

Dying to Meet You:

The Spread of Disease in Conquest

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Many historians have noted the question of why the native peoples of the Caribbean and Americas were decimated by the Spaniards and other colonizing peoples. The question has usually been answered by the concept of “Virgin Soils,” as noted by Alfred Crosby and expanded upon by Noble David Cook. Virgin soils are lands in which people have had no previous contact with the disease in question, in this case, smallpox. Cook argues in *Born to Die* that disease played an essential role in the ritual subjugation of native peoples. Disease added to the exploitation and famine that had already hit the native peoples. David S. Jones, on the other hand, argues that disease, while important, should not receive the utmost focus. To him, it is important to note that social and environmental factors worked in tandem with the colonizing powers’ agendas to take out the native peoples. I agree with Jones’ argument, as it calls to mind various factors that do not take the colonizers off the hook, as their human behavior is at the forefront of Jones’ argument. In this paper, I will outline Noble David Cook’s arguments about the subjugation of native peoples concerning disease and the concept of the “Black Legend.” I will then outline David S. Jones’ argument about different factors culminating in the subjugation of natives. I will then conclude with my own opinion about which argument is more appealing both ethically and methodologically.

Noble David Cook traces how the “Black Legend” narrative of European colonization of the Americas gained prominence, pointing to religious and political causes. In his introduction, Cook uses imagery that draws upon the various sources for the native colonization. The

imagery is vivid and emotional, showing the seedy (and ever-present) angle of colonization. It is in this early chapter that we see the introduction of the “Black Legend,” the idea of the Spaniards being especially atrocious to the natives. These ideas were rooted in religious doctrine, as “their frequent and willing use of the instruments of the Inquisition to search out heterodox beliefs, reinforced in the minds of many the idea that they were ruthless and bigoted.”¹ Religious motives were especially important, as later expeditions to the New World consisted of missionaries. Of course, the religious motives rely on underlying racist notions, as the mere concept of conversion relies upon the natives being “unbelievers.” In this case, this offers a pre-Kipling “White Man’s Burden” with regards to these native peoples. It also within this introduction that we meet Bartolome de Las Casas, who would become one of the preeminent chroniclers of this time, writing from the clerical point-of-view. Las Casas’ book “became the cornerstone of the Black Legend” and thus was widely read.² The Black Legend created virtual “monsters” of the Spanish, thus portraying all the other Old World expeditioners as positive, spreading the will of God. The Black Legend was exploited by the enemies of Spain due to de Las Casas’ work, as the enemies of Spain capitalized on the “evil” view of them that the Black Legend showed. However, it should be noted that the Spaniards were not the only “evil” ones, as the concept of subjugating other, “inferior” people could be viewed as morally questionable when viewed in a modern lens.

In his first chapter, Cook details how European settlers brought to the New World a variety of devastating diseases over the course of four expeditions (1492-1518). It is within this chapter that we see the various sources that Cook uses to make his point. Cook makes rather excellent use of primary sources, considering the fact that he does not have very many sources to work with. The primary sources that Cook works with largely consists of invader-written sources, which creates problems for ascertaining what happened to the natives. Through his use of those sources, we have learned that the natives

1 Noble David Cook. *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

2 Ibid, 7.

received smallpox, measles, the plague, typhus, and cholera.³ The wide variety of diseases would cause problems later, as it was hard to determine what diseases contributed to the massive decline of the native population (if they contributed solely to the decline). Often in the invader sources, the deaths of the natives would be pushed aside in lieu of focusing on the Europeans. The sources also made it difficult to determine the population, as Cook also comments on that. It is within this context that we see problems with ascertaining what contributed to the decline of the natives: statistics.

It is difficult to determine what killed natives if we cannot determine how many natives there were to begin with. The range of population spans between 60,000 and 7,975,000 people.⁴ Cook himself lies right in the middle, at around 500,000 for the population of Hispaniola. Regardless of how many people there were, those people present were decimated in the four exchanges. The first exchange noted was about how the Spaniards were affected by what they believed was syphilis.⁵ However, that is derived from a Spanish source, so there may have been some bias towards the natives. Despite the source, this is an interesting way to begin, as it creates a two-sided narrative of the gift of disease. However, this disease was not nearly as debilitating as others would be on the native populations. The second exchange, taking place in 1493, created a context as to what caused the spread of disease: the spread of animals. Close contact with animals fostered the spread of bacteria, and, thus, disease. Within these expeditions, it is unclear what was spread to the natives, and, while the diseases were deadly, they had not reached the level of the epidemic of 1518.

Alonso de Santo Domingo and Luis de Figueroa, friars in contact with Spain, described the 1518 Hispaniola epidemic as one of the deadliest in history, though Cook deemphasizes this epidemic's impact.⁶ This epidemic was the first of many cataclysmic ones within the sixteenth century, starting in 1518, with the last large one in 1591. It is believed that smallpox was spread to Cuba during the expedition of Hernan Cortes and destroyed what was believed to be ninety percent

3 Cook, 18.

4 Ibid, 23.

5 Ibid, 26.

6 Ibid, 60.

of the population. While this set of epidemics has been pinpointed by many historians as the beginning of the decimation, Cook believes that the death began in the first expedition of 1492-1493. He differs from the other historians because he attributes the decline of the native population to an earlier epidemic date. He was one of the first historians to do so, thus instigating a different version of the disease theory.

While Cook discusses the role of famine, starvation, and exploitation in the natives' demise, these factors overlap with the epidemics and suggest colonization to be morally ambiguous. The combination of those created the disaster rather than just "normal" factors, such as social and environmental differences. A consistent theme in Cook's work is the idea of disease as "neutral." In this case, neutrality takes the blame off the Spaniards, as they were unaware of what they were bringing. This we cannot be sure of, as we know that during the plague, cities such as Venice were aware of contagion via trading ships. It could be surmised that the expeditioners noticed that they were ill and could have taken precautions to prevent the spread. Whether they were aware or not, Cook places an emphasis on disease being at the forefront for the decimation of the native peoples, while also mentioning the "Black Legend," albeit downplaying it to focus on disease.

Jones, on the other hand, emphasizes how social and environmental factors influenced the epidemics' magnitude and severity. Before he goes into detail about this, he outlines four narratives that historians have wedged themselves into when it comes to discussing this problem. The first theory lies within the concept of the native populations being full of "purity infiltrated and destroyed by corruption."⁷ While this can be viewed as a positive sentiment, it holds a condescending view towards native peoples, a view reflected within the concept of colonization. The next narrative holds a similar type of condescension, as it shows the vulnerability of the natives as the result of migrating from Asia to America.⁸ Through their extensive travels to get where they are, they weakened themselves. The third narrative

⁷ David S. Jones, "Virgin Soils Revisited," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 4. (2003), 713.

⁸ *Ibid*, 714.

encapsulates the former two, as it plays on themes of virginity (hence the concept of “Virgin Soils”). This concept had religious undertones relying on chastity and the corruption associated with losing said chastity. Finally, the narrative that binds historians is what Jones calls “Puritan theories of Providence,” which is the theory of God making natives ill to leave the country open to the Puritans.⁹ These narratives play on the paternalism that is associated with colonialism (even if this paternalism is dealt with a harsh hand). In the case of all these narratives, they downplay the actions of the colonizers, as they only acknowledge the weakness and “inferiority” of the natives, or the will of God, rather than emphasizing the inherent advantages that the colonizers had, as well as their use of cruelty to create even more advantages.

Instead of placing the blame on the weak immunity of the natives, like others had, Jones acknowledges how a variety of things worked together, allowing disease to run rampant. He does note that “American Indians, who lived without epidemics, would have lacked these protections” that the Europeans had acquired through their ritualistic exposure to illness.¹⁰ However, that is not the whole story, mostly due to the environmental factors and the mere idea of the Europeans not quite having an innate immunity to smallpox, as it would take some time to acquire it. Through exploitation, the environment and social structure of the natives were severely weakened, thus opening them up to be hit by disease. The hardest hit diseases came as a result of the “chaos of colonization”, which included killing natives through “war, starvation, neglect, and even hunting.”¹¹ The native peoples would have been weakened by the abuse, thus not being able to tend to those hit with disease (even the healthy would most likely not have been able to provide care).¹² Their lack of experience with European diseases would only have been augmented when subjected to other stresses being forced upon them. This theory takes away the neutrality of disease as an explanation for the depopulation of the Americas. When it is paired with systematic abuse and exploitation by the colonizers, it looks less unintentional

9 Jones, 714-15.

10 Ibid, 718.

11 Ibid, 722.

12 Ibid, 732.

or inevitable. He also questions the idea of disease “virginity,” as he tries to determine cause and effect when it comes to the decimation of natives. The question that Jones struggles with is: does the “virginity” of the natives cause the destruction, or does a mixture of factors? Jones, in contrast to others on this opinion, leans more towards the latter theory. However, it is difficult to ascertain, as there was a degree of “virginity” within the native peoples. Jones’s criticism notes the implicit racism that lies within the four narratives. That racism is the idea of the natives needing the Spaniards to take care of them, due to the natives being less developed in the eyes of the Old World. Despite the desire to appear to be separated from racist ideas, the narratives presented contain those paternalistic racist ideas (the concept of the native virginity lies in the idea that there were no natives present, which was disproven).

I have found Jones’ argument to be more justifiable both methodologically and ethically. Methodologically speaking, Jones is dealing with more apt sources when it comes to disease. It is his use of primarily and secondary sources that gives his argument more weight, as he is more critical of primary sources (due to the inherent bias within them, either written by invaders or after the fact) and the medical evidence, which he does not believe to be sound. Cook runs into problems with primary sources, as he only has a select few to work with. Cook’s sources are largely written by the invaders themselves and rarely mention the specifics of the diseases that took out the natives. Jones, in only really using secondary sources (except for Bartoleme de Las Casas’ *Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*), avoids the problem of primary sources. Of course, there is a positive aspect of using primary sources, as they provide a timely context of the disease itself. However, Jones finds fault with how the primary sources are used, as it is difficult to reconcile out of context primary sources with what happened during colonization. Cook’s argument is strengthened by his use of primary sources, but he recognizes how the sources are problematic. In contrast, Jones can avoid the pitfalls of the primary sources through his use of secondary sources.

Jones' argument places the blame on the invaders by acknowledging their part in the decimation. They were willing vectors of disease and decimation. Cook's neutralization of disease takes away some of the blame that the invaders ought to have. The invaders acted in a way that moderns (as well as their contemporaries, as seen through de las Casas) would find abhorrent. Ritualistic subjugation occurred due to the weakening of natives via the colonization efforts, and not through the natives simply having weaker immune systems. The natives were at a disadvantage in a microbial manner but were at a significantly higher disadvantage when it came to the steel of the expeditioners. Were it not for the native populations being weakened through warfare, overwork, and other types of abuse, the diseases would not have been as catastrophic. Part of Jones' argument is that the weakened population did not have enough people to tend to the field (for food) or tend to each other, thus weakening the social and political structure of the native peoples. Jones explicitly states that "virgin soil epidemics may have arisen from nothing more unique than the familiar forces of poverty, malnutrition, environmental stress, dislocation, and social disparity," factors that affected not only the natives but also the Europeans when smallpox came through.¹³ Based on this argument, to say that the natives being inherently weaker due to their susceptibility to disease would also throw the Europeans under the bus, as they were hit by disease due to the factors listed above. It is the combination of colonization, microbial disadvantage, and implicit racist ideas that push the concept of "Virgin Soils" being the main explanation for the destruction of natives.

The problem that historians have with this question is that we lack the primary knowledge of the situation at hand. While historians can surmise how and why things happened due to sources we have, it is highly improbable that it is possible to pin down what caused the great decimation of the native peoples. Due to this conundrum, various theories have emerged. Noble David Cook's theory about disease being the main factor in the decimation is well thought out and sound but lacks the considerations of other factors at hand. He emphasizes

13 Jones, 742.

the immunological disadvantage bestowed on the natives, thus giving weight to the disease being the main destroyer of civilizations. David S. Jones, on the other hand, recognizes both the disadvantage of the natives, but is not willing to simply jump on that theory. Instead, he finds fault with the neutralization of disease as a causal factor and instead focuses on how disease capitalized on a population weakened by colonialism. Jones, in commenting on Cook's view of disease as a causal agent, says that Cook's claims "do not match the contingency of the archaeological and historical records. These, instead, tell a story of a population made vulnerable."¹⁴ In creating a vulnerable population, it creates a blameless invader, which does negate historical records. Both historians and their contemporaries have worked to find a reason why the natives were decimated by the vastly outnumbered Spaniards (as well as other expeditioners), despite a variety of theories.

¹⁴ Jones, 741.