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The politics of publication: Bartolomé de las Casas The Devastation of the Indies


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The 1992 Johns Hopkins University Press publication of Bartolomé de las Casas's *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* has been, I am told, a commercial success. Regrettably, it is a scholarly failure. The translation—a reprint of a 1974 version—is so inaccurate that it barely deserves to go by the name, and the introductory essay that accompanies it repeats the old clichés and familiar misunderstandings that one commonly reads about Las Casas's life and work. The shortcomings of both the translation and the introduction could have been overcome by a deeper engagement with Las Casas's works and greater attention to basic information about sixteenth-century Spanish history.

The English rendition of Las Casas's 1552 tract offers egregious problems because, in addition to distorting Las Casas's text nearly beyond recognition, it presents a view of the Spanish conquests in America that contradicts not only Las Casas's interpretations but the historical record itself. The translator evidently did not understand that the conquests in general were carried out by privateering expeditionaries with or without contracts with the king, and that the conquest of Mexico in particular was undertaken by Hernán Cortés against the orders of the governor of Cuba and without the knowledge of the emperor Charles V.

Both the distortions of Las Casas's text and the more fundamental errors of historical understanding can be illustrated by the translator's treatment of Pedro de Alvarado's conquest of Guatemala. We pick up the narrative after the death of Cristóbal de Olid who, with Pedro de Alvarado, had been dis-
patched by Cortés from Mexico to pursue conquests to the south and southeast. Alvarado is one of the major villains in the Brevisima, but the translator missed the point. In addition to being uncertain as to whether Alvarado or Olid was the object of Las Casas’s final harangue (even though she had translated the account of the death of Olid a few pages earlier), she annotated the text (p. 137) to suggest that either might have been the target of Las Casas’s condemnation. Where Las Casas claimed that Alvarado had been responsible for great destruction (1965:93), the translator attributed all the atrocities listed to him personally (p. 74). Furthermore, where Las Casas had used the active voice, making Alvarado the subject of the sentence and therefore responsible for the heinous deeds, the translator used the passive voice, thus diffusing the culpability that Las Casas sought to attribute.

It is difficult to account for these mistranslations for, despite the number of pages Las Casas devoted to Alvarado, he made one general and explicit statement to the effect that “he [Alvarado], as has already been stated, exceeded all the past tyrants and equals those who exist today, from the outlying provinces to [the city of] Mexico itself” (Las Casas 1965:83; my translation). The translator’s own rendition of this declaration (pp. 67-68) provided her with no clue because she had misread the demonstrative pronoun (in the singular), thinking that its grammatical antecedent was the (plural) “kingdoms of Granada.” Thus, instead of declaring Alvarado a great tyrant, she extolls the size of the realms of Guatemala, “which, as I have said, exceeded in size and population all the other kingdoms of the past and present time.”

The substance of Alvarado’s cruelty to the Indians in this account is twofold. The first is the infamous case of human butchery and cannibalism by which Alvarado permitted and encouraged his native allies to consume the flesh of the enemies his armies conquered, and the other is his use of natives for shipbuilding, for which purpose he instituted forced marches that required them to carry heavy anchors, artillery, and other supplies from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico (Las Casas’s North Sea) to the Pacific (the South Sea) (Las Casas 1965:91-93).

In the first instance, Las Casas had written that this Spanish-imposed cannibalism was so horrific that its news spread quickly to other native groups in other territories, all of whom were so terrified by the prospect that they did not know where to turn (1965:91). The translator thoroughly confused the issue by declaring instead that this human butchery was carried out in other parts of the Indies as well (p. 73). Who would be responsible for it, the reader asks, the tyrant Alvarado/Olid? Even more confusing is the statement that this individual (Alvarado or possibly Olid) had this carnage carried out in his “royal kingdom” (p. 73); it was, of course, Alvarado’s army’s
camp (Las Casas 1965:91). Here, the culprit was the word *real,* which can mean “royal” as an adjective; but here it was a noun, for which military encampment is one of the common (and, in this case, obvious) meanings.

The translator’s account of the forced marches across Guatemala (p. 73) is another example of considerable confusion, for which one of the sources seems to have been the Spanish word *unas,* which the translator rendered in its most common usage as “fingernails,” but which in this case referred to the flukes of ship’s anchors. First, the translation declares (p. 73) that, instead of marching from one coast to another (from the North Sea to the South), the Indians were taken aboard ship for “voyages to the north and south along the coast.” Second, they had to carry anchors “to the coast.” Third, instead of Las Casas’s description of the Indians struggling under the burden of the heavy anchors, with the flukes (*unas*) of the anchors slung over their shoulders and backs, the translator conjures up a macabre conga line: “and they marched, thus shackled, those pathetic naked creatures, one behind the other, their hands [*unas* is interpreted as a synecdoche] clinging to the shoulders and waist of the one in front, carrying heavy burdens on their backs” (p. 73). It is difficult to envision how they would have simultaneously clung to one another at shoulders and waist and carried such burdens. (Las Casas had specified not only anchors but artillery.)

The translator’s affective distance from the object of study is revealed in her reference to the Spaniards’ “breaking up marriages” (p. 73) when the reference is to the invaders’ physically tearing men and women from one another. Another instance is the rendering of the conquistadores’ stealing wives and daughters of Indians in order to give the sailors and soldiers “consolation.” The word consolation connotes somehow the deservedness of the mercenaries to such rewards, whereas Las Casas’s explanation, “to keep them satisfied” (1965:93), had clearly connoted the greedy lustfulness of rapists and robbers.

Such imaginative failures on the translator’s part are not as serious, however, as the historical ones. It is well known that Cortés’s conquest of Mexico was an illegal adventure that defied the authority of his immediate superior and ignored altogether that of his king. The translator, however, gives the impression that the conquest was royally sanctioned. Again on the subject of the conquest of Guatemala ordered by Cortés, she asserts: “this captain-general [Alvarado or Olid] himself wrote ... a letter to the prince who sent him” (p. 68). Of course, no prince had sent either Cortés or Alvarado out from Cuba, across the Gulf, and into the Mexican mainland. As one might by now expect, Las Casas’s statement had had quite a different meaning. In referring to one of Alvarado’s letters to Cortés which he had consulted in preparing his own version of the conquest of Guatemala, Las Casas
wrote that “the great tyrannical captain,” not a captain-general, “had written to the leader who had sent him” (1965:83). He referred to the mercenary Alvarado having been dispatched by the insubordinate Hernán Cortés. Again, a key word mistranslated has distorted the whole; principal means head or leader in a general way, it never means “prince” (príncipe), as the translator rendered it.

This type of error reveals a misapprehension of the Brevisima much broader than the instance itself and misses the point in Las Casas’s having it printed. The Dominican friar never directed his accusations against the monarch but rather against the privateers who acted beyond the reach of the sovereign’s control. Las Casas had the Brevisima printed for Prince Philip precisely so that the latter could understand the destruction that private adventurers and mercenaries had wreaked when their actions were not firmly controlled by a higher authority. It was the responsibility of Las Casas, the loyal subject, to inform his king about these tragedies so that the latter could take measures to remedy it. Las Casas’s dedication to Prince Philip in the prologue (not printed in the translation) makes the point clear: “The king who sits on the canopied throne of justice dissipates all evil” (1965:11).

In sum, Briffault’s The Devastation of the Indies is an account of horrific deeds, but it is far from being a fair or accurate rendering of Bartolomé de las Casas’s Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias. It is a rousing, though somewhat confusing tale; it clearly is not Las Casas.

The introduction to this slim volume is no more helpful because it repeats the commonplaces – and many common errors – about the Dominican’s life. To the author’s credit, he starts by giving the correct birthdate of Las Casas (p. 3); this has been established since Helen Rand Parish and Harold E. Weidman (1976) proved that Las Casas’s birth year was 1484, not 1474. (The Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data in the volume still gives the incorrect year.) This good beginning notwithstanding, many of the statements in the introduction need to be challenged. Among them are the familiar assertions that Las Casas started his Indies career as a soldier, that he held slaves, that he was the first priest ordained in the New World, that he advocated the importation of African slaves to the Indies, that he bypassed Inquisitorial censorship when he had his tracts printed in Seville in 1552-53, that the Brevisima was translated abroad immediately after its publication, that Las Casas learned several native languages but naively oversimplified “cultural differences among native tribes,” that he was not a social reformer because he was “unable to establish any coherent alternative to the economic and political exploitation” that he condemned, and yet, finally, that he “directly influenced the direction of the New Laws” (pp. 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 20).

Despite all the tomes written on Las Casas, both his early life and his role in
writing royal legislation in the 1540s have been the least clearly known and the most subject to banalities. The newly published work of Helen Rand Parish, who collaborated several decades ago with Henry Raup Wagner in writing the most thoroughly documented of Las Casas's biographies (Wagner & Parish 1967), documents and updates these crucial portions of Las Casas's life. Her introduction to the newly published *Bartolomé de las Casas: The Only Way*, for example, reveals that the only evidence that any member of the Las Casas family was a military man pertains to Bartolomé's uncle Francisco, that the family's business in Hispaniola was not agricultural but commercial, selling provisions to expeditions who would go on to the mainland, that Bartolomé became a deacon in Seville in 1506, and that he was ordained a priest not in America but in Rome, on March 3, 1507, along with twenty-three others, and that he celebrated his first new mass in Hispaniola in 1510, as he had declared in the *Historia de las Indias* (Parish 1992:14-16).

But what about Las Casas's position on African slavery? Parish (1992:6, 10, 49, 201-208) takes up this issue afresh and examines it via the only sources we have on the subject: Las Casas's 1516 memorandum to the emperor, in which he proposed the importation of black and white slaves from Africa, and his own remarks on it in the *Historia de las Indias*. At the outset, it should be noted that Las Casas was not the author of African slavery in the Caribbean; King Ferdinand had begun the importation of Africans as slaves in the first years of the sixteenth century, and, in any case, the extent of Las Casas's influence at court years later, in 1516, is dubious.

Like all Spaniards at the time, Las Casas understood that the Portuguese slave trade along the north and west coasts of Africa depended on black and white slaves taken in the war (considered just by Catholic Spain and most of Christendom) against Islam, that is, that the slaves were captives taken legally in a just war. Only upon writing the *Historia de las Indias* did Las Casas learn that this was not true. On reading in the early 1550s the Portuguese historians' accounts of their nation's oceanic exploration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Dominican discovered that such slaves had not been taken in the war against Islam but rather were being hunted down as they lived peacefully in their own homes. As to the claim that Las Casas had held slaves in his youth, this was a reference to the Indians held by him in *encomienda*, an institution and practice from which he separated himself in 1514 (Parish 1992:20-21).

One of the most significant aspects of Las Casas's life – well known by his contemporaries, both friend and foe – was that he was a canon lawyer. Parish (1992:13) had foregrounded the issue by the discovery of documentation that confirms that he took two degrees in canon law at Salamanca. Such a background makes all the more plausible the lifetime of work he did in writing
remedial legislation for the Indies and particularly the centrality of his role in
drafting – not merely steering the direction of – the New Laws. His contempo-
rarities gave ample testimony to the decisive role he played in the creation and
promulgation of the New Laws (Wagner & Parish 1967:108), but clarity had
faded with the centuries. Parish & Weidman (1992) and Parish (1993) docu-
ment and restore Las Casas’s central role in these efforts. This enormous
corpus of documentation makes clear that Las Casas did indeed pose alterna-
tives to the political and economic exploitation he condemned, and that he
was a social reformer in his era in the manner that Thurgood Marshall was
one in our own times – that is, working in the chambers of legislative and
judicial institutions, rather than in the street or from the pulpit.

On so many of these biographical points, the starting place is the work of
Las Casas. His own corpus of writings is unconquerable, it is true, and this
accounts in large measure for the commonplaces to which we so easily fall
prey. Here, the best guides are the “Narrative and Critical Catalogue of
Casas’s Writings” in Wagner & Parish 1967 (253-98) and Pérez Fernández
1981. In any case, knowledge of Las Casas’s juridical writings (the last of
which, the 1564 Tratado de las doce dudas, proposed to King Philip the
abandonment of the Indies), and his immense Historia de las Indias, as well
as the remarkable Apologética historia sumaria, make it impossible for the
serious reader to conclude that Las Casas never proposed solutions to polit-
ical and economic problems, that his importance as a historian depended on
the accuracy with which he estimated the number of Indians who lost their
lives at Spanish hands, or that his vision of native American societies was
naive and simple.

On the contrary, on the basis of his own experience and the reports of
friars and soldiers from all over the Indies, he spent decades writing the
Apologética historia sumaria, the most comprehensive and detailed critical
account of native customs then in existence. But he was not, by his own
admission, the master of “several native languages.” Readers familiar with
his writings know that he made no such claims and that, in fact, the objects of
his deep admiration were the friars who were experts in native tongues. The
introduction’s assertion (p. 20) about Las Casas’s naiveté regarding native
“tribes,” however, reveals how partial an account of Las Casas’s works the
Brevisima is. It is there that one gets the impression that he saw the Indians
as one people, but that is because the tract is a work of advocacy on behalf of
all of them, not a work of ethnography that differentiates among the hun-
dreds of groups in question. It is a disservice to scholarship to take the part
(the Brevisima) and make it stand for the whole of Las Casas’s works.

To conclude, a few words are in order about the publication of the Brevis-
sima in its own time, and the reappearance of The Devastation today. As to
his undertaking the publication of the *Brevisima* plus eight other tracts on Indies reform in 1552 and 1553, he should not be faulted for failing to seek “clearance from the Inquisition” (p. 9), because the major laws in Castile concerning censorship, with both pre- and post-publication inspection of manuscripts, were not promulgated until 1558, six years after the *Brevisima* appeared. Furthermore, as the Indices of Prohibited Books (of which the first appeared in 1551) remind us, the Spanish Inquisition practiced post-publication censorship. Second, the sensational *Brevisima* was not “almost immediately translated” (p. 2); it came out twelve years after Las Casas’s death in 1566, or a quarter century after its original Seville publication. That first foreign edition, published in French in Antwerp in 1578, had as its purpose not the condemnation of Spanish deeds in the Indies, but rather the goal of serving as “an example and warning to the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries” (Saint-Lu 1984:44). In other words, its purpose was to protest Philip’s oppression of the rebellious Netherlands.

What about its publication today? The introduction claims that *The Devastation* possesses an “enduring relevance” for “its presentation of timeless and universal issues of human rights,” and that the “essential question” asked by Las Casas in his work is “What is the proper moral reaction to monstrous injustice?” (pp. 22-23, 11, 23). I would argue that such was not the case in Las Casas’s day, nor is it so in ours. In 1542, Las Casas himself addressed the issues of human rights and proposed serious legislation for remedial action before the royal council not in the *Brevisima*, but in the document that accompanied it, the *Entre los remedios* which proposed the abolition of the *encomienda* system (Wagner & Parish 1967:108-109). Today, on reading *The Devastation*, readers tend to think not about human rights but rather about “Spanish cruelty,” as the introduction acknowledges: “Even today the Black Legend heavily influences Northern European and North American perceptions of Latin American history and culture” because of the common reading that interprets Las Casas’s charges as the condemnation of “all Spanish activities and the Spanish national character” (p. 2). As if to prove the point, the introduction notes that, as recently as 1898, the work was used as a tool of anti-Spanish propaganda (pp. 16-17).

So does *The Devastation* really focus our attention, as the introduction suggests (pp. 23-24), on our roles as “Columbus’s heirs” and “inheritors of the past”? From 1578 onward, the foreign publications of the *Brevisima* had nothing to do with protecting the human rights of America’s inhabitants but rather with portraying Spain as a cruel nation and dangerous enemy. I dare say that any publication of the work by the Dutch, the English, or the French was not done with the purpose of turning a self-conscious eye on their nations’ own moral position as colonialists, any more than the publi-
cation of Tzvetan Todorov's *Conquest of America* in 1982 has directed readers to an exercise in self-reflection about the injustices perpetrated in our own societies today. Whatever the intentions that accompany the present publication of *The Devastation* may have been, I seriously doubt that it leads us to examine our own national sins, rather than those of others. The introduction speaks of the "propitious moment" that the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landfall offers to reissue Las Casas's polemical tract. However, if the goal of the Johns Hopkins University Press was to raise moral issues such as human rights, the claims of native peoples, and the destruction of the rain forests (pp. 2-3), *The Devastation* is not only a poor but totally inappropriate choice.

### References


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