

## THE INVENTION OF AMERICA IMAGINARY SIGNS OF THE DISCOVERY AND CONSTRUCTION OF UTOPIA

“The ships that invented regions were directed toward the West”, announced Juan de Castellanos in 1587 in his *Elegías* dedicated to Christopher Columbus, and at the beginning of the 16th century Hernán Pérez de Oliva wrote a *Historia de la invención de las Indias*.<sup>1</sup> The use of the word *invention* when speaking of the discovery of America may seem to be a semantic confusion or poetic license, viewed from the contemporary perspective of a discipline with well-defined limits, such as geography, since we usually understand invention as the transformation of things by man’s intervention, while discovery is finding something that already existed so as to make it known to others.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

<sup>1</sup> *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, a long poem by Juan de Castellanos between 1570 and 1592. *Biblioteca de autores españoles*, Vol. IV, Barcelona, 1944.

On a strictly geographical level, someone who invents passes for a liar, Ernst Bloch reminds us,<sup>2</sup> using Münchhausen's tales of his voyages as a literary example. On the contrary, the imaginary would be excluded from discovery. At the most, it would appear as an invention corrected by the "real facts".

Spain revealed the existence of America to the world. To put it into the known space of the West beginning not only with the historical present of its discovery but also with its living past of civilizations and cultures, Spain did not have to invent it, since America existed before October 12, 1492. It was a matter of the discovery of an existing entity. Thus the idea of an invention is completely foreign to the truth.

Yet these two enterprises—invention and discovery—so clearly differentiated today, in the centuries following the "unveiling" of America were, if not identical, at least complementary. Furthermore, other semantic variants appear if we consider that discovery implies an obvious intentionality in the English acceptance of "discover" while "to find" is the result of change in which premeditation has no part. In Portuguese as in Spanish, this distinction is clear: Brazil was *achado* or *hallado* (found) whereas India was *descoperta* or *descubierta* (discovered).<sup>3</sup>

## 1. THE IMAGINARY SIGNS OF THE DISCOVERY

Man has never been content with the known space surrounding him. From time immemorial his fear of the void led him to explore his immediate environment on the one hand and to people what was beyond the frontiers of the known world with products of his imagination. The circle of reality has always been contained in a larger one whose limits mark the beginning of the imaginary.

The farther the advance into the exploration of the immediate surroundings, the more distant became the limits of fantastic countries, paradise islands and legendary kingdoms. The imaginary was obliged to find refuge in unattainable areas where only distance and inaccessibility could guarantee its survival.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Bloch, *Le principe espérance*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, Vol. II, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Mahn-Lot, *Le découverte de l'Amérique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1970, pp. 114-117.

## *The Invention of America*

### *The Denial of Invention*

In this sense the progressive discovery of the terrestrial globe throughout the centuries had gradually brought a refutation of invention and the replacement of the imagined space by a revealed space. The explorations could not be a creation since all they did was unveil what had been hidden. Their activity was not inventive but an unmasking.

Today natural sciences have mastered all the details of the planet and forever exiled the imagined geography of the cosmos. Invented space has now found refuge in distant planetary systems protected by the light-years that separate us from their potential reality.

Seen in this way, it is clear that discovery is in opposition to invention. When a space is discovered and incorporated into a scientifically-known reality, the imaginary is forced to recede beyond the new frontier. History thus observed can be considered as the slow reflux of the geographical imaginary, from classical Greece to the discovery of America. First to the limits of the eastern Mediterranean, then to the Pillars of Hercules and gradually to the Mar Tenebroso which was staked out with the progressive discovery of islands that belied the existence of the dreamed-of paradises. This is how the *encounter* with America occurred. The invention was then carried over to the new continent itself. Initially it took refuge in the inhospitable forests or hidden mountain valleys, then, more and more harassed, in the southern seas to be finally chased from the individual and collective imaginary.

A number of reasons support this thesis.

If, to begin with, the discoveries brought descriptions and observations that permitted others to understand the new reality, which thus entered human knowledge, this appropriation brought in its turn the abolition of the dream. On the other hand, to the degree in which what was discovered had a previous existence, its historical past must be interpreted to conform with the designs of the author of the discovery.

This is because all appropriation of territory is made in terms not only of the present that is being entered but also of the past that is not known and of which possession is being taken. In a general way, conquests that follow discoveries undertake to give

coherence to the enterprise. "It is not enough to conquer power, it must be established on a solid and obliging past", J.H. Plumb reminds us.<sup>4</sup> This legitimizing of the past implies that a contradictory imaginary can be put into doubt.

Nevertheless, to say that invention has always receded before the scientific confirmation of geography is somewhat simplistic. And if we take the discovery of America as an example, we will see that the separation between *discovery* and *invention* is not so clear.

In some cases, when the imagined space seems to be *confirmed* by the discovery, it is the dream that, so to speak, is colored by reality. If Columbus undertook his voyage convinced that the Indies were to the west, the Antilles where he landed *had* to be the looked-for Indies. Consequently, the space became organized.

In other cases in which the imaginary prefiguration is very strong, the vision of reality is imbued with the initial project. If the reality is different, the facts are reinterpreted and adapted to the space that is desired.<sup>5</sup> The conquest and colonization that follow are adjusted to what should be or to the projected ideal world. The islands in which the Golden Age survived, the earthly paradise—pagan or Christian—always located in the unknown West by medieval imagination leave their imprint on the discovery of America and a good part of the enterprises of conquest. From this comes the acculturation of the myths on its territory.

Finally, we must not forget that if every discovery not only broadened reality in terms of geographical certitude, it even substantially modified it. The conquered space, but also that of the conqueror, went through a readjustment, the result of the intercultural dialogue experienced. Spain and Europe were not the same after the discovery of America, just as the indigenous reality could not remain unchanged after the conquest.

However general and abstract these considerations may appear, they help us to understand why an *invention* of America was spoken of and why in the century following its discovery conquerors and colonizers remained attached to all that had been

<sup>4</sup> J.H. Plumb, *La muerte del pasado*, Barcelona, Barral, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Utopian literature speaks of the *time of desire* and *desired space* as a counter-image of present reality. This time and space may signify the reclaiming of a mythical past (lost paradise or Golden Age) or of a future ideal society (rationalized utopia, futurist statements).

## *The Invention of America*

imagined earlier about the existence of *another* possible world. Invention, when it was not Providence, guided the European with such a firm step in his march toward the West that a brusque denial would have been unacceptable. America *had* to be what was expected of it. Reality mattered little when there was such belief in the project. In this sense, it is interesting to remember that it was not until 1498 that Columbus suspected he had discovered a new world. The intensity of this project—to reach the Indies by sailing west—prevented him from perceiving the true nature of this discovery, a privilege that fell to Vespucci, its *inventor*. “The fourth region of the world *inventata est* by Vespucci”, affirms Waldseemüller, the cartographer, in the 1507 edition of the *Quatre Navigations* of the Florentine navigator.

It is obvious that geography, history and literature all contributed over the centuries to the forging of a hybrid view of the American actuality whose delimitation through discipline is not foreign to the complexity of the resulting cultural identity. In the perspective of the present article we must keep in mind the importance of the *imaginary* that preceded the discovery; the *inventive* prefiguration in which the later identification of the American *être* was objectivized and confirmed, a root that predetermines an image of an America nourished with myths, dreams and archetypes. This image plays a fundamental role in the utopian concept which later identifies and structures it.

## *The presentiment of America*

The signs of the existence of a “fourth region of the world” precede its discovery by almost two thousand years and may be found in legends, chronicles of extraordinary voyages in antiquity, classical myths and medieval fables, the premonitory verses of certain poets, as well as in speculations by cartographers and astronomers.

We find a mixture of allusions to real places visited by intrepid navigators, legendary lands that appear in different cultures and traditions with various names but with a practically identical foundation and, finally, the *ideal space* where the Golden Age has found refuge and is preserved, or the uncontaminated realm of the

pagan or Christian paradise. Myths of the Golden Age, the Promised Land, the Isles of the Blest, spaces where happiness and harmony exist in a pure state. Ideal societies, perfect climates, abundant harvests, trees loaded with various fruit, men who reach old age without working appear in all the prefigurations of the “longed-for spaces” of mankind. At the popular level, we find fables like that of the Land of Cocaigne; in prose and poetry, literary constructions such as Arcadia.

Throughout the centuries separating classical Antiquity from the discovery of America, these spaces were located to the west of Europe in mythical and fantastic cartography. The earthly paradise of Genesis, situated in the east, differently from the pagan paradises, Greco-Roman or Celtic, became accessible to the imagination from the west once the roundness of the earth had been admitted. The western location of these myths and legendary countries offered no doubt when America was discovered. Thus we can say with Alfonso Reyes that America was a “desired region before it was found,” because “searched for in all directions it was both a scientific and poetic presentiment before it was a verified fact”.<sup>6</sup> The discovery of America was therefore not due to chance. “Europe discovered it because she needed it”, wrote Leopoldo Zea.<sup>7</sup>

This desire and necessity turned the spirit of invention from its classical origin toward the construction of spaces that were essentially the *counter-image*, the inverse of European reality. In the perspective of the discovery of America their study is striking, since they all offer, taken together or separately, integrated or adapted to the pre-Columbian traditions, the first European vision of the new World.

So it is not an exaggeration to say that the first *idea* of America was inspired by the images that preceded its discovery. The spaces of the invention converge from different directions in the objectivization of the American territory and soon invest it with their “desired” virtues.

Under the shock of the new reality, the myths and legends, far from being refuted, were actualized. Thus the Golden Age that was

<sup>6</sup> Alfonso Reyes, *Ultima Tulé*, in *Obras completas*, Vol. IX, p. 29, Fondo de cultura económica, Mexico City, 1960.

<sup>7</sup> Leopoldo Zea, “América en la historia”, *Revista de Occidente*, Madrid, 1970.

### *The Invention of America*

believed to be definitively lost *in illo tempore* reappeared in the American space which, because of its isolation and the lack of communication even among its own great civilizations, remained outside the degradation of history into the Iron Age which was in vigor in Europe. The imaginary spaces of the terrestrial paradise and the Land of Cocaigne seemed to be recognized in the abundance, temperate climate and peaceful life of the New World. The myth, instead of disappearing because of the discovery, grew and was transformed. At times it changed scenes and was generalized (it became Eldorado, the Amazons, the Fountain of Youth) and at times it was reexamined and reinterpreted in the perspective of the New World, like Atlantis in the *Critias* of Plato.

The discovery of America did not stop the *invention* which had peopled the maps from antiquity to the Middle Ages with the imagination of the West. On the contrary, it acted as a stimulus and seemed to furnish it with tangible proof that justified the search for an *ideal space*. The invention is not refuted but reenforced by the discovery. The proof is provided by the number of expeditions organized by the Spanish and Portuguese but also by the English, Germans, Dutch and French, in quest of what to us today seem chimeras: the Fountain of Youth, the kingdom of Prester John, the Seven Cities, the Sierra de Plata, the Pais de la Canela, the city of the Caesars, Eldorado or the Amazons. A large part of the discoveries and explorations of vast territories of North and South America were made in the name of myths that were held to be true. The story of the disappointments and frustrations that followed each expedition is that of the foundation of the Spanish Empire.

### *The invention confirmed*

The collective Western imagination transported to American territory the cities and exploits of the literature of chivalry, repertories of fantastic animals and applied botany, forgotten legends and other traditions.

During the years that followed the discovery the chroniclers who accompanied the conquerors devoted themselves to the *verification* of these myths and their adaptation to America. The *a priori* of the

New World, product of the imagination, imbued the description of the new reality. The fantasies of the imaginary voyage of John Mandeville, published around 1355, that of the *Etimologias* of St. Isidore of Seville; the “marvels” of the voyages of Marco Polo seemed to find confirmation in the New World.

When Bernal Díaz del Castillo arrived with Hernán Cortéz in Tenochtitlán and saw the white buildings of the Aztec capital rising above a flowered lagoon he thought he was seeing the “marvels of Amadis de Gaule”. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo affirmed that the Antilles where Columbus landed were the same Hesperides that Antiquity located on the western shore of the earth, forty days’ sailing from the Gorgones Islands (Capo Verde) where the paradisiacal Golden Age was preserved.

The discovery of America is thus explained and justified as providential. Bartolomé de las Casas himself came to say that

“divine providence usually orders that names are given to those designated by it to perform certain functions, as appears in many passages in the Holy Scriptures, and the philosopher of the fourth book of *Metaphysics* says that men must be in accord with the properties and usages of things. He therefore received the name of Christopher, which means the bearer of Christ and the surname of Columbus, which means one who repeoples, the colonizer”.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle and the Bible thus explain how Columbus, through his name and surname, was “fated” to discover America in the name of Christianity, according to the Messianic view of his biographer.

For his part, Father Acosta in his work *De natura novi orbis*—that Alexander Humboldt considered the basis of modern American geography—explained the origin of human migration toward the New World and the diversity of the flora and fauna of the continent as beginning with Noah’s ark. We could multiply such examples, but the important thing is to show how a conscious effort was made to *explain* the New World through known categories and make it intelligible to others without infringing on

<sup>8</sup> Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, the chapter on Columbus, in *América y el Nuevo Mundo*, anthology prepared by R. Díaz Alejo and Joaquín Gil. Buenos Aires, Joaquín Gil ed., 1942, p. 83.



## *The Invention of America*

the principles of the invention that preceded it.

Lévi-Strauss wrote,

“The Spanish did not go to acquire new ideas as much as to verify old legends: the prophecies of the Old Testament, Greco-Latin myths such as Atlantis and the Amazons. To this Judaeo-Latin heritage were added medieval legends such as the kingdom of Prester John and the Indian contributions of Eldorado and the Fountain of Youth”.<sup>9</sup>

This endeavor of adaptation of reality to a preceding imaginary resulted in a vision of America that was transmitted and repeated in the years following its discovery and conquest.

Many of these characteristics, sometimes ambivalent and contradictory, survive in the later *ideas* of America and in the representation, indeed the stereotype, of what is understood today as the American *identity*.<sup>10</sup> They are commonplaces of this “has to be”, of this ideal that not only Europeans took up beginning with distant and schematic visions but also the Latin-Americans in the concept of their “manifest destiny” or their legitimate right to claim an “American utopia”.

“America was nothing other than the ideal of Europe: this latter saw in the New World what it had wished Europe could be”, wrote Leopoldo Zea.<sup>11</sup> On this virgin soil without history, even though millenary civilizations ostensibly proved the contrary, one *could* (or better, *should*) remake the western world. As soon as America was integrated into universal history, its future was colored with the nostalgia of the European past: a nostalgia that was none other than “disposition of the mind that again finds through the mental process sentiments and states of mind that were already known<sup>12</sup> that is, existing in the European collective imaginary”. In a way, as Jean Servier maintained, the West did not undertake the discovery of a New World but “a return to its origins beyond the primordial waters of the Ocean”.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Marianne Mahn-Lot, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> We developed this question in *Identidad cultural de Iberoamérica en su narrativa*. Madrid, Gredos, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Zea, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Alexandre Cioranescu, “Utopia: The Land of Cocaigne and Golden Age”, *Diogenes*, no. 75, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Servier, “Histoire de l’utopie”, *Idées*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967.

The Golden Age and the earthly paradise that were believed to have been found only served to exorcize reality. Because of the intensity of this nostalgic evocation, America could appear as the sum of perfections, as an authentic promised land.

A simple *therapy of distance*, facilitated by the rupture that crossing the Atlantic signified, made the past possible in the future, a cyclic repetition of a lost time that the discovery actualized. The myth of the promised land was fed by this idea and played an important role in the representation of the New World not only in the colonial but even in our day.<sup>14</sup>

In the name of the *invention* of America, participating in the spirit that Ernst Bloch has called “geographical utopias”, socio-collective dreams took shape in the New World and were organized into coherent ensembles of conceptual images, often contradictory. The cross that revived the earthly paradise was opposed to the sword that searched for Eldorado, the idleness and abundance of the land of Cocaigne to the severe Biblical precept “You will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow”, in which the builders of the new Jerusalem believed.

### *A new “nursery” of images*

What must be pointed out is that America, from its discovery, became a new “nursery” of images, if we use the felicitous metaphor of Lezama Lima: “From the moment it entered western history, the New World closely entwined classical myth and utopia”.<sup>15</sup> Because if “we cannot understand America if we forget that we are a chapter in the history of utopias”, as Octavio Paz wrote, the study of Utopia also assumes that of a certain permanence of the ancient myths. It is precisely those European

<sup>14</sup> We developed this essential subject in “Utopia, Promised Lands, Immigration and Exile”, *Diogenes*, no. 119, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> José Lezama Lima recalls that in America during the early years of the conquest “imagination was not *la folle du logis* but a principle for assembling, recognition and legitimate differentiation”. The chronicler of the Indies transplants the tales of chivalry to the American landscape. Fauna and flora are recognized in old bestiaries, books of fables and other books on magic plants. Imagination established the connections. José Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, Santiago, Chile, Editorial universitaria, 1969.

## *The Invention of America*

myths transplanted to America that allow the birth of the utopia of the Renaissance.

### 2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF UTOPIA

The tales and chronicles that arrived in the troubled Europe of that time, even though it was only the transposition of the prodigies of Antiquity or books of chivalry, directly influenced the authors of a new genre—the Utopian—inaugurated with the publication of *Utopia* in 1516. Thomas More was himself influenced by *De orbe novo* by Pedro Martir, published in 1511 and by the collected letters of Amerigo Vespucci in the *Quatre Navigations* that circulated in Europe in those years.

The utopic genre spread at the same time that the conquest of America was accelerated. Both were measured with a rhythm of a pendulum movement between the theories relative to imaginary worlds and what corresponded to the practice of conquest and colonization. America lived between geometric conceptualizations on countries located “nowhere”, “new Atlantis”, “Oceania”, “Cities of the Sun” and the expeditions that were being multiplied in the farthest reaches of the continent, often on the traces of a myth or legend. Myth and Utopia were the object of tangential or superimposed experiences that mark the history of the 16th century.

Although the texts of classical medieval and religious Antiquity were at the origin of many discoveries, the existence of a new discussion concerning the organization and administration of the new World became more and more evident. *Utopia* that was above all the theoretical and organic formulation of an ideal society on the order of Plato’s *Republic* gradually replaced the *a priori* “given” worlds of the imagination.

The alternative world, the other reality had to be constructed with effort beginning with a utopian project. Classical myth and Christian eschatology that supposed the existence of “another world” somewhere and to which only *relevation* permitted the access ceded to such a project. “It is no longer the man who dreams of a divine world but the man who plays at being God”,<sup>16</sup> Raymond

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Ruyer, *L’utopie et les utopies*, Paris, PUF, 1950, p. 9.

Ruyer tells us, in substance. It is not exaggeration to say that Western man developed his demiurge condition because of the discovery of America.

From this viewpoint, the meaning of the original search for the earthly paradise was radically changed in content, although the intention remained the same. It was no longer a matter of recuperating the vestiges of a Golden Age miraculously preserved in a lost corner of America. Utopia looked to the future from a new territory full of possibilities. It was a matter of *organizing* an ideal society with real human beings and taking up the challenge in which an alternative society that was just and egalitarian, far from a corrupt Europe, was opposed to a purely military conquest and the indiscriminate domination of the native. From this comes the interest aroused by the discovery of America. It is not that the search for Eden was coming to an end; it was the installation of a dawning utopia. "Man with his own hands can create a second nature", affirms Fra Luis de Granada. Utopia transfers to man the *duty* and *responsibility* to transform the world, a privilege that in the past belonged only to the gods. Man could do everything, foresee everything and most of all organize the new reality. The utopian project would thus be essentially a matter of organization. Its ends would depend on its own means.

### *The organization of the territory*

If the texts of Antiquity had been the motivating force for the discovery of America by indicating the exact meaning of the projected direction, those of the Renaissance inspired by the conquest served to organize the new territory. The secularization of the earthly paradise, implicit in the task taken on by man on American soil does not however assume that its essence substantially varies. If Campanella wrote in his *Città del Sole* that "we present our republic not as being given by God but as a work of philosophy and human reason", this *discovery* participates in many of the conditions of the classical *Civitas Dei*.

Likewise, the practical experiences of the Christian social utopia in America, notably that of the Franciscans, of Bartolomé de las Casas, of Vasco de Quiroga and of the Jesuits participate in this

## *The Invention of America*

earthly and celestial condition in the project of an ideal society with “beings without evil or duplicity”, as Father de las Casas defined the Indians.

The spirit of primitive Christianity was found again and a renovation of the Roman Church perhaps conceived beginning with America. The missionaries of the reformed mendicant orders, over whom Erasmus had acquired the ascendant, did not only aim at the evangelization of the Indians; throughout the 16th century they also tried to install a model society whose “objective” was the ideal of utopia.

The “utopian charge” of the 16th century prolonged the “invention” of America, as Maravall affirms.<sup>17</sup> Heterodox theories on possible alternative antarkist societies could still be imagined in the cadre of the New World. But it was seen early on that America could not be a promising counter-image of Europe without injuring the essential unity of the Spanish Empire. Centralizing and absolutist ideas demanded the eradication of the *different*, in other words, invention, thought to be subversive.

The myths, legends and utopias that had helped to elaborate this first idea of America as the *summa* of a European ideal had to give way before the authority and bureaucracy of the Crown in the 17th and 18th centuries. The socio-Christian utopias were abandoned after the counter-reform and dictatorship of the Inquisition.

However, if the invention retreated, it did not altogether disappear. The imaginary project of America reappeared at other moments in history. The old myths combined with new utopias resurged with different names at the time of independence at the dawn of the 18th century and in that of the consolidation of national states. They also underlie the contemporary images that again inspire the same ideal.

The study of this utopian function with regard to the history of the continent is without a doubt “one of the most precious tasks to which the American can apply himself”.<sup>18</sup> From a utopia *about* America projected and elaborated from Europe we have gone to

<sup>17</sup> The “utopian charge” of the 16th century is studied in detail by José Antonio Maravall in *Utopía y reformismo en la España de los Austrias*, Madrid, Editions Siglo XXI, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Arturo Andrés Roig, (*Teoría y crítica del pensamiento latinoamericano*, Mexico City, FCE, 1981, p. 183) reclaims the studies on “knowledge by conjecture” among

an American utopia,<sup>19</sup> conceived by the Americans themselves. That is the beginning of a new challenge.

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which he includes utopia as a “liberating discourse”. He agrees with Horacio Ceruti Guldberg in that America, which was “first a utopia for others”, elaborates utopias “for itself”, which could be “the full exercise of the right to our utopia”.

<sup>19</sup> In Fernando Ainsa, “Notas para un estudio de la función de la utopía en la historia de América” (*Anuario Estudios Latinoamericanos no. 16, Latino America* a publication of the Centro Coordinador y Difusor de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Mexico City, UNAM, 1983, pp. 93-115) we insisted on the distinction between utopia and utopian function, using five particular instances in American history as references.