Radical Courage: Bartolomé de Las Casas and his defense of the American Indians

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Radical Hope.

In his book *Radical Hope. Ethics in the face of cultural devastation* (2006) Jonathan Lear elaborates on the importance of studying historical contexts in order to achieve a deeper understanding of ethics (8).[1] Writing on how Native American Chief Plenty Coup (1848-1932) dealt with the devastation of the Crow people's way of life, Lear goes beyond the classical definitions of concepts like hope and courage, reinterpreting them in terms of their 'radical' character.

As we all know, "radical" is a very controversial word today. It is often used to define so- called "anti-establishment activism," which often includes acts of violence. However, the first meaning of "radical" is not its similarity with "extreme"; on the contrary, radical comes from the Latin word *radix* (root). This meaning was assimilated into the discipline of Linguistics and is used to refer to the 'stem' of words. The term 'radical' is also used by scientists in Chemistry, Mathematics and Physics to identify basic principles that allow for different developments within natural processes. I think Lear's use of the adjective "radical" is meant to convey the older, more ancient sense of the term –its sense as original and fundamental– and not its current political usage and its association with violence. For Lear and his argument about the Crow people, 'radical' means the ability to maintain the core values of the community while moving ahead in difficult times.

Being radical about hope also implies being radical about courage. In fact, Lear's book can be read as a discussion of how a classical concept like courage, one that is traditionally measured in terms of bravery in war, can be transformed to also include a sense of 'engagement' and 'commitment.' Stated differently, how can one design survival strategies while also taking into consideration leadership initiatives that can move the community forward in a way that is sensitive to one's particular historical situation. In a moment of cultural chaos and political confusion, the Crow leader, Plenty Coup, was able to use his own dreams, coupled with Native American ways of understanding reality, to propose a practical solution for his people's way of life. This solution took into account the new conditions facing the Crow people, but did so in a way that attempted to improve upon the old ways of life at the same time.

If hope was necessary for Plenty Coup to imagine a different world for his people, courage was equally important in order to face his community and explain to them why they should go from a nomadic lifestyle to one that was settled and localized; to move from an era of constant battle with other Native American groups, to that of cooperation with them and even with Europeans. All this leadership and work made Plenty Coup into a hero to the Crow people, one whose actions continue to serve as a model today, especially for those interested in the inter-relation between history and ethics.

This paper draws from Jonathan Lear's account of how to perceive the role of virtues, especially courage, as the centerpiece for an ethical vision that can move communities forward in times of difficulty. Plenty Coup and Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566) fought to transform their fellow citizen's perspectives on humanity when

everything seemed to conspire against their ideas for a better future. Through thoughtful actions, they both created an alternative narrative that allowed indigenous people to survive cultural devastation, and provided a new way to think about their future.

Similar to Plenty Coup, Las Casas challenged his fellow Spaniard's perception of the new "discovered" people, and worked most of his life to prove that the Spanish treatment of the Native American populations was unjust. Las Casas reinterpreted virtues like courage by contrasting the religious goals of the conquest with the actions of the *conquistadores*, exposing the unbalance and contradictions between these two poles.

Who was Bartolomé de Las Casas?

Las Casas (Seville, 1484 – Madrid, 1566) came to the Americas in 1502 as a regular Spanish conquistador, and in 1514, after a long transformative experience that included becoming a priest, he took the side of the American Indians against most of the economic interests of the *encomenderos* (land owners). He is well known for his book *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), which describes the massive killing of Native people in Central America and the Caribbean during the first ten years of the conquest.[2]

Las Casas was a firsthand witness to some of those killings, and they played a prominent role in his later decision to defend the Indians. He was declared "Protector of the Indians" in 1515 and Bishop of Chiapas, southern Mexico, in 1544, by the Spanish crown. In order to carry his mission of defending the American Indians he had to become a sharp politician who was able to balance several factors inside the Spanish imperial machine. He was friends with Christopher Columbus' family, with many Catholic Church authorities, and also the many indigenous leaders with whom he had to seal peace and economic treaties.

Las Casas' work, however, was not completely recognized until the 19th century when the new Latin American nations defeated Spain in the Independence Wars, and started to revalidate their national and cultural identities. In the 1960's and 70's, Las Casas was (re) discovered as the father of Liberation Theology, a perspective that was reaffirmed in 1993 by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez in his book *Las Casas: in search of the poor of Jesus Christ* (1993).[3] Las Casas' life and work still speaks to millions today, and his ideas continue to fuel arguments about a number of crucial issues; for example, the legacy of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, the richness and prestige of the American Indians' cultures, and the role of the Catholic Church in the social and political structure of Latin America.

Turning Points

In her introduction to *The Only Way* (1992), Helen Rand Parish establishes three major spiritual crises in Bartolomé de Las Casas' life. The first one occurred during Pentecost in 1514 when, as a priest, Las Casas had to decide if he was going to continue to support the *encomiendas* system. *Encominedas* were an economical structure that established land ownership and the allocation of natural resources -mainly gold and silver- that directly impacted native populations living in the area. These institutions formed the basic structure for life in colonial Spanish America. *Encomiendas* were granted by the Monarch to *conquistadores* who were supposed to provide food, housing, and Christian education to the Indians in return for their labor. In most cases, none of these three conditions were followed, which meant that the Indians became *de facto* slaves. Las Casas renounced his own *encomienda* and freed his Indians. This gesture frightened most of the *conquistadores* who, at the beginning of the conquest, had come to the Americas basically to become wealthy and return to Spain.

The second moment that Helen Rand Parish mentions in Las Casas' spiritual crisis happened in 1522, when, after failing to establish a model community in cooperation with the Indians, he entered the Dominican Order. While in the order he dedicated himself to writing about, and rethinking, his mission to defend the indigenous peoples. The third crisis occurred around 1550 when, as Bishop of Chiapas in southern Mexico, he chose to enforce the New Laws, despite the fact that they had been partially revoked by the King under pressure

from land owners who did not want to give back their territory to the indigenous communities.[4]

Using his ecclesiastic authority, Las Casas declared that the inheritance rights of the New Laws had to be recognized (that lands confiscated by the conquistadors needed to be returned to the indigenous peoples), and those *encomenderos* who did not comply would be excommunicated on their deathbed. In every previous case, Las Casas' actions were motivated by a profound sense of responsibility toward his Christian and Catholic faith. Actions like that of enforcing inheritance rights, show how Las Casas' courage derived not only from his faith in his religious message, something that was shared by many other priests, intellectuals and nobles, but also in the way he acted for the cause of liberation; this latter sense of courage was something that grew out of his respect for the millions of human beings who lived across the Atlantic, and Las Casas' commitment to find a way for their culture to move forward.

We should not forget that Las Casas tried to make his case for the Indians during a time of war and political intrigue, in which his cause was constantly in danger of being lost in the labyrinth of imperial politics. Las Casas conducted himself in a way that enabled him to influence Spanish laws regarding the treatment of indigenous populations in the Americas. By the middle of the 16th century, he had established official standards of moral conduct that needed to be followed in all dealings with the indigenous peoples of the Americas. This did not mean that these moral sanctions were given equal consideration by all, seeing they were often ignored not only by the *conquistadores*, but also by other ecclesiastic authorities within the vast Spanish American territories. Nevertheless, Las Casas' efforts have had a definite impact on political and cultural debates, and have produced a solid *corpus* of scholarship across disciplines, from theology to anthropology, international law, literature, history, and philosophy, which still serves as a valid reference point for studying colonial Spanish America.[5]

The Humanity of the Indians

All of Las Casas's arguments can be summarized into a single idea: the human condition of the Indians. This is the central theme that he explores, and in doing so, allows him to speak out against both the mistreatment of the Indigenous people, and against slavery and all other forms of oppression.[6] Las Casas accomplished this by reaching out to other social fields, going beyond his own religious framework in order to articulate what could be called a 'counter- narrative. These efforts can be traced back to his "Humanity of the Indians," the prologue to *The Only Way*, a five-page text where Las Casas summarizes the reasons for his position.

In this document Las Casas utilizes all of the knowledge and experience he accumulated while living in the Americas, to prove that, in some respects, the Indians were even more civilized that many Europeans. Using Aristotle's conceptualization of the virtues, he illustrates how many aspects of pre-Columbian civilization achieved a high degree of 'functionality,' which enabled the maintenance of a productive political structure:

> Then too there exist extraordinary kingdoms among our Indians who live in regions west and south of us. There are large groupings of human beings who live according to a political and a social order. There are large cities, there are kings, judges, laws, all within civilizations where commerce occurs, buying and selling and lending and all the other dealings proper to the law of nations. That is to say, their republics are properly set up, there are institutions. And our Indians cultivate friendship and they live in large cities. They manage their affairs in them with goodness and equity, affairs of peace as well as war. They run their governments according to laws that are often superior to our own…

Las Casas goes on to explain how the Indians had not only developed artistic skills just as sophisticated as those of Europe, but also how they were able to learn and even improve upon practices like music and handwriting that had come from 'old world' Europe (Las Casas, 65).[7] Las Casas places himself as a witness to these advances, challenging scholars and politicians in Spain who presented Indigenous people as uncivilized flocks without any capacity to govern themselves or assimilate new skills: "I have seen all this (advances) with my own eyes, touched it with my own hands, heard it with my own ears, over the long time I passed among those

people…" (Las Casas, 65).

That Las Casas himself was a witness to such achievements, helped secure his credibility with both the King and the Pope. Maintaining this credibility helps explain why Las Casas made so many trips to the peninsula, for doing so allowed him to reveal before the royal court, theologians and scholars, his firsthand accounts of what was happening in the Americas. Las Casas was well-read in the historical and philosophical debates of his time, and so he made the decision from 1514 onwards to begin documenting what he was seeing in the Americas, with the hope that he could ensure for these new human beings an important place in the history of the west.

When Las Casas writes that *"the Indians come to be endowed, first by force of nature, next by force of personal achievement and experience, and with the three kind of self-rule required: (1) personal, by which one knows how to rule oneself, (2) domestic, by which one knows how to rule a household, and (3) political, knowledge of how to set up and rule a city"* (Las Casas, 65), he is prioritizing Indigenous personas over any other consideration, and presents their cultures and civilizations at the same level as that of the Greeks and the Romans.

Las Casas even affirms that *"they are inferior to none …. And in a good many customs they outdo, they surpass the English, the French and some groups in our native Spain."* (Las Casas, 66) If these words sound heretical for some today, imagine how they sounded when read or pronounced in front of the Spanish royal court, a bureaucracy that considered itself the alpha and omega of the globe in the 16th century. Las Casas hammers home his point, arguing that:

> Our comparison show that in the entire world, in the old days of paganism, there were countless peoples who were much less rational in their use of mind than our Indians, people who had customs far more horrible, vices far more depraved. That conclusion is enough to confound those who have so rashly, perhaps unforgivably, defamed our Indians, to those defamers ashamed in and for themselves, to make them admit their error… And all those who know of them should consider them false witnesses. The more so because, as we have seen through comparison and contrast, the Indians are and were ahead of others –many, many others– more ordered in their use of mind, more ordered in their use of will, with less taint of malice and malignancy. (Las Casas, 66)

It is true that in making this case, Las Casas was not saying something separate from the official political stance of the Church. His *radical courage* consists in not just maintaining his position against constant detractors, but defending it from the political relativism of his time, a relativism that continually gave the benefit of the doubt to *conquistadores* and *encomenderos* who profited from the dehumanization of the Indians.

In 1550, Las Casas had a debate with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1483-1579), a scholar serving the Spanish Crown, in which they argued about whether the Indians had any 'humanity.' Although no winner was officially recognized by the panel in the debate, the Spanish enterprise of colonization continued for more than 250 years under the assumption defended by Sepúlveda, who argued –following Aristotle's theory of natural slavery– that the mistreatment of native populations was justifiable. Even as recent as the late 18th century, Jesuit friars were expelled from Spanish colonies in South America for expanding their missionary duties to incorporate Las Casas' recognition of the cultural and political capabilities of indigenous peoples.

Through 40 years of work and action, Las Casas proved that neither the ancient perspective of Greek philosophy, nor the Christian standpoint, could justify treating people from the Americas as less than human. The rich history of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, despite being victims of mass violence (some of which was witnessed by Las Casas himself in Cuba, La Española [current Domincan Republic], and Central America), systematic oppression, and internal warfare, provided a framework through which Las Casas could extend their own worldview in productive ways, learning from new challenges as they arose. And it is precisely on this point that I think Plenty Coup and Bartolomé de Las Casas come together, with their drive for social justice connecting them across historical time and geological space. Their stories encourage us to reflect on

different ways of understanding the nature of courage, and help us to recognize the challenges, both historical and contextual, involved with living out the full potential of the radical virtue of courage.

Endnotes

[1] Jonathan Lear, Radical *Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
[2] Bartolomé de las Casas, "History of the Indies (selections)," in *Witness. Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas,* edt., George Sanderlin with foreword by Gustavo Gutiérrez (New York, Orbis Books, 1993).
[3] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *En busca de los pobres de Jesuscristo. El pensamiento de Bartolomé de las Casas,* 2da Edición (Lima, 2010).
[4] The New Laws of 1542 were promulgated by Charles I in order to eliminate the enslavement of the Indians. The laws were the result of an intense effort by Las Casas with the Royal Court in which Las Casas testified on the ill treatment of the indigenous populations by *conquistadores*. The New Laws were partially revoked a year later due to the protest of *encomenderos* and their families in Mexico and Peru who saw their heritage rights threatened by these laws. The New Laws, however, founded a legal precedent in favor of the Indians and their rights to their original lands and cultural identity.
[5] Las Casas' work has gained even more relevancy today thanks to new technological advancements in archeology. Work in this field has confirmed that many of Las Casas' claims, described as "exaggerated" by his opponents, are largely reliable descriptions of the rich cultures of the Indigenous communities. One important recent example is described by Charles C. Mann in his book *1491. New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), in which he summaries global peer reviewed research on this topic and concludes that the Western Hemisphere was densely populated before the arrival of Europeans, with some advanced civilizations reaching the peak of their age.
[6] In 1516, Las Casas, confronted by the killing and rapid extinction of indigenous communities in the Caribbean, defended, along with many others, the importation of African slaves into the Americas, a decision he repented shortly afterwards due to its harmful consequences. He offered a formal apologize for this previous position in his *History of the Indies* written in the mid 1500s. The reconsideration of Las Casas' role in Spanish American slavery started in 1822 when emphasis was placed on his total condemnation of the Slave Trade. See, Santa Arias: "Equal Rights and Individual Freedom: Enlightenment Intellectuals and the Lascasian Apology for Black African Slavery," *Romance Quarterly* (Fall 2008, Vol. 55 Issue 4): 279-291. More recent studies pay attention to the general context in which slavery was perceived in Andalucía, Spain, where Las Casas was born and grew up. See Lawrence Clayton, "Bartolomé de las Casas and the African Slave Trade," *History Compass* (Volume 7, Issue 6, Nov., 2009): 1526–1541.
[7] Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Only Way*, edt., Helen Rand Parish, tr., Francis Patrick Sullivan (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

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