or older were forced to retrieve a set amount of gold every quarter of a year. If they were able to meet the quota, they were given copper necklaces to denote their tribute, if they were seen without these symbols, they were killed (Zinn 1991: 6). On Haiti alone, after mass suicides, and mass murder of the 250,000 natives alive prior to contact, half were dead (Zinn 1991: 7).

The same fate would come for peoples all over the New World. Clive Ponting sums up the costs of creating the affluent society in the New World in writing: "Just how rapidly the vulnerable native societies in the Americas could collapse is demonstrated by events on Santo Domingo, one of the first islands to be discovered by Columbus. At the time of the Spanish conquest the population was about one million, yet within forty years, after intense exploitation, slavery and many deaths through European diseases, there were only a few hundred natives left (Ponting 1993c:130)."

The monetary gain to be acquired by civilized nations was the initial impetus for the genocide that occurred in the New World. Zinn characterizes this impetus clearly, "It seems there was a frenzy in the early capitalist states of Europe for gold, slaves, for products of the soil, to pay the bondholders and stockholders of the expeditions, to finance the monarchical bureaucracies rising in Western Europe...These were the violent beginnings of an intricate system of technology, business, politics, and culture that would dominate the world for the next five centuries (Zinn 1997:12)."

But underneath this superficial reasoning, lies deep theological, intellectual, and ideological roots of European expansion and conquest. An understanding of the paradigms expressed by figures such as Christopher Columbus is just as integral to understanding the costs of creating the affluent society, as an understanding of the reasons to obtain material wealth. In other words, we can recognize reflectively that greed is morally corruptive, but if we look no further

than this, we may never question the fundamental intellectual, ideological, and theological pretexts that allow civilizations to conquer other lands and peoples.

The first layer beneath the outright greed, is that of Christopher Columbus' utilitarian view towards the natural world. Columbus expressed appreciation for the beauty of the lands he had discovered, was inextricably tied to his vision of the beauty transformed into tangible riches. To Columbus, the beautiful trees represented a limitless supply of ships that could be built; and the exotic plants would certainly provide medicinal spices (Sale 1991:105).

A utilitarian view of the natives themselves would follow Columbus in the form of the reading of what was called "the Requerimiento", to the captives. This statement was like reading them their rights, so to speak. It informed them of their immediate obligation to recognize the divinity of God and the Spanish Church, to relinquish all of their possessions, and to be wholly obedient to the conquerors. Of course none of this was translated, nor even delivered with a pretense of an attempt to send a clear statement to the Indians themselves. Rather, writes author David E. Stannard, "the proclamation was merely a legalistic rationale for a fanatically religious and fanatically brutal people to justify a holocaust (Stannard 1992: 66)."

Clearly, in order for such an arrogant, inhumane, and utilitarian practice to occur these men must have been very certain of the legitimacy of their actions. In order to be impervious to remorse and moral questioning, more than simple greed must have guided these men. The use of religious superiority appears to have been a perfect justification for the subjugation of "lesser" peoples.

The Swiss philosopher, Paracelsus, dealt with the concept of what would later be termed "poly-genesis" in the early 16th century. According to him, all non-white people were not descendants of Adam and Eve; rather, they were descendent from inferior and separate progenitors (Stannard 1992: 209). This view of non-Christian non-white people as "inferior," falls in line within Aristotle's notion of "The Great Chain of Being" upon which all life forms are assigned a position based on advancement toward the anthropocentric and ethnocentric climax of high civilization.

This logic has been at the core of western thought, and the premise responsible for expansion and conquest for millennia. In Columbus' time, it was enough to identify the people as savages without god, nor civilization. Author, Francis Jennings writes on this, "The conquerors of America glorified the devastation they wrought in visions of righteousness, and their descendants have been reluctant to peer through the aura. Decent men with pigmentless skins no longer overtly espouse delusion of peculiar grandeur, but the myths created by the cant of conquest endure in many forms to mask the terrible tragedy that was Europe's glory. Although the ideologists of conquest can no longer evoke admiration for holy wars or pseudo-biology, they have yet one great and powerful system of myth among their resources. In it the Christian Caucasians of Europe are not only holy and white but also civilized, while the pigmented heathens of distant lands are not only idolatrous and dark but savage. Thus the absolutes of predator and prey have been preserved, and the grandeur of invasion and massacre has kept its sanguinary radiance (Jennings 1975: 6)."

Ultimately, the costs of creating the affluent society in the case of New World conquest have resulted in mass genocide for the indigenous people enslaved and decimated in the name of Christianity and civilization. Beyond this example (of the inherently exploitative nature of civilization based on the accumulation of wealth in the form of land, labor, and natural resources), what is most insidious about the history of European atrocity in the New World is the ideological framework from which it operates. This framework can be observed in action as we speak; though now it appears within the new methodological framework of corporate globalization.

Part II: The U'wa, 500 Years Later

The name U'wa means "the thinking people" because of the fact that for thousands of years they have avoided conflict with neighboring tribes with the use of communication. Today, 5,000 U'wa exist in the cloud forests of the Colombian Andes. They were once a tribe of

around 20,000 which occupied territory from southern Venezuela all the way into northeastern Columbia, an expanse of approximately three million acres. The Colombian government has since seized 85 percent of the U'wa tribe's traditional land. In 2000, only about 247,700 acres were officially recognized by the Colombian government (Rainforest Action Network 2000).

At the time of the arrival of Conquistadors in Columbia, the U'wa migrated far into the hills to avoid being enslaved and forced to dig for gold. When they were found by the conquistadors, according to the oral history of the tribe, they committed mass suicide in an effort to die with dignity and avoid the fate of the tribes that had been enslaved. According to myth, thousands of tribespeople committed collective suicide by walking off of a 1,400-foot cliff. The U'wa say that so many people were piled in the river below that its course was changed forever (RAN 2000).

After the Spaniards abandoned the area, the remaining U'wa lived unaffected by civilization until the 1940s and 50s when roads were built that allowed for the settlement of displaced Colombian nationals during Colombian civil conflict. The settlers brought diseases that lowered the defenses of the indigenous population, making them more susceptible to cooperation with the medicine-offering Western missionaries (RAN 2000).

Oil exploration has occurred since then in territories outside that of the U'wa; they have only recently been directly affected. In 2000 Occidental Oil planned to extract 1.5 billion barrels of oil from the fields below U'wa land. Their plan to drill has been halted by global resistance and outcry.

The U'wa have been aware of the existence of oil for millennia. For them it represents something far different from what it has come to mean for industrialized nations. To the U'wa, oil is one of the five cosmological elements that make up their universe. These include earth, sky, water, mountains and oil. In their mythology, oil is the blood of the earth. It is called Ruiria, and it sustains the Earth, which is the mother of all life. To the U'wa, the extraction of the blood of the mother is a desecration that can only lead to the death of their people. The U'wa have promised to commit collective suicide once again if the oil project currently proposed occurs. They would take death over the acceptance of the loss of their sacred land and culture (RAN 2000).

It is clear that in this case the resource being targeted is oil. Though slavery -- in the typical sense -- is not imminent, as it was 500 years ago for these people, the same threat exists in the form of assimilation into civilization and the wage slavery that would inevitably follow their being forced into cities. Here the cost of creating the affluent society would mean, for the U'wa, the abandonment of all they hold sacred: their land, their traditions, their ability to live as they have for millennia. These are the costs being incurred so first world consumers can continue to run petroleum based industrial societies.

The reasons why oil is being extracted from the region are much more complex than those that brought explorers here in the first place to seek gold. Five hundred years ago, the sole purpose was the bolstering of the economic power of individual nations and the elites within them; now every endeavor is tied to a world-wide economic network of debt and investment. The recent protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC shed light on this system. Now there are countless layers of interests that are involved in the creation of the affluent society. The pressure to exploit the people and resources of Columbia is many times greater under the institutions and corporations of modern capitalism than it was in a time when Europe was only beginning to shed its backwater marginality by gambling on the riches of the New World (Ponting 1993 c: 117). What oil drilling in Columbia represents today is profit for the government, for the oil companies, for the markets into which the oil flows, and for the investors that fund not only the "development" of the country, but the projects themselves. I will discuss some of the details of this system in a moment, but first, a brief overview of oil drilling in Columbia and the effects it has had.

Since 1984, Occidental Oil has been operating in Colombia (outside of U'wa territory). In 2000 it claimed that there are approximately 1.5 billion barrels of oil to which it must have access.

Because U'wa land is legally protected, Occidental Oil is basing their interpretation of U'wa land on a narrow definition that excludes the protection of their greater traditional land. As mentioned above, the pressure to start extracting oil from this territory is great.

Right now oil is Columbia's largest export commodity, generating one fourth of its official export revenue. Colombia is the fourth largest and fastest growing oil exporter in South America; in 1995, Columbia increased its oil output by 30 percent. The United States is the largest importer of Colombian oil and, of all of the oil exported, the U.S. takes about 260,000 barrels a day (RAN 2000).

The reasons for these developments are not solely based on Columbia's voluntary expansion of oil extraction. Rather, what's pushing these advancements is Columbia's need to satisfy debts to the United States and international financial institutions. International financial institutions (IFIs) are organizations such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These organizations are publicly funded, and though quite powerful, they pale in comparison to private financial institutions. One such private institution involved in Columbia's oil economy is Citigroup. Citigroup is the world's third largest financial institution. To put this into perspective, a comparison can be made between the currency exchange of public versus private financial institutions. Four days of private financial institution currency exchange is equal to an entire year of public financial institution exchange. The money is truly in the hands of private investors (RAN Presentation 2000).

The strength of these lending institutions exerted over small "developing" countries forces them to accelerate already unsustainable industrial practices. The real losers in this equation are the indigenous cultures and ecosystems that stand in the way. The real costs of creating the affluent society are incurred at this level.

It is clear that ecosystems and cultures are destroyed to create affluence for some. It is important to consider exactly who the affluent of the world now are. To an extent, all first world consumers should consider themselves the beneficiaries of the affluent society, but really, the affluence is funneling straight into the hands of monstrous global corporations and financial institutions.

It is the same old story of conquest. The differences between what's going on today and what occurred 500 years ago are few. Though the methodology of the expansion of resource extraction may involve less outright bloodshed, it has only become more efficient as technological advancements have allowed for the expedient extraction and transport of raw materials from anywhere in the world. Though the names of economic systems have changed from colonialism, to imperialism, to neo-liberalism, the underlying paradigm has remained unchanged. In essence, what guides these endeavors is the deep-rooted belief that all of the universe, living and nonliving, is at the disposal of not only mankind, but the masters of mankind, the white capitalists. Christianity need no longer be the intellectual justification for genocide, rather all that is required now is the "bottom-line" defense. We all are expected to accept the notion that corporations have no obligation to be moral or ethical; their only obligation is to make money for shareholders.

The motivation for inflicting costs to create affluence is not new. Again the motivation is the same: power and profit. All that has changed is the methodology and the expression of ideology. The fact is that though the conquest of indigenous cultures to create civilized affluence is no longer guided by outwardly racist religious doctrines, the blatant disparity in worth and rights between the "civilized" and the "savage" is as present as ever. First peoples are still viewed as valueless obstacles to be managed and overcome in order to secure the resources they "negligently" refuse to exploit. The logic of industrialization and corporate globalization is rooted in Aristotle's Great Chain of Being. To states and corporations, indigenous people are impoverished savages who are stuck at the lower end of the spectrum of cultural evolution. Implicit to this logic is the assumption that civilizations -- more specifically, modern industrial capitalist societies -- are superior to all other "less developed" societies. This "View from Olympus" has been at the heart of the ideological framework that has justified the subjugation of traditional societies for all of history (Hubbard: 2000).

Until this ideology is recognized, questioned, and destroyed, the affluent societies will continue to expand, exploit, and conquer. Furthermore, the rapidly diminishing indigenous peoples and ecosystems of the planet will continually suffer the costs incurred. As awareness of the costs of the first world lifestyle and consumption has become more inescapable, movements have arisen. However, at this point in history, reforms will simply continue sustaining an inherently destructive and unsustainable system. Movements of the future must attack the systemic and ideological foundations of civilization itself, as well as the costs that its ever-changing, symptomatic leaders, nations, and corporations incur upon the earth.

Literature Cited:

Burger, Julian. 1990. The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples. New York: Anchor Books.

Heinberg, Richard. 1997. Was Civilization a Mistake? Green Anarchist, Fall.

Hubbard, Lyle. 2000. Anthropology 102, Intro to Archeology and Prehistory.

Lecture 1/4/00. Portland: Portland Community College.

Jennings, Francis. 1975. The Invasion of America. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Ponting, Clive. 1993c. A Green History of the World. New York: Penguin Books.

Rainforest Action Network. 2000.

http://www.igc.org/ran/ran_campaigns/beyond_oil/oxy/index.html

Rainforest Action Network Presentation. 2000 Oil and Indigenous Cultures. End Corporate Dominance Conference. 5/20/00. Portland. Portland State University.

Sale, Kirkpatrick. 1991d. The Conquest of Paradise. New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc.

Stannard, David. 1992. American Holocaust. New York. Oxford University Press.

Zinn, Howard. 1997c. A People History of the United States. New York: The New Press