Chapter Two

1493: The True Importance Of Christopher Columbus.

In the beginning, all the world was America...

Chapter 2, "1493," considers the impact of Europe and the Americas on each other.

Astoundingly, no one textbook I surveyed describes these geopolitical implications of Columbus's encounter with the Americas. Three of the twelve books credit Indians with having developed important crops. Otherwise, the west-to-east flow of ideas and wealth goes unnoticed. Eurocentrism blinds textbook authors to contributions to Europe, whether from Arab astronomers, African navigators, or American Indian social structure. By accepting this limited viewpoint, our history textbooks never invite us to think about what happened to reduce mainland Indian societies, whose wealth and cities awed the Spanish, to the impoverished peasantry they are today. They also rob us of the chance to appreciate how important America has been in the formation of the modern world.

This theft impoverishes us, keeps us ignorant of what has caused the world to develop as it has. [p. 69]

When history textbooks leave out the Arawaks, then offend Native Americans. When they omit the possibility of African and Phoenician precursors to Columbus, they offend African Americans. When they glamorize explorers such as De Soto just because they were white, our histories offend all people of color. When they leave out Las Casas, they omit an interesting idealist with whom we might all identify. When they glorify Columbus, our textbooks prod us toward identifying with the oppressor. When textbook authors omit the causes and process of European world domination, they offer us a history whose purpose must be to keep us unaware of the important questions. Perhaps worst of all, when textbooks paint a simplistic portraits of a pious, heroic Columbus, they provide feel-good history that bores everyone. [p. 74]

What is, after all, the point of studying history? It matters not if we are offended, nor if we identify with someone. Only understanding cause and effect matters. The paragraph, edited, is much shorter.

What would it be but feel-good history if the text were inclusive because it might offend somebody?

"Columbus discovered America and proved that the earth was not flat... Right?"

"We tend to "underplay previous explorers" (39). There were probably 15 or more individuals and groups that "discovered" and settled America before Columbus.

"Even if Columbus had never sailed, other Europeans would have soon reached the Americas... Columbus's voyage... was epoch-making because of the way in which Europe responded" (39).

"The changes in Europe not only prompted Columbus's voyage... they also paved the way for Europe's domination of the world for the next five hundred years. Except for the invention of agriculture, this was probably the most consequential development in human history" (41-2).

"...new and more deadly forms of smallpox and bubonic plague had arisen in Europe... Passed on to those the Europeans met, these diseases helped Europe conquer the Americas and, later, the islands of the Pacific" (44).

"Columbus claimed everything he saw right off the boat. When textbooks celebrate this process, they imply that taking the land and dominating the indians was inevitable if not natural" (44).
“Most important, [Columbus’s] purpose from the beginning was not mere exploration or even trade, but conquest and exploitation, for which he used religion as a rationale. If textbooks included these facts, they might induce students to think intelligently about why the West dominates the world today” (45).

Washington Irving created the lie that people thought the earth was flat until Columbus proved that it was round (57).

What is the real significance of Columbus’s reaching the Americas? What made his trip different than the fifteen discoverers who preceded him?

“Christopher Columbus introduced two phenomena that revolutionized race relations and transformed the modern world: the taking of land, wealth, and labor from indigenous peoples, leading to their near extermination, and the transatlantic slave trade, which created a racial underclass” (60).

“When Columbus and his men returned to Haiti in 1493, they demanded food, gold, spun cotton—whatever the Indians had that they wanted, including sex with their women. To ensure cooperation, Columbus used punishment by example. When an Indian committed even a minor offense, the Spanish cut off his ears or nose” (61).

“...attempts at resistance gave Columbus an excuse to make war... For this he chose 200 foot soldiers and 20 cavalry, with many crossbows and small cannon, lances, and swords, and a still more terrible weapon against the Indians, in addition to the horses: this was 20 hunting dogs, who were turned loose and immediately tore the Indians apart” (61).

“Columbus initiated a great slave raid. They rounded up 1,500 Arawaks, then selected the 500 best specimens (of whom 200 would die en route to Spain. Another 500 were chosen as slaves for the Spaniards staying on the island” (62).

“Spaniards hunted Indians for sport and murdered them for dog food. Columbus, upset because he could not locate the gold he was certain was on the island, set up a tribute system... The Indians all promised to pay tribute.. every three months... With a fresh token, an Indian was safe for three months, much of which time would be devoted to collecting more gold... the Spanish punished those whose tokens had expired: they cut off their hands” (62).

“Columbus installed the encomienda system, in which he granted or “commended” entire Indian villages to individual colonists or groups of colonists... On Haiti the colonists made the Indians mine gold for them, raise Spanish food, and even carry them everywhere they went” (63). An Spanish observer wrote that “As a result of the sufferings and hard labor they endured [under this virtual slavery], the Indians choose and have chosen suicide. Occasionally a hundred have committed mass suicide. The women, exhausted by labor, have shunned conception and childbirth... Many, when pregnant, have taken something to abort and have aborted. Others after delivery have killed their children with their own hands, so as not to leave them in such oppressive slavery”” (63).

“Estimates of Haiti’s pre-Columbian population range as high as 8,000,000 people... a census of Indian adults in 1496.. came up with 1,100,000... “By 1516,” according to Benjamin Keen, “thanks to the sinister Indian slave trade and labor policies initiated by Columbus, only some 12,000 remained.” Las Casas tells us that fewer than 200 Indians were alive in 1542. By 1555, they were all gone” (63).

“.. one of the primary instances of genocide in all human history” (64).

“Columbus not only sent the first slaves across the Atlantic, he probably sent more slaves--about five thousand--than any other individual... other nations rushed to emulate Columbus” (64).
“As soon as the 1493 expedition got to the Caribbean, before it even reached Haiti, Columbus was rewarding his lieutenants with native women to rape. On Haiti, sex slaves were one more perquisite that the Spaniards enjoyed. Columbus wrote a friend in 1500, "... it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand"” (65).

"Columbus is not a hero in Mexico... Why not? Because Mexico is also much more Indian than the United States, and Mexicans perceive Columbus as white and European. "No sensible Indian person," wrote George P. Horse Capture, "can celebrate the arrival of Columbus." Cherishing Columbus is a characteristic of white history, not American history" (70).

“The worshipful biographical vignettes of Columbus in our textbooks serve to indoctrinate students into a mindless endorsement of colonialism... the Columbus myth allows us to accept the contemporary division of the world into developed and underdeveloped spheres as natural and given, rather than a historical product issuing from a process that began with Columbus’s first voyage” (70).