

I've deliberately changed the singular title of the congress on « Territoires de l'Amérique » to the plural and added as a subtitle the title of a collection of my stories about alternate *futures* of America for this essay because after attending the Congress, I realized that there are not only alternate futures of America, but alternate *presents* of America, and research for historical novels of my own have shown me that America even has alternate *pasts*.

Indeed there is not even any agreement on what geographical territory is encompassed by the word « America ».

Citizens of the United States of America call ourselves « Americans » and have no other word for our nationality. But from the point of view of citizens of Canada, comfortable with calling themselves « Canadians », the states of even the continent of North America are not united at all. And from the point of view of « Latin America » or « Hispanic America », Canadians and citizens of the United States – though not Mexicans who share the North American continent with them – are « Norteamericanos ». And Mexicans refer to the United States (though not Canada) as « El Norte » and its citizens as « gringos ».

And all this is not just a word game. There are any number of alternate versions of « American History ».

In the United States, what is generally taught as « American History » is the history of the United States: the « discovery » of America by Christopher Columbus, the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, the colonization by England, the Revolutionary War, the expansion westward by American Manifest Destiny, the

Civil War and the freeing of the slaves, a couple of World Wars, and so forth. In the old version, this was viewed in terms of triumphant virtue and glory, in the revisionist version, a darker story of imperialism, genocide, and slavery, but in both versions still parochial.

Canadian history, I was reminded at the Congress in Ottawa, is quite a different American story. Eastern Canada was colonized by the French at about the same time that the British were establishing their colonies to the south, the ancient European conflict between the French and the English was brought to America, and the French in Canada, rather than conquering the Indian federations in the area, made alliances with them against the British in a series of raids and probes back and forth which in the version taught in the United States is known as the « French and Indian Wars. » The British conquered French Canada before the War of Independence in the south, Canada never revolted against British rule, never sought or achieved full sovereignty until it became a « Dominion of the British Commonwealth of Nations », not so long ago still had the Union Jack on its flag and « God Save the Queen » as its national anthem, and even today has a pro forma British « Governor General » as a representative of the « sovereign » British monarch.

Thus while central formative historical realities of the United States are the Revolution, the expansion westward, and the mass immigration of the so-called « Melting Pot » forming a supposedly culturally homogeneous Anglophone culture, the central formative historical reality of Canada is the conquest of French Canada by the British, and a multilingual multicultural nation, as witness the location of its capital Ottawa in Anglophone Ontario but virtually on the border with Francophone Quebec and its signature university there at least officially Francophone.

Of course both U.S. and Canadian history are much more complex than this, but the point for present purposes is that « Canadian

America » is quite different from « U.S. America » in both their formative histories and consequent presents.

And both of these « Americas » and their histories stop abruptly at the Rio Grande.

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If you think America is a « New World », consider Andean and particularly Mexican history. Mexico not only had a highly developed civilization before the advent of the Spanish conquistadores, it had two, Aztec and Mayan, both of which had reasonably detailed knowledge of centuries of their own histories, much of it recorded in written pictographic annals, and had similar if rather mythologized knowledge of predecessor civilizations going back centuries more. In western South America, the Inca Empire was something similar, though without any written record of its history.

The Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire by Francisco Pizarro was a straightforward matter of superior arms and ruthless treachery, but Hernando Cortes' conquest of the Aztec Empire involved media and mythic manipulation, alliances with rival and subject tribes, a war as complex as anything seen in Europe before or since.

In South America the native Indians were almost immediately reduced to official serfdom and unofficial slavery, and thereby turned into a majority underclass, and what evolved was mostly a second-hand Spanish culture imposed by the colonial overlord, with the native cultures reduced to remnants, but in Mexico, where Cortes could not have prevailed without his native allies, true melding of the two cultures took place.

In the early 19th Century, the Spanish colonies successfully revolted, and in South America some of them briefly confederated into a kind of United States of their own, Greater Colombia, before fragmenting into the present collection of separate nation states.

This, of course, is an over-simplification, for while the history of Hispanic America can be traced from the advent of Columbus to the conquistadores to the Bolivarian and Mexican revolutions to the present day, the largest nation in Latin America in terms of land and population, Brazil, arose outside this history, being colonized by the Portuguese, not the Spanish, and passing through a period when it was an independent empire ruled by an emperor, becoming a republic late in the game.

And lately I've discovered what seems to me a well-documented « secret history of the Americas » which makes the whole story much more complicated than even all of the above.

In the lower grades of school, we Americans learn that « Columbus discovered America. » Later on, the story gets amended to the Vikings having gotten there a few centuries earlier, at least to Newfoundland and Labrador, calling it Vinland. Certain of the Irish claim that St. Patrick made it to the « New World » There are cultists who claim the Egyptians must have made it here first and built the Mayan pyramids. And so on, and so forth. If it were all to be believed, then the Americas must have been visited by expeditions, refugees, colonists, from all over the Eastern Hemisphere for centuries before Columbus.

I used to take this as a joke, a Monty Python routine, but no longer.

It becomes obvious once you start thinking about it globally and long-term.

After all, it is indisputable that genus homo originated in Africa, migrated up through Europe, across Asia, into what are now the western Pacific islands, and into America probably no more than 100,000 years ago. So *no* Europeans « discovered America ». It was first discovered in the course of this long millennial migration by people coming across the Bering Sea landbridge of prehistory or

perhaps by seagoing primitive boats from the Pacific islands ; which is a subject of much dispute.

But why not both ?

Small bands of humans crossing from Siberia into Alaska and scattered boatwrecked Polynesians of the same vintage or even later could have easily enough arrived independently in the Americas very early on and never come within a thousand miles of each other in the vast humanly empty continents.

And recently while in Singapore, an exhibit reawakened my interest in the 15th Century Chinese admiral Zheng He, who I had known led great fleets from China to India, Indonesia, Africa, Arabia, perhaps beyond, before internal Chinese politics ended the exploratory policy over half a century before Columbus set sail. With the idea in mind of maybe writing a novel about him, I read 1421, a non-fiction book by one Gavin Menzies claiming that Zheng He had overseen the dispatch of four fleets, each of more than a hundred ships, to explore and map the entire world, at least two of which had reached the Americas in that year and supposedly planted Chinese colonies.

An outrageous claim at first on the face of it, but Menzies was a sailor, submarine commander, and expert navigator and cartographer, and presents a crushing wealth of evidence based on maps acknowledged authentic which showed most of the lands of the Americas long before 1492, and abundant correspondence, some by Columbus himself, that he, Prince Henry the Navigator, Ferdinand Magellan, and the other European « discoverers » knew more or less where they were going before they set sail because they were following maps based on second-hand or third-hand copies of Chinese cartography.

And further, though the Chinese discoveries are Menzies' hobbyhorse, he also presents convincing proof in the form of maps and correspondence that the Portuguese had reached and perhaps

planted colonies in the Caribbean decades before the Spanish expedition of Columbus in 1492.

The so-called Indians of North America certainly crossed over from Siberia and migrated southwards, but it is entirely possible that canoes from Polynesia might have reached South America in prehistory as well. It is certain that the Vikings reached « Vinland » half a millenium before Columbus reached the Caribbean, almost certain that the Portuguese had been there before him, extremely likely that the Spanish and the Portuguese were following maps based on earlier Chinese cartography, and unquestionably true that the descendants of the prehistorical migrants – Olmecs, Aztecs, Mayans, Incas, and so forth – had built complex American civilizations in Mexico and the Andes with their own « American histories » long before any Chinese or Europeans had arrived, so-called « pre-Columbian » or « native American » civilizations which in turn were not even aware of each others' existences.

The point for present purposes of this haiku version of alternate histories of the Americas, all of which and maybe more are probably at least partly true, is that for the peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere – be they prehistoric Siberians, Polynesians, Vikings, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, French, British, whatever – the Western Hemisphere, the Americas, was *always* a virgin New World beyond the old, a Terra Incognita waiting to be found, explored, exploited and populated, out there somewhere beyond the mists of legend, a *tabula rasa* upon which to project, write, actualize their myths, hopes, fears, and dreams.

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Thus the diverse geographical and historical territories of the Americas, each emerging from the unknown or dimly glimpsed land of legend before their « discovery », each with its own epic version thereof.

The tribes of prehistory perhaps followed the warming of an ice age ; the Vikings island-hopped stepwise from Scandinavia to Iceland, to Greenland, to Vinland ; Polynesians likewise island hopping across the far vaster unknown reaches of the eastern Pacific, the Chinese sending out huge fleets to map the entire world ; the Spanish and Portuguese following their secret maps into the only vaguely known ; Cortes marching across the mountains to fabled Mexico, Coronado chasing the legend of El Dorado, Ponce De Leon the Fountain of Youth, Lewis and Clarke the way west across an unexplored continent, down to the first film moguls from the east arriving in the self-made myth of Hollywood and Bugsy Siegel dreaming Las Vegas in the empty desert of Nevada.

For the British settlers on the east coast of what was to become the United States, America was a vast empty wilderness stretching westward to the vaguely-known Pacific--an endless frontier, where the landless, the refugees, the freebooters and the religious cultists from tired old Europe could seek farmland, fortune, and freedom. And thus the formative American myth of that America was and is that of the permanent frontier, the Wild West, the Gold in Them Thar Hills, Golden California. For the redskins that happened to be in the way and served as foils for the game of Cowboys and Indians, it was, of course, another matter.

North of the border, in what was to become Canada, the story began rather differently, with alliances with the Indian nations in the low-level territorial warfare with the English settlers to the south, and then the Conquest of French Canada by the British. Thus Canada was born with a more complex political and military, a less red-and-white relationship with the Indian tribes, and a bilingual and bicultural identity from the outset, though also with a frontier myth and reality as it too spread westward to the Pacific.

South of the Rio Grande, it was a radically different story that produced radically different cultures with radically different

formative myths which have lead to radically different political cultures and tensions.

In Mexico and western South America, the Spanish conquistadores encountered not a continent « empty » save for scattered « primitive tribes » with an open frontier, but well-developed city-building empires which had expanded by practicing imperialist military and economic policies of their own, with their own powerful religious-political myths of superiority.

Pizarro may have conquered the Inca Empire by a ruthless genocidal massacre and a major act of treachery, but Cortes was constrained to fight a complex years-long war against the Aztecs ; a war of conquest from his point of view, but a series of « wars of national liberation » from the point of view of his Indian allies. Only after the native overlords were defeated were the lands they had ruled consolidated into a « New Spain » ruled by Europeans.

In what became the United States, the population of scattered tribes was relatively small, their cultures relatively « primitive », and the European « pioneers » – farmers, trappers, ranchers – poured westward in relatively large numbers, decimating them in the process, and the original inhabitants quickly became a small demographic minority, a footnote to the history of Manifest Destiny to those who wrote it.

But in Mexico and western South America things went quite differently.

In western South America, the indigenous populations were larger and accustomed to some form of central government, and conversion to Catholic Christianity was a theocratic *raison d'être* for turning the Indians into a useful class of peons, modeled on medieval serfdom, from which newly unified and newly Christianized Spain had been later emerging than England or France.

It was much the same thing demographically, economically, religiously, and politically in Mexico, but there were cultural differences. In the former Inca Empire, the Indian underclass may have retained its language as a secondary tongue to some extent, but lost most of its higher cultural heritage, but in Mexico the culture that ultimately emerged was much more a synthesis of Spanish and indigenous elements, owing perhaps to the Aztecs, the Mayans, and even to some extent their predecessors having had a long and detailed recorded history, and having been conquered not simply by the force of technologically superior Spanish arms, but by alliances between the Spaniards and powerful subject tribes against the local overlords.

Nevertheless, when Hispanic America revolted against Spain after three centuries of Spanish rule more or less at the same time in the early 19th century, it was much the same everywhere; a revolution by the Spanish-descended colonial ruling class against the mother country, rather than a rebellion of the Indian subject class against the conquerors, just as the revolution in El Norte that produced the United States was a revolt of British colonists against England, not of Indians against the British colonials.

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So because of their different pasts, the « Territories of America », better understood as the « Territories of the Americas », have very different presents, not only on political, social, and economic levels, but on the deeper mythic, archetypal, and cultural levels that inform and mold them.

The mythic history of the United States is that of economic, political, and religious refugees from the tired Old World seeking and finding liberty, land and plenty in a Virgin New World, expanding their muscular libertarian civilization ever westward, ever onward, cowboys overcoming the savage Indians, settlers in covered wagons taking possession of the land, saving the world from the Hun in

World War I and from the Nazis in World War II, placing American feet on the Moon.

This has led to an America which has had an unbroken run of constitutional government for over two centuries, an official ideology of the « Melting Pot » and the « classless society », a reality as the military hegemon of the planet, a sense of righteous and self-righteous Manifest Destiny as the Champion of Liberty and the Hero of History, and the sincere belief by the majority of its citizenry that God is on its side. Its mythic hero is the Man in the White Hat on the White Horse – the Cowboy, the Sheriff, Teddy Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George C. Patton, Superman, and uh, Captain America.

But the mythic history of Hispanic America is the conquest of existing indigenous civilizations by foreign European invaders, the reduction of their builders to a peon underclass, a series of rebellions by the ruling class of descendants of the Spanish colonists against the European metropole, followed only later by what seems like an endless series of social, economic, and ethnic local revolutions, successful and otherwise, against whatever powers that be.

This has led to an America whose thirty or so independent Hispanic nations have had more revolutions than can be counted, sometimes by military juntas, sometimes against them, no tradition of stable constitutional government at all, a fascist ideology among the Spanish-descended ruling class exemplified by such as General Augusto Pinochet, and a vaguely socialist or sometimes communist liberationist ideology among the dominantly Indian underclass in which economic redistribution of land and wealth tends to be combined with nativist nationalism, whose characteristic heroes are Benito Juarez, Lazaro Cardenas, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, all of the former and much more now epitomized and generalized in the transhuman avatar thereof, « El Che ».

Canada, at least to this non-Canadian, seems to be a country still searching for a mythic history to inform and mold its present and future, having come into being by the conquest of its Francophone element by its Anglophone element, both having a more ambiguous and complex relationship with its indigene element, having only recently in historical terms adopted an anthem and a flag of its own, still formally acknowledging a British sovereign and governor general, still trying to make peace with its inherently bilingual and bicultural nature.

In this sense, though they all came to being at roughly the same time in historical terms, Canada is a younger nation than any of the Latin American states or the United States ; still a nation in the process of formation, without a formative national myth, or characteristic national hero figure.

And if that might be seen as a weakness, in another sense perhaps it is Canada's great strength. Without an overweening national myth, Canada is free to be a kind of post-modern nation, more egalitarian than Hispanic America in part because richer but in part for that very reason, less nationalistic and more rational in its relationships with other states and the world as a whole than the United States, if not in the cultural and linguistic conflict between Anglophone and Francophone Canadas, the dialectic between which would seem to presently be the most characteristic Canadian identity of all.

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If all of this seems complex, well it is, and if all of it seems oversimplified, it is that too.

For long millennia the inhabitants of the eastern hemisphere had no idea that the western hemisphere even existed, indeed the highest civilizations of the western hemisphere in Mexico and the Andes even had no idea that *each other* existed.

As we are now beginning to learn, or rather perhaps remember, the knowledge of the existence of the Territories of the Americas arrived in the eastern hemisphere slowly over time, out of the dim mists of legend, travelers tales, isolated voyages, explorations long lost to history, a field of dreams in the European and yes, Chinese, mind, before Columbus, before even the fleets of Zheng He, perhaps even before the Vikings.

The true histories of the Territories of the Americas are far older, far more multiplex, far deeper than what we once believed, the Territories of the Americas of myth and legend even vaster still.