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Author

Wood, Alex

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Laying the Foundation in America: How Old-World Perceptions Shaped the New

By Alex Wood

Introduction

The New World surprised many of the Spanish and English colonists by challenging their religious and cultural beliefs. When the explorers and colonists encountered the North American landscape, it had, to a certain extent, frightened some of the colonists and inspired them to control the land. This led to the destroying of the existing landscape and replacing it by plowing and customizing the earth to match similar soils in Europe. This was done by incorporating European seeds, animals, and goods that shifted the preexisting landscape of the New World to look more like Europe. Along with those physical changes came the change of ideas in the New World that organized people's daily lives.

Much of early North American colonial legislation was informed by religious and social concepts that were conceived by elite Europeans in the Old and New World. Coercion existed in society due to the creations of distinctions between race, gender, and appearance based off the social and legal outcomes coming from an elite class that did not interact with the general population. With the clashing of cultures during the creation of the North American colonies, there was a massive amount of inequality and inequity among inhabitants.

Using documents from primary sources and prior research, this paper looks at the ways in which the elites Europeans and the colonists shaped North America from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. While there was much strife between the European colonists, Native Americans, African-American slaves, and women, the perceptions of the Old World shaped the New World both socially and physically; this friction from the Old to New World in turn has allowed the construction of the current social makeup of North America to be fueled with racial, cultural, and expansionists ideologies.

Disregarding Natives

There were two different colonial Christian perspectives: Spanish Catholic and English Protestant. While English Protestants colonized North America, Spanish Catholics colonized Mexico as well as Central and South America. Because of the European rivalry, the English Protestants tried to separate themselves and classify themselves as more civilized, while arguing that Catholics were barbaric invaders. While theologically, Catholics and Protestants believe in the same savior, they differ in specific religious and social aspects which set them apart from Catholics. Despite these differences, the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches employed similar methods for shaping the New World, one of those methods was using religion to convert other groups of people to Christianity.

To legitimize colonization of the New World as a holy concept, the English Protestants used Satan to paint everything unknown as evil and ripe for purification. The Spanish Catholics used Satan to show that the native peoples were the Devil's demons and minions. In confirming this Jorge Canizares-Esguerra in his work, *Puritan Conquistadors*, states, "the satanic epic and demonology impacted Puritan culture from Iberian roots in exorcism."¹ Throughout his work,

¹ Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1500-1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 215.

Esguerra explains how religious-minded the Europeans were as they colonized the New World. In trying to exemplify this he states, “Satan behaved as [hail and gale], scorching, drying, and destroying the fruit of virtue growing in the hearts and souls of Indians.”² By viewing the indigenous populations as the Devil’s followers and lovers of self, idols etc., the Europeans saw it fit to take away their land and their way of life to save everyone else from Satan. This was practiced in both the Americas and the Caribbean as well. These attitudes, in turn, suppressed indigenous people and caused unrest in native populations.

Colonists used religious mandates from both Spanish Catholic and English Protestant faiths to expand their domain and conquer the indigenous peoples around them. Because these faiths had a strong influence on people’s daily lives, it was expected that the religious population would agree with the Church. Race and ethnicity were used by groups to define themselves or others, and to convey a variety of attributes simultaneously.³ This was done by the religious elites in America that wanted to separate the “savages” from the “civil” for the purpose of structurally organizing the socio-economic class system. Colonialism was socially and politically supported because there was an economic and nationalistic status quo to be upheld. This came from the urge to develop new land and create more opportunities for trade from the preexisting ideology of Old World Europe. Ultimately, this resulted in the disregard for the rights of the native populations in America.

Exploiting Africans

In the New World (primarily North America) slaves played a significant role in creating the structures that carried out the institutional concepts from the ruling elite. There was slavery in the Old World that occurred across Asia, Africa, and Europe, which was expanded to a large, transcontinental, and commercial scale to North America that was unprecedented. While there might have been minor cases of slaves captured between warring tribes in North America, there was no large scale economic focus before that made people’s bodies a property for life.

Slavery was not considered to be a sin because according to slave traders and men of capital supporting government officials of the time, colonists across the New World could have free labor. This systematically oppressed people of color. Betty Wood’s work *The Origins of American Slavery*, describes how many Europeans started to gather racially biased perceptions of Africans. She explains that,

Over the years, Elite Englishmen had formed some of their impressions of Africa and its inhabitants through their reading of works of ancient Greek and Roman writers. For more humble English men and women, the bible was an important, and before the sixteenth century probably the main source of information about Africa and African peoples.⁴

Because of the noted difference in physical features such as skin color and facial appearance, the biased information was not challenged; the early notions on Africans were assumed to be true. These same notions on race helped European states and colonies by allowing slave traders to provide the free labor that was needed for economic stability during the creation of the North

² Canizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors*, 5.

³ Franklin W. Knight, *General History of the Caribbean: The Slave Societies of the Caribbean* (UNESCO: Macmillan Caribbean, 1997), 5.

⁴ Betty Wood, *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 22.

American colonies. Due to those circumstances, slavery was solidified as a Christian tradition to slave traders and those who upheld the status quo of slavery were the same people that made slavery legal and moral. An example of this can be seen in the Old Testament book of Jewish law Leviticus 25:39-42 which states, "If your brother with you becomes so poor that he sells himself to you, you are not to make him serve like a bond slave. Instead, he is to serve with you like a hired servant."⁵ This meant that if an individual had found themselves in position of major debt, they were to work off that debt as a servant free of charge and supports the social acceptance of both free and slave labor. Which, in reflection, is a corruption of Christian scriptures used for profit through free labor.

Another way slaves were accepted in Western society can be shown in the legal definition of slaves being considered property in the court of law. An example of this can be seen through a law entitled *Maryland Addresses the Status of Slaves in 1664*, which states, "and all children born of any Negro or other slaves shall be slaves as their fathers were for the term of their lives."⁶ This law shows how African slaves were an example of a group of people whom the colonies degraded through legislation. With the state of Maryland having to clarify who the slaves reveal how the colonies viewed African inhabitants. The document even comments on the color of skin by saying "negros" implying darker skinned peoples, whereas native peoples were usually either referred to as savages or not regarded at all as an attempt to disregard and marginalize other non-White populations. Because of this oppression, being white came to have certain privileges that were not given to non-White people. The racial perception of people was quickly challenged by society, but due to influence from the Protestant and the Catholic Churches, opposition to the racial status quo did not gain enough momentum to change the dynamics of society.

Colonists used legal restrictions against Africans and used religion to justify these actions. In the eyes of colonists, Africans were not worthy of rights or respect. Most Americans were dirty by modern standards, but Black Americans came in the harshest scrutiny and description.⁷ This recorded law clearly states even after slavery was abolished, the Black population in America was still expected to reside in lower living conditions than the rest of the New World. Aside from the belief that equality never truly existed, Black Americans have remained on a lower social stratum because of their past circumstances through the bondage of slavery and colonialism.

Marginalizing Women

While Native Americans and Black Americans were treated poorly, white women were considered second class citizens. With a cultural emphasis on constraining women from Old World practices, the New World saw similar gender inequality in the colonies. It was the normative scenario for the wife to be considered property of her husband. The man held more power over the woman not just in the household, but in the public domain as well.

In the colonial period, the social and political relationship between men and women was tied to power. In Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs*, she examines the social and political relations between men and women during the colonial. Brown reveals the perceptions Europeans had on gender when she states, "the alleged physical and moral weakness of women provided authors with a useful metaphor for explaining other relations of

⁵ Leviticus 25:39-42 King James Version.

⁶ William H. Browne, ed., "Maryland Addresses the Status of Slavery in 1664," *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1883), 533.

⁷ Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790 – 1840, Everyday Life in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 163.

dominance and submission.”⁸ There was no real scientific evidence of women’s place, it was all conceptual. Women were not attributed to maintaining any power, rather this was left to men. Because of this, women were not viewed as worthy in society beyond a household setting.

Defining the restrictions concerning women became a major focal point in the colonies. Powerful male colonists sought any justification in setting up barriers to keep women from gaining any power in society. According to Brown, “relying on ancient texts, sixteenth-century writers drew analogies from this universal female subordination to establish and explain the naturalness of the political order.”⁹ Because there were laws being made and enforced solely on the grounds of gender, the social divides were strengthening within the colony. Colonist sought to model the New World gender dynamics off the practices in Europe; in doing so, this ensured that men would have power in the colonies and women were expected to be submissive.

Colonists did not want women in positions of power and authority. Women were marginalized, and this left them on a lower tier in society. Women were viewed as needing protection and maintenance and men were considered the appropriate deciders. Laws were set in place to ensure the immobility of women in society. Individuals had the legal justification and language to keep women in a lower status in comparison to men, and overtime, this moved beyond a legal entity. Because the Old-World beliefs continued in the New World, women became trapped in these categories of unworthiness and weakness that still plagued women long after the establishment of the colonies.

Conclusion

Pre-existing European perceptions justified colonization by religiously mandating that certain groups of individuals would be controlled. Native Americans were deemed savages and expected to be civilized based on standards created by colonizers. As a result, land belonging to Native Americans was seized without regard to the negative effects this would cause. Africans were considered property which resulted in their dehumanization. Held down by the confines of slavery, Africans were labeled as inferior and this made it difficult to separate notions of inferiority from the African body. Women were marginalized and held to a status attributed to weakness. In keeping women subordinate to men in all sectors, colonists ensured that power extended far beyond notions of race; gender became a marker of power as well.

The beliefs and perceptions of individuals coming from the Old World to the New World are important when understanding divides in American society. This early history reveals that America was founded upon the desire to keep certain people in power. European elites who came to the New World wanted to maintain power and calm any potential threat to this power. To do that, laws were set in place to add justification to societal divides. Race and gender were believed to be indicators of whether an individual would have power or a voice. These beliefs continued to hold weight long after the establishment of the colonies and it ultimately laid the foundation for how we view race and gender as markers of worthiness in American society.

⁸Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 13.

⁹ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 15.

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