

Topic 1.6

Cultural Interactions in the Americas

The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men.

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Spanish theologian, 1547

Learning Objective: Explain how and why European and Native American perspectives of others developed and changed in the period.

History is filled with experiences of contact between diverse people, such as the Romans and Africans in the Classical Era, or the Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages. Often these conflicts were violent, but they were in small regions and lasted no more than a couple centuries. The contact between Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans in the Americas also featured violence, but the interaction was on a much larger scale for a much longer time.

Europeans and Native Americans held conflicting worldviews. For example, most Europeans believed in a single god, while most Native Americans honored many deities. European women had little role in public life, while Native American women in some tribes held decision-making positions. Europeans used legal documents to establish the right to plow a field or hunt in a forest. Native Americans relied more on tradition to make land use decisions.

European Treatment of Native Americans

The Europeans who colonized North and South America generally viewed Native Americans as inferior people who could be exploited for economic gain, converted to Christianity, and used as military allies. However, Europeans used various approaches for ruling Native Americans and operating colonies.

Spanish Policy

The Spanish overwhelmingly subjugated Native Americans. However, Spanish scholars also debated the status of Native Americans and the treatment of them.

Bartolomé de Las Casas One European who dissented from the views of most Europeans toward Native Americans was a Spanish priest named

Bartolomé de Las Casas. Though he had owned land and slaves in the West Indies and had fought in wars against the Indians, he eventually became an advocate for better treatment for Indians. He persuaded the king to institute the **New Laws of 1542**. These laws ended Indian slavery, halted forced Indian labor, and began to end the *encomienda* system that kept the Indians in serfdom. Conservative Spaniards, eager to keep the *encomienda* system, responded and successfully pushed the king to repeal parts of the New Laws.

Valladolid Debate The debate over the role for Indians in the Spanish colonies came to a head in a formal debate in 1550–1551 in Valladolid, Spain. On one side, Las Casas argued that the Indians were completely human and morally equal to Europeans, so enslaving them was not justified. On the other side, another priest, **Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda**, argued that Indians were less than human. Hence, they benefited from serving the Spaniards in the *encomienda* system. Neither side clearly persuaded the entire audience. Though Las Casas was unable to gain equal treatment for Native Americans, he established the basic arguments on behalf of justice for Indians.

English Policy

Unlike the Spanish, the English settled in areas with no large native empires that could provide forced labor. Further, when English colonists arrived in the 1600s, European diseases had already dramatically reduced the indigenous population. In addition, many English colonists came in families rather than as single young men, so marriage with natives was less common.

Initially, at least in Massachusetts, the English and the American Indians coexisted, traded, and shared ideas. American Indians taught the settlers how to grow new crops such as corn (maize) and showed them how to hunt in the forests. They traded furs for an array of English manufactured goods, including iron tools and weapons, that they found useful.

But peaceful relations soon gave way to conflict and warfare. Most English showed no respect for American Indian cultures, which they viewed as “savage.” American Indians saw their way of life threatened as the English seized land to support their growing population. The English occupied the land and forced the small, scattered tribes they encountered to move away from the coast to inland territories. They expelled the natives rather than subjugating them.

French Policy

The French, looking for furs and converts to Catholicism, viewed American Indians as potential economic and military allies. Compared to the Spaniards and the English, the French maintained good relations with the tribes they encountered. Seeking to control the fur trade, the French built trading posts throughout the St. Lawrence Valley, the Great Lakes region, and along the Mississippi River. At these posts, they exchanged French goods for beaver pelts and other furs collected by American Indians. Because the French had few colonists, farms, or towns, they posed less threat to the native population than

did other Europeans. In addition, French soldiers assisted the Huron people in fighting their traditional enemy, the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee).

Survival Strategies by Native Americans

As European settlements expanded, Native Americans responded to protect their cultures. One strategy was to ally with one European power or another. For example, in Mexico, several tribes allied with the Spanish to help them win their freedom from the Aztecs in the 16th century. Later, in the Ohio River Valley, the Delawares and the Shawnees allied closely with the French against English encroachment on their land.

Other tribes simply migrated west to get away from settlers, though this often led them into conflict with Native Americans already living in a region. The conflicts reflected the strong tribal loyalty that Native Americans felt. Since they did not identify as part of a larger group that included all tribes, European settlers pushing westward rarely faced a unified response from Native Americans. Only later would the shared desire to resist European power lead people to identify as Native Americans as well as members of a particular tribe. Regardless of how they dealt with the European invasion, Native Americans would never be able to return to the life they had known prior to 1492.

The Role of Africans in America

Africans contributed a third cultural tradition in the Americas. Their experience growing rice resulted in rice becoming an important crop in the colonies of South Carolina and Louisiana. They brought musical rhythms and styles of singing that shaped the development of music throughout the Americas. They also introduced European settlers to the banjo. By the 19th century, the banjo would be closely associated with the culture of the southeastern United States.

Europeans justified slavery in many ways. Some cited passages from the Bible to support their belief that slavery had always existed and was approved by God. As slavery became exclusively for Africans, Europeans began to argue that Africans were biologically inferior, so enslaving them was acceptable. This was similar to the argument used by de Sepúlveda regarding Native Americans.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Describe the evolution in the views of the Europeans and Native Americans toward each during the period of European colonization.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Identity and Politics
(NAT, POL)

New Laws of 1542

Values and Attitudes
(SOC)

Bartolomé de Las Casas

Valladolid Debate

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“Concerning the treatment of Native American workers: When they were allowed to go home, they often found it deserted and had no other recourse than to go out into the woods to find food and to die. When they fell ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them; and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless, giving them some cassava for the twenty- to eighty-league [about 60 to 240 miles] journey. They would go then, falling into the first stream and dying there in desperation; others would hold on longer, but very few ever made it home. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony.”

Bartolomé de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indian*, c. 1550

1. How did Las Casas’s attitudes compare to those of most Europeans?
 - (A) He was more sympathetic toward the suffering of Indians.
 - (B) He was more critical of Indians for causing their own problems.
 - (C) He was more focused on how Indians treated Europeans.
 - (D) He was very typical in his attitudes toward Indians.
2. Las Casas was primarily trying to influence
 - (A) the monarchs of Spain who shaped colonial policies
 - (B) the religious leaders in Europe who were not Roman Catholics
 - (C) the conquistadores in the colonies who were moving into new areas
 - (D) the Native Americans who were reacting to the Spanish colonists

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - (a) Briefly explain ONE specific effect of Spain’s policy toward Native Americans during the period 1492–1607.
 - (b) Briefly explain ONE specific effect of a policy of a European country other than Spain toward Native Americans during the period 1492–1607.
 - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific reaction of Native Americans to European policies during the period 1492–1607.