

CHAPTER

2

*FROM THE INVENTION TO THE
DISCOVERY OF THE NEW WORLD*

When and how does America appear in historical consciousness? This question—whose response obviously presupposes the reconstruction of a process which I am going to call the ontological American process—constitutes the fundamental question of this work.

—E. O'Gorman, *La invención de América* ¹

I will distinguish conceptually among *invention*, *discovery*, *conquest*, and *colonization*. These are figures (*Gestalten*) that contain spatially and diachronically distinct theoretical contents. They refer to different existential experiences that merit separate analyses.

THE “INVENTION” OF THE “ASIATIC BEING” OF THE NEW WORLD

We owe to Edmundo O'Gorman the proposal of this first figure (*Gestalt*): the "invention of America."² In a philosophical-historical

analysis, undertaken in a Heideggerian style, this great Mexican historian describes the ontological experience as lived by Christopher Columbus and as documented by texts handed down to us. This reconstructive adventure will lead us to the conclusion that Columbus *did not discover America* in a strictly ontological sense, according to O'Gorman's vocabulary.

The starting point of the analysis is obvious, and for that reason never sufficiently taken into account. The *world (Welt)*,³ or the *world of everyday life (Lebenswelt)*,⁴ of Christopher Columbus was that of an expert navigator of the Mediterranean (the *mare nostrum* of the Romans), whose waters touched Europe,⁵ Africa, and Asia⁶—Europe was not yet the "center."⁷ Since 1476 Columbus had had extensive experience of the Atlantic—where he had been attacked by pirates and shipwrecked.⁸ Because his world was filled with Renaissance fantasy, in spite of its distance from the medieval period, Columbus on his third voyage thought that the delta the Orinoco was the opening of one of the rivers of the earthly paradise.⁹ This imaginative world would have pertained to a merchant from Venice, Amalfi, or Naples, from the Florence of the Medici, the Rome of Pius II, or Columbus's native Genoa.¹⁰ In Columbus's world, the Christian Italo-Iberian world faced the Muslim world of North Africa and the Turks.

In the same year, 1492, in which the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fe*¹¹ were signed on April 17 at Granada, as it fell to the last European Crusade,¹² Columbus, on August 3, set sail. He had only one purpose in mind: to arrive at India by traveling westward. That such a journey would be feasible had been an accepted thesis from the time of Aristotle or Ptolemy to that of Toscanelli.¹³ Heinrich Hammer's 1489 map suggested this possibility also.¹⁴ The first explorer to complete this journey would acquire nautical knowledge, amass gold, win honor, and expand the Christian faith—purposes that could coexist without contradiction in that *Weltanschauung*.

Although Columbus was one of the last merchants of the occidental Mediterranean, he was at the same time the first modern man. Previous discoveries via the North Atlantic,¹⁵ such as the one that landed in Helluland ("land of desolation") under Leif Ericson in 992, had no historical impact. Ericson's Vikings failed

to integrate their findings in an irreversible manner either into the European *Lebenswelt* or into the economy or history of their own people. Columbus's crossing of the equatorial Atlantic, on the other hand, took on an entirely different significance.¹⁶ The Portuguese never attempted such a venture, even though they had occupied Ceuta in Africa (1415), constructed the first caravels (1441), initiated the African slave trade, and journeyed as far as Guinea¹⁷ and the Cape of Good Hope (1487)¹⁸ trying to reach India and its riches. The Portuguese roved the seas, but they saw only what was already known. Thus, they *discovered* Africa, even though it already held a geographic, historical, and theological place in the Renaissance *Weltanschauung*. One cannot understand Columbus's undertaking in the same terms.

Columbus departed the Canary Islands September 8 and arrived at an island in the western Atlantic on October 12, 1492. The papal bull of 1493, *Inter caetera*, described this location in an objective manner: "islands and lands" situated in the "western parts of the Oceanic Sea, toward the Indies."¹⁹ What Columbus actually saw and what he wanted to see were two different things. He categorically affirmed in his diary that he had landed in Asia:

The information that I have given to your Highnesses about the lands of *India*, about a leader called Great Kan²⁰ (which means in our Romance language "king of kings"), and about the repeated requests by him and his ancestors that Rome send teachers of our holy faith.²¹ ... Your Highnesses, as Catholics and Christians, the chief lovers of the holy Christian faith... and enemies of the sect of Mohammed²²... have thought to send me, Christopher Columbus, to these *parts of India* to see²³ these leaders and their peoples and lands and, above all [to understand] how we might convert them to our holy faith.²⁴

A hermeneutic reconstruction of Columbus's mind would indicate that he thought he had discovered Asia just as he had anticipated. For him the islands, the plants, the animals, the "Indians" (from "India") only confirmed this belief.²⁵ Columbus writes, according to las Casas:

At two hours after midnight [October 12], land appeared... a little island of the Lucayos that the Indians called Guanahani. Then they [Columbus's men] saw nude people, people very poor in every respect. They walked about completely nude just as their mothers had given birth to them²⁶ Moreover, in order not to lose time, I wish to go find the island of Cipango²⁷

On this basis, O'Gorman's original proposal makes sense:

But if this is so, one can conclude that the ontological significance of the voyage of 1492 consists in the fact that for the first time someone from the Occidental culture,²⁸ such as Columbus, attributed a generic meaning to what he found. Columbus conferred on a geographical being (the *Dasein* of some lands) the specific sense that it belonged to Asia. He endowed this land with *Asiatic being* (*Seingebung*) because of his own a priori and unconditional presuppositions²⁹

Upon returning, Columbus declared that he had arrived in Asia on March 15, 1493. In his opinion, he had explored the islands just off the Asian continent. Columbus believed these islands lay near Cipango (Japan) but in front of the fourth great peninsula (present day Indochina and Malaysia) on which the Golden Chersonesus (Malacca) was located and on whose other side the ocean turned into the *Sinus Magnus*.³⁰ In his second voyage,³¹ in 1493, Columbus sought to prove that he had explored Asia. Traversing Cuba toward the east, Columbus supposed it to be the Asian continent the fourth great peninsula, not distant from the Golden Chersonesus. Turning south, he believed that Mangi (China) was not far to the north³² and that soon he would be heading toward India. However, he could not prove these hypotheses.

After returning to Europe in 1496, Columbus recognized that further exploration was needed. He was convinced that a large continental mass loomed south of the islands,³³ and its discovery would have confirmed his interpretation that he had reached Asia.³⁴ Thus in his third voyage he decidedly departed toward the south, seeking to circumnavigate the fourth peninsula. Taking North America for China, he expected that its peninsula, extending south, would eventually open upon Asia, even though he would have actually been reconnoitering South America. Columbus skirted the island of

Trinidad and wandered the sweet waters of the delta of Orinoco, the tributary of a river larger than the Nile or any European river. Columbus imagined that he had reached Asia east of the Chersonesus, but he was unable to return to Spain with conclusive evidence about this passage to India.

In his final (fourth) voyage, from 1502 to 1504, he moved inland,³⁵ crossed Honduras (part of China in Columbus's view), and followed the coast toward Panama where he received information from Indians (Asiatics) that there was a great sea on the other side of the isthmus. Columbus was overjoyed since he held it for certain that this was the *Sinus Magnus* and that he was near the Ganges River, in fact, only ten days from it.³⁶ On his return trip from Jamaica, he wrote the kings on July 7, 1503, explaining how the Asian peninsula extended toward the south.

Columbus died in 1506 assured that he had discovered the route toward Asia; he lived and died with this certainty. The Catholic kings, however, betrayed him, abandoning him to his poor and solitary fate, as they had betrayed Boabdil and Granada's Muslim and Jewish people. Because of the expulsion of these people—among other causes—Spain forfeited the future possibility of its own bourgeois revolution.

These European Renaissance explorers invented the Asiatic being of the American continent. Although Columbus officially opened Europe's door to Asia via the west, his invention left the three parts of the world—Europe, Africa, and Asia—intact, like the holy Trinity:

[Columbus's] hypothesis depended on a priori convictions.... The fact that South America and the fourth peninsula were completely different geographical entities in no way undermined his belief that these northern hemisphere lands were Asian.... His hypothesis never escaped the *previous* image conditioning it. As a result, when he ran across land in an unexpected site, he was incapable of an *empirical, revelatory* insight into what that land really might have been.³⁷

This invention of America as Asia transformed the Atlantic into a commercial center between Europe and the continent to its west.³⁸ The Mediterranean was then experiencing agony, since it

had hoped that its own deterioration would have been halted after Lepanto in 1571. But the Turks and the Muslims and the entire *mare nostrum* were on the verge of becoming poorer due to gold and silver inflation resulting from the riches pouring in from peripheral Latin America.

Columbus thus initiated modernity. He is the first to leave Europe with official authorization, since, unlike earlier voyages, his was in no way clandestine. Because of his departure from Latin anti-Muslim Europe,³⁹ the idea that the Occident was the center of history was inaugurated and came to pervade the European life world.⁴⁰ Europe even projected its presumed centrality upon its own origins. Hence, Europeans thought either that Adam and Eve were Europeans⁴¹ or that their story portrayed the original myth of Europe to the exclusion of other cultures.

According to O'Gorman's completely Eurocentric thesis,⁴² the *invention* of America meant that "America was invented in the image and likeness of Europe since America could not *actualize*⁴³ in itself any other *form*⁴⁴ of becoming human [than the European]."⁴⁵ In contrast, I mean by *invention* Columbus's construing of the islands he encountered as Asian. The Asiatic being of these islands existed only in the aesthetic and contemplative fantasy of the great navigators of the Mediterranean. As a result, the Other, the American Indian, disappeared. This Indian was not discovered as Other, but subsumed under categories of the Same. This Indian was known beforehand as Asiatic and reknown in the face-to-face encounter and so denied as Other, or *covered over* (*en-cubierto*).

THE "DISCOVERY" OF THE "NEW WORLD"

Discovery constitutes a new figure after *invention*, one that involves further aesthetic, contemplative experience as well as the explorative, scientific adventure of coming to know *the new*. Because of discovery, or the resistance of stubborn experience to a whole new tradition, Europe was led to revoke the long-standing representation of Europe⁴⁶ as one of only *three* parts of the earth. However with the discovery of fourth part (America), provincial and renescent Europe continued to interpret itself as modern Europe the center of the world. A European definition of modernity, such as

Habermas's, overlooks how *European* modernity constitutes all other cultures as its *periphery*. Instead, I will pursue a world definition of modernity which will neither negate Europe's Other nor oblige it to imitate Europe's path of *modernization* as if that path were the only one.⁴⁷ I will trace this distinction between modernity as a legitimate concept and as a false myth back to 1502.

Discovery consists in a person-nature relationship, comprised of poetic, technical, and premodern commercial-mercantilist dimensions.⁴⁸ In fifteenth-century Latin Europe, Portugal took the lead in the search for the end of the earth (*finis terrae*) because of its commercially advantageous location on the Atlantic and near tropical Africa.⁴⁹ Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian navigator like Columbus, but under Portuguese auspices, left Lisbon in May 1501 for India. His intention, the same one held on an anterior failed voyage, was to pass beneath the fourth peninsula and cross the *Sinus Magnus*.

Since my intention was to see if I could follow a cape of land which Ptolemy names the Cape of Catigara,⁵⁰ which is near the Sinus Magnus.⁵¹

In search of the strait to India, Vespucci reached the coasts of Brazil.⁵² Convinced that he would eventually find the Asiatic *Sinus Magnus*, he navigated southward along territory which the Portuguese controlled from east African outposts.⁵³ As Vespucci progressed along what he thought was the southern fourth peninsula, his enterprise gradually grew more difficult than expected and ran counter to his presuppositions. The land extensions were greater, the inhabitants stranger, and all his a priori knowledge faltered, even though this knowledge had stood unshaken throughout the eras of Greeks, Arabs, and Latins until the time of Martellus. Vespucci advanced along the coast of South America as far as what he took to be the Jordan River, but in September 1502 he had to return to Lisbon without finding the *Sinus Magnus* or the passage toward India. Slowly Vespucci was transformed into a *discoverer*. In a revealing letter, he discussed his increasing consciousness that he had discovered a new world—not China, but something else. In that letter, addressed to Lorenzo de Medici,⁵⁴

Vespucci indicated *for the first time in the history of Europe* that the continental⁵⁵ mass to the east and south of the *Sinus Magnus* discovered by Columbus and mistakenly assumed to be an unknown part of Asia⁵⁶ was actually Europe's southern antipode, "a fourth part of the earth."⁵⁷ In addition, very primitive and nude human beings inhabited this land. From 1502 until his *Mundus Novus* in 1503 or 1504, Vespucci deepened his awareness of what was happening. It took years to revise a thousand-year-old *Weltanschauung*.

The concrete ego of Amerigo Vespucci accomplished the passage from the Middle Ages to the modern age. Vespucci completed what Columbus, the first modern, had begun. A new world, unknown before, emerged before Europe's eyes. Europe, in turn, opened itself to the new world! Europe's status altered from being a *particularity placed in brackets (citada)*⁵⁸ by the Muslim world to being a new *discovering universality*. The modern ego thus took its first step in a diachronic self-constitution that later passed from the *ego cogito* to the practical will to power. O'Gorman writes with great precision:

When Vespucci speaks of a *world* he refers to the old notion of ecumene, of a portion of the Earth fit for human habitation. If he licitly designates the recently explored countries as a *new world*, it is because he intends to announce the effective finding of one of these *other ecumenes*.⁵⁹

Matthias Ringmann and Martin Waldseemüller use the expression *discovery* in their *Cosmographiae Introductio* in 1507. They depict the "Fourth Part of the Earth" on their map and call it "America" in honor of Amerigo Vespucci, its *discoverer*.⁶⁰ In line with O'Gorman's ontology, such a discovery merely recognizes a material or potency upon which Europe could invent its own *image and likeness*. For O'Gorman, America is not discovered as something *distinct* or *Other* which resists subsumption. Rather America serves only as matter upon which *the Same* projects itself; America submits to a "covering over" (*encubrimiento*). Such a Eurocentric thesis is part of a historico-cultural act of domination, however much O'Gorman's intentions may have opposed such domination.

Habermas, whose Eurocentrism resembles O'Gorman's, suggests an intra-European definition of modernity which commences with the Renaissance and the Reformation and culminates in the *Aufklärung*. Latin America, Africa, or Asia have *no importance* for the philosopher from Frankfurt! In this self-centered, Eurocentric definition, Habermas identifies European particularity with world universality. O'Gorman, in spite of his cognizance of domination, denies America by defining it as matter, potency, and nonbeing. Habermas dismisses the relevance of the discovery of Latin America and thereby denies its historical reality, just as Hegel did.

The dis-covering took place historically and empirically from 1502 to 1507. This discovering confirmed the existence of continental lands inhabited by human beings to the west of the Atlantic and previously unknown to Europe. This discovering demanded that Europeans comprehend history more expansively, as a world/planetary happening (*weltliche Ereignis*).

This discovery process terminated in 1520 when Sebastián Elcano, surviving the expedition of Fernando de Magellan, arrived in Seville. That expedition had discovered the Strait of Magellan, traversed the Indian and Pacific oceans, put to rest the hypothesis of the *Sinus Magnus*, and circumnavigated the earth for the first time. As a result, the earth became the scene of world history, and its Fourth Part (America) was distinguished from the Asiatic fourth peninsula. These discoveries took place within a European perspective interpreting itself for the first time as the center of human history and thus elevating its particular horizon into the supposedly universal one of *occidental culture*.⁶¹

For the modern *ego* the inhabitants of the discovered lands never appeared as Other, but as the possessions of the Same to be conquered, colonized, modernized, civilized, as if they were the modern *ego's material*. Thus the Europeans (and the English in particular) portrayed themselves as "the missionaries of civilization to all the world,"⁶² especially to the "barbarian peoples."⁶³

Europe constituted other cultures, worlds, and persons as objects, as what was thrown (*arrojado/jacere*) before (*ob/ante*) their eyes. Europe claimed falsely that the covered one (*el cubierto*) had been dis-covered (*des-cubierto*). *Ego cogito cogitatum*, but this

cogitatum was Europeanized and immediately covered over (*en-cubierto*) with respect to its otherness. The Other was thus constituted as part of the Same.⁶⁴ The modern *ego* was born in its self-constitution over against regions it dominated. Fernandez de Oviedo exemplifies this subjection of the "Other" to "the Same":

The people of these Indies, although rational [*sic*] and of the same branch of the holy ark of Noah, are made irrational [*sic*] and bestial by their idolatries, sacrifices, and infernal ceremonies.⁶⁵

The Other is Oviedo's beast, Hegel's future, O'Gorman's possibility, and Albert Caturelli's *material in the rough*. The Other is a rustic mass dis-covered in order to be civilized by the European being (*ser*) of occidental culture. But this Other is in fact covered over (*en-cubierto*) in its alterity.