

**Fanaticism and Avarice:  
‘That Strange Alliance in the Character of the  
Conquerors of the New World’**

by

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At least since the eighteenth century, scholars working on the social and political history of the ‘New World’ —taken in its broadest possible sense— have been fascinated by the perceived paradoxical motives of the original ventures of colonisation. Two themes reoccurring steadily throughout the past three centuries are those of religious dissemination and economic gain, notions attracting special attention from many contemporary historical studies. Although highly valuable in their own right, these studies tend to neglect any detailed consideration of the development of these themes over the historical timeline, often assuming a relatively static and unchanging notion of what it means to be, for example, ‘fanatic’ or ‘avaricious’. Taking as its starting point Robertson’s *History of America* (from which the titular quote originates), this paper analyses the important notions of ‘fanaticism’ and ‘avarice’ in descriptions of the New World mentality and how they developed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To what extent did early-modern Europeans see this ‘odd alliance’ in New World mentality as incoherent or contradictory? Why was the pairing so inconceivable in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social mores? By contesting static notions of fanaticism and avarice and instead seeing them through a critical philosophical perspective, this paper suggests an unexplored connection—or at least intersection—between the process of identity formation and the social circumstances of its articulation.

*Central Themes and Questions*

Although one of the most prominent and valuable trends in historical analysis over the past two decades has rotated around questions of identity formation in historical subjects, studies embracing this method often overlook elements of historical change that are not easily formalised into discrete histories of group identities. The remarkably focused and engaged perspective espoused by this method provides, on the one hand, an indisputably useful corpus of historiography and prosopography for particular historical agents; on the other hand,

however, it often leaves questions about wider movements in historical change unanswered or simply gestured towards. The papers presented at the JOUHS ‘Odd Alliances’ conference have collectively pointed to two crucial facets of history not easily account for by this method: chance (being precisely what the notion of *process* excludes), and alliance (being automatically referential to a multiplicity of identities, rather than focusing on the formation of a singularity). The union of individuals *despite* their vastly different group-identities, the convergence of political groups driven by precisely what would seem to *separate* them, and the *random* encounter that solidifies institutions which influence British and international history: these are just some of the topics that studying the ‘odd alliance’ has brought to light.

That said, my project is a bit different from other research in that it attempts to theorise on the alliance of character traits—or rather, the perceived alliance between traits created and constituted by a specific form of discourse—instead of, for instance, concrete political systems or even abstract (though still specifically identifiable) systems of thought. My project is even more ambitious, on another level, in that my central focus is not on *how* these pairing came about—I am thinking here in terms of particular understandings of religion and economics, for instance—but rather on uncovering the social circumstances at work in allowing people to formulate the notion of the ‘strange alliance’ of, say, fanaticism and avarice in the first place. Thus my question resides not so much in how understandings of Christianity across denominational lines came to influence the perception of other ethnicities; instead, I take as my primary theme what I call the ‘symbolic landscape’ in which the unique alliance of fanaticism and avarice manifests itself. This landscape is, ultimately, the very disturbing and very difficult idea of the *violent encounter*.

To that end, I have organised this brief exploration into two sections. First, I offer some key examples of perceptions and preconceptions of fanaticism and avarice in the Spanish conquerors of the sixteenth century, told from the point of view of Protestant British and American historians of the nineteenth century. In particular, I demonstrate that the key aspect of the odd alliance of fanaticism and avarice was based not so much on differing understandings of religious principles—though this clearly was an issue to *some* extent—but, more importantly, on the inverted and foreign world of the violent encounter. Simply put: without violence, the alliance of fanaticism and avarice was not so strange.

The second section will develop, in more general terms, the theme of violence as a problematic concept in establishing meaningful alliances as such. Violence is at heart something inverted and strange, something defying easy categorisation owing to its precisely illogical or, we might better say, super-rational character. In certain respects, it is a deviant occurrence with philosophical links to other concepts like chance, and by discussing it a bit we can better understand the possible roles of notions like 'chance' in establishing the 'oddity' of historical alliances. The end result offers us a way to understand particular moments of historical change (in this case, the perception of colonisation in a very problematic period) outside of traditional 'cultural history' lines, while suggesting some provocative questions about the nature of schematised history at all.

*All Spanish Colonists were Greedy Religious Fanatics*

It was more-or-less a commonplace in British historiography of the New World that the premises of Spanish colonisation were greed and religious enthusiasm, and there is virtually no end to the number of examples that could be drawn in this regard. As a focal point, let us take Robertson's *History of America*, a massively popular work steadily reprinted throughout most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Robertson has many pejorative things to say about Spaniards, but perhaps none comes up so often as his bafflement on the recurrent paradox, or hypocrisy, of their combining religion and greed in colonial enterprises. He begins quite simply, toward the beginning of his work, with the following observation:

As religious enthusiasm always mingled with the spirit of adventure in the New World, and, by a combination still more strange, united with avarice, in prompting the Spaniards to all their enterprises, a large cross was displayed in their standards, with this inscription, *Let us follow the cross, for under this sign we shall conquer.*<sup>1</sup>

Nominally this passage describes the first steps of Cortez's campaign from Cuba toward Cozumel, through Tabasco, and into Mexico in the winter of 1519. Robertson's real focus, however, is on the principles motivating Spanish colonisation: religious enthusiasm and

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<sup>1</sup> William Robertson, *The History of America*, 14<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: 1821), p. 119, italics in the original. Interestingly, this passage and most of those subsequently quoted are found verbatim in William Grimshaw, *The History of South America, from the Discovery of the New World by Columbus to the Conquest of Peru by Pizarro*, 5th edn. (Philadelphia, 1833). Although the relationship between the texts is unclear, it is interesting to note how stereotypes were perpetuated through this sort of textual borrowing.

avarice, mixed with a healthy dose of ‘the spirit of adventure’. What Robertson probably sees so strange about this alliance is that it takes a Christian principle and distorts it, in Robertson’s eyes, into a discursive expedient utilised for economic gain. We can infer quite directly that he thinks violence and plunder are antithetical to Christian principles, and, without commenting on the correctness of the conclusion itself, I think we can agree that this inference on Robertson’s opinion is probably accurate. Interestingly, Robertson offers no extended description about *why* we are to see this alliance as so strange; that is to say, he does not develop a theoretical basis of the understanding of, say, Christianity in order to illustrate that the alliance is, in fact, odd. He simply assumes a readership that is familiar with a particular understanding of Christianity, equipped with particular stereotypes and impressions of the distinctly historical nature of certain nations, which formulates ideas of ‘strangeness’ in the same way that he does.

The trope of fanaticism and avarice becomes one of the defining features of Robertson’s story of the Spaniards. Importantly, however, the alliance of fanaticism and avarice becomes strange in more than just the conceptual sense mentioned above. The alliance, and the strangeness of the alliance, was reflected even in the European appropriation of the New World in linguistic and physical terms, such as the naming of cities, and thus the very paradox of an avaricious fanatic actually became embodied in the physical make-up of the New World itself. In concluding one section of the story started above, that is to say, Cortez’s march through Mexico, Robertson provides the following strange tale:

‘The two principles of avarice and enthusiasm, which prompted the Spaniards to all their enterprises in the New World, seem to have concurred in suggesting the name which Cortes bestowed on his infant settlement. He called it, *The Rich Town of the True Cross*.<sup>2</sup>

Again we see the motif of the avaricious fanatic underpinning all Spanish actions, but what is more important here is the distinctly physical manifestation this alliance comes to represent. The Rich Town of the True Cross, being simultaneously an intrusion and imposition on foreign soil, and violent in both the generative and causal senses, can be read as an actual physical reflection of the odd alliance between fanaticism and avarice. It is an *actual city* bearing the name of the strange alliance that Robertson is so anxious about. Although in

valuative terms this is consonant with the conceptual link mentioned above, there is an important change here in our understanding of the 'oddity' of this alliance: it is something distinctly physical. Robertson adds a further assumption on the part of his readership that this distinctly physical manifestation of the alliance contributes to its hypocrisy and therefore oddity; naturally, as suggested above, this is premised on a particular understanding of historicity and the legality of appropriation.

As a final example from Robertson's History of America, let us look at a brief story he tells in relation to the distribution of a massive 1,528,500 *peso* 'donative' paid to the Spanish army to prevent their plundering a Peruvian province under Incan control in 1532. He writes:

'The festival of St. James, the patron saint of Spain, was the day chosen for the partition of this enormous sum, and the manner of conducting it strongly marks the strange alliance of fanaticism and avarice, which I have more than once had occasion to point out as a striking feature in the character of the conquerors of the New World. Though assembled to divide the spoils of an innocent people, procured by deceit, extortion, and cruelty, the transaction began with a solemn invocation of the name of God, as if they could have expected the guidance of Heaven in distributing those wages of iniquity.'<sup>3</sup>

Again, it is conspicuous what Robertson chooses to condemn or not to condemn, as is his lack of explaining why exactly this situation is so strange. At the most basic level, he does not go so far as to condemn the acquisition and division of the money *eo ipso*—indeed, that would probably have been a bit *too* ambitious given Robertson's own historical context—but what he is more concerned about is the apparent lack of delicacy in choosing St James's day for the partition of the sum. The violence used to gain the money—through deceit, guilt, extortion, cruelty, etc. —seems somehow to disqualify it as an appropriate activity for what is supposed to be a religious occasion. As with the paradox in uniting fanaticism and avarice to military force in the first example, and with the violent physical incursion onto foreign soil in the second, the distinctly violent means used to acquire wealth, for Robertson, seem antithetical to the religious means used to disseminate it.

Interestingly, Robertson was not alone in noting the alliance of fanaticism and avarice in Spaniards. Even historians themselves from the New World noted this characteristic in the

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<sup>2</sup> William Robertson, *The History of America*, 14<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: 1821), p. 135, italics in the original.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 309-10.

Spanish conquistadors. A telling example can be found in an 1889 work of travel writing and history by a gentleman named Maturin Ballou, published in Boston. In narrating the history of Cuba, he goes into a rather lengthy description of Spanish involvement there, writing:

Diego Velasquez, the first governor of the island under Spanish rule, appears to have been an energetic magistrate, and to have ruled affairs with intelligence. He did not live, however, in a period when justice erred on the side of mercy, and his harsh and cruel treatment of the natives will always remain a blot upon his memory. Emigration was fostered by the home government, and cities were established in the several divisions of the island; but the new province was mainly considered in the light of a military station by the Spanish government in its operations against Mexico. Thus Cuba became the headquarters of the Spanish power in the west, forming the point of departure for those military expeditions which, though small in number, were yet so formidable in the energy of the leaders, and in the arms, discipline, courage, fanaticism, and avarice of their followers, that they were fully adequate to carry out the vast scheme of conquest for which they were designed.<sup>4</sup>

Velasquez and his soldiers are noted for their military prowess, fanaticism, and avarice amongst other undesirable qualities such as cruelty and asperity. Importantly in this passage, Ballou lists fanaticism and avarice alongside explicitly martial traits such as strength of arms, courage, and discipline. Considered as a whole, it was precisely this set of 'virtues', if we can call them that, which bolstered the chief function of the Spanish army in Cuba; that is, the power to conquer and oppress. Although Ballou does not go so far as to call the pairing 'odd' as such, its appearance in a completely unstable site certainly gives them the impression of being so. The whole situation is inverted, violent, distinctly *unsettling* and *unsettled*: Ballou explicitly mentions forced emigration, the chronological novelty of the Spanish presence, the fact that Cuba was not a destination in its own right, but more properly simply a point of departure. All of these things signify the oddity of the situation, and, in a way similar to that of Robertson, make the pairing all the more strange.

#### *The Violent Encounter: a Site of Unstable Alliances*

In all of the discussions of fanaticism and avarice presented above, there lingers the notion of violence and oppression. This is articulated to different degrees in the various passages, of

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<sup>4</sup> Maturin M. Ballou, *Footprints of Travel; or, Journeyings in Many Lands* (Boston, 1889), pp. 350-1.

course: in the case of Robertson, the paradox of marching under the conquering cross for material gain almost defines the oddity of the Spanish enthusiastic avarice, and the physical imposition of Spanish settlements violently—or at least, destructively—into the heart of the New World is only rendered more insane by the audacity of naming the town ‘The Rich Town of the True Cross’. Similarly in Ballou, fanaticism and avarice—listed among explicitly military traits such as strength of arms, courage, and discipline—bolstered the chief function of the Spanish army in Cuba, the power to conquer and oppress, and both connotatively and representationally appear as something unsettlingly ‘odd’. The situation is rendered all the more complicated by the fact that Ballou links fanaticism and avarice with traditionally ‘good’ or at least desirable virtues such as courage and endurance, and even Robertson seems to hint that the connection of fanaticism and avarice with violence is more disagreeable than the characteristics themselves. Violence, in sum, is a constitutive element of the ‘odd alliance’ of fanaticism and avarice, and, importantly, is a factor which contributes to the strangeness of the alliance beyond simple force of historical circumstances.

It is important that the ideological backdrop against which the notions of fanaticism and avarice appear is consistently, and almost essentially violence. Violence is something intimately linked to ‘excess’ in the Bataillian and Klossowskian sense of the word, the excesses whose suppression is a requirement to live in a civilised world governed by notions of reason and order. By authenticating and, as it were, licensing certain forms of acceptable behaviour, societies that construct an ideal of Reason or Civilisation actually eliminate the possibility of taking into account the anomalies whose very exclusion defines the hegemonic order. Concepts like violence, therefore, the legitimate control of which almost defines the ‘state’ as such, provide a ‘space’ in which odd alliances can occur. Possibly, therefore, it is no accident that history which focuses on the process of identity formation neglects things like this: for in their study of the formation of group identities (using traditional Marxist or whiggish dialectic), their primary concern is to offer insights into the constructive, positive, largely self-assertive and normalising aspects of history. Alliances taking place in the ‘excess’ of the destructive, negative, and self-negating realm of violence are difficult to incorporate into these sorts of historical narratives.

Certainly in the context of nineteenth-century historiography of the conquest of the New World, alliances materialising in the space of violence are ‘naturally odd’, to employ a

deliberately paradoxical turn of phrase. Possibly it is precisely this circumstance of the alliance—that is to say, the violent one—which Robertson does so much to describe as 'strange' without, notably, giving any thorough explanation about *why* it's so strange.

By way of conclusion, let me first state that hypothesising about the nature of difficult concepts such as violence offers an inroad to incorporating other problematic concepts into the writing of history. We were asked to think specifically about the role of chance in establishing odd alliances, and I do think chance and violence share certain base-level similarities. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, speak extensively about chance, chaos, and violence as super-rational elements of an otherwise closed system which occur beyond or even help to define the boundaries and limits of acceptable behaviour. Like violence, the troublesome aspect of chance from a rationalistic point of view is that it represents precisely the anomaly which one attempts to obviate in formulating a meaningful model of history in the first place. Consequently, it is formally and internally opposed to the notion of historical 'process'. However, to extrapolate that conclusion and assert, for instance, that identity formation, by being a process, necessarily excludes chance seems to discount a potentially fruitful avenue of historical research.

In practical terms, how can we incorporate these ideas into our own study of history? Partially, we have to acknowledge that even in the most rigidly historical studies of the processes of identity formation, there are unrepresentable factors at play: chance, violence, multiplicity, and incongruity among others. The framework which defines 'oddity' is not necessarily linked to concrete characteristics of the historical agents themselves—for instance, their political affiliation or, broadly speaking, their 'identity'—but might also be reflected in the less visible, but perpetually present backdrop of the alliance. This is not to suggest that scholars ought to abandon more traditional methods of historiography and prosopography; but a more nuanced understanding of the symbolic forces at play will doubtlessly enrich our account of the historical narrative.

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