

# On (Re)interpreting the Concept of “Discovery” in (Latin) American Perspective\*

Olga Bondar

Department of Social Philosophy  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
6 Miklukho-Maklaya Str.  
Moscow, Russia  
E-mail: bondar\_oyu@rudn.university

**Abstract**—The article attempts to expand the traditional interpretation of the concept of "Discovery of America". The author emphasizes the necessity of expanding the concept beyond geographical, political, and economic contexts, carrying out the transition from the linguistic to cultural and philosophical point of consideration. The author poses a question of the concept's cultural and historical significance, revealing its close connection with the solution of the issue of self-determination of the subject, involved in world history.

**Keywords**—*invention of America; America as an idea; the essence of America*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the global historical process was in principle monocausal and subordinated to the European logic of cultural development, which put itself in the spotlight, largely due to its progressive and expansionist character. The history of a European man was interpreted as a universal history. As for the histories of other human communities, they, involved in the European one, were seen just as an integral part of it, which devalued their value. The interpretation of the global, planetary in their significance phenomena and concepts was also dependent on the European monologism. Consequently, their meaning was narrowed, losing the completeness of the internal content. The most representative in this respect was the phenomenon of the exploration of Americas.

Undoubtedly, for the Old World, the discovery of the New World was not just a trivial historical fact. Europe felt the gravity of this event throughout own culture: the fact of the discovery and existence of America shattered the image of the world, destroying the system of knowledge of the Europeans, formed at the turn of the 15th – 16th centuries. However, the status of the object of the cultural process, which was allocated to America by the Europeans, determined the subsequent emphasis of geographical, political, economic and epistemological perspectives regarding the concept (and phenomenon) of the “discovery of America” without considering its worldwide historical and

cultural significance.

Replacing the Eurocentric one, the new explanatory model of the historical process, set by a polycentric approach, allowed revealing the relations of the Old and the New Worlds in the perspective of a non-Western world, therefore coming to an objective assessment of the events, focusing and reconsidering the concepts (and phenomena) that have given the historical process the complete shape, making it global [1]. The concept of the “Discovery of America”, derived from geopolitical and economic contexts, in the “geography” of the historical-cultural dimension receives and addition by such concepts as “the encounter of the two worlds” and “the mutual discovery of the cultures”, emphasizing the importance of the communicative act and the equivalence of the parties involved: the discoverer (Europe) and the discovered one (America). However, in a series of attempts to find a definition that may reflect the depth of the historical events and reveal their ambiguity, there is also “Concealment” [2]. It directly emphasizes the drama and tragedy of the collision of the worlds and the lands in the New World, expressing the words of Hegel that America is an “all-natural culture that was supposed to die witnessing the approach of the spirit” [3]. The non-European interpretation of the concept of “Discovery” finds its verso, unveiling the painful and violent forms, closely associated with the phenomenon of La Conquista and subsequent colonization, determining the key American problem of self-discovery in terms of the loss of the own roots.

Historical-cultural and cultural-philosophical issues, being considered through the prism of the processes of universalization and globalization, bring to the surface the topic of the formation and transformation of America from the world history's object to a global actor – the subject. Hence, the historical fact of the discovery of America placed in the system of the “Latin America - Europe” relationship reveals the new aspects of its content, expanding its spatial horizon with the new definitions and meanings.

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## II. "THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA": FROM THE LINGUISTIC TO THE CULTURAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

In most cases, in the Spanish-language literature, the historical event of the Discovery of America is described using the word "*descubrimiento*" – "discovery". Yet sometimes the word "*invención*" – "invention" – is used. It appears in the texts of the initial period of the exploration of the New World, starting with the Latin translations of the Christopher Columbus' letters "*De insulitis inventis*" dated by the late 15th century. At the beginning of the 16th century, Hernán Pérez de Oliva used the word "invention" in the title of his book "*Historia de la invención de las Indias*" ("History of the Invention of Indias"). Juan de Castellanos also uses it in his "*Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*" ("Elegies of the Worthy Men of Indias"), an epic poem dedicated to the centenary of Columbus' first voyage, praising the participants of the first expeditions to the New World with the following words: "*Al Occidente van encaminadas las naves inventoras de regiones*" ("To the West sail the ships of the navy, inventing the new limits"). Of some interest in this regard are the chronicles of the 16th century. Andrés Bernaldez calls C. Columbus "*inventor de las Indias*" ("the inventor of Indias"). A similar name to Columbus is given by the priest and humanitarian Bartolomé de las Casas; seeing providence in the explorer's accomplishments, the historian describes Columbus as "*inventor deste orbe*" ("the inventor of this world"), directly connecting him with a divine mission. This is not coincidental: the name "Christopher" translates as the "Christ-bearer" (*Cristóbal, traedor o llevador de Cristo*) while "Columbus" means "the settler of the new lands" (*Colón, "poblador de nuevo"*). Reinforcing the messianic role of C. Columbus with Aristotelian thesis on "the adequacy of names to the properties and purposes of things", B. de las Casas states that "often the Divine Providence outlines the names that should be given to people, so that they correspond to the classes and foretold activities, and there are many examples to be found in the Holy Scripture" [4].

From the formal point of view, it is unacceptable to use the word "invention" to describe the discovery of the New World. However, in the continental cultural philosophical tradition, the meanings of the concepts of "discovery" and "invention" are being conceptualized and turned into the center of the identity discourse. In the 20th century the idea of "the invention of America", if not being put into the spotlight, is being discussed by many authors. Edmundo O'Gorman, Arturo Uslar Pietri, Enrique Dussel and Fernando Aínsa, among others, form a new view at the early texts of the continent's exploration, making the very discovery of America problematic and distinguishing it as a separate topic [5].

Regarding the meaning of the Spanish words "*descubrir*" and "*inventar*", we should emphasize the following [6]. "*Descubrir*" translates not just as "to discover", but as "to expose", "to detect", "to meet". In this case, "to discover" means to see something hidden (*cubierto*). As for the word "*inventar*", its meanings "to invent" something unknown, "to

think up", and "to imagine" indicate a different meaning, namely "to create something that has never existed before". In this context, the discovery of America is clarified by such concepts as "discovery – detection" and "discovery – invention".

If we understand the event of the discovery of America as its detection (*descubrimiento*), then it wasn't America discovered but some a priori existing space. If we understand the event in the second meaning (*invención*), then America wasn't discovered, it was just a mere title, uniting various realities that were being invented in each particular historical period. The semantic accent is the determining factor in the understanding of the historical role of those directly associated with the said event. For E. O'Gorman, C. Columbus is "the discoverer" (*descubridor*) of America while A. Vespucci is its "inventor". Martin Waldseemüller's map reads: "The Fourth part of the world *inventa est* Vespucci" [7].

The transfer of the semantic load in the concept that is interesting for us from "discovery – detection" to "discovery – invention" allows to interpret the discovery of America as "an idea of the discovery of America", i.e. as an intellectual project, subjected to realization and reveal in a new perspective of its historical existence. This means that the question "who and when discovered America?" receives a different posing – "when and how does America appear in the historical consciousness?" [8]. From this point of view, it is possible to distinguish two stages in the development of the concept of the discovery of America: "geographical invention" and "historical invention".

## III. THE "INVENTION" OF AMERICA

The temporal contours of the first stage of the "geographical invention" of America are outlined by the beginning of the 16th century and are, in fact, limited to it. In such a short time, the idea of America's discovery had an explosive impact on European consciousness: physical space has almost doubled and received visual embodiment on the geographical world map in the form of two hemispheres.

The beginning of the "historical invention" stage coincides with the time of the invention of America as a geographical entity, yet leaving the chronological boundaries and extending (branching) for subsequent periods, which can conditionally be designated as "European" and actually "American". As for the temporal contour of the stage, E. O'Gorman chooses to include the current events, thus considering the period unfinished.

The inclusion of the idea of America in the structure of European thought was the starting point of America's existence as a historical reality. In its origin, the European discourse on America was an attempt to approach the unknown territory and explain the obscurity through "baptism" (F. Aínsa); it ran through a difficult path of comparison, description, and cataloging of otherness.

The process of the development of the identification tools was strongly influenced by the providentialism inherent to the European cultural consciousness. According to these

guidelines, Europe was conceived as “due to be”, an ideal, inventing America by shifting own image to the American soil: what was thought to be America within Europe’s borders, in fact, seemed to be just a different Europe. European thought, reinforced by the naturalist-positivist tendencies, presented Europe as a perfect model of development. The rest of the peoples were seen in descending order from civilization to barbarism. The classification of the peoples, naturally occurring in the process of development of the Eurocentrism, grouped peoples on the bases of race, climate, geography, etc. As Leopoldo Zea notes, two inseparable ideals of the Western word – Christianity, and civilization – were the inevitable fate of the New World [9].

Europe invented America by building oppositions. This created the backbone of antithetical interpretation ideas: Heaven and Hell mythologeme, civilization – barbarism, spirit – nature, etc. European meditation on the issue of “What is America?” determined the emergence of the external discourse, going “inside from outside”, i.e. from Europe to America. The answer to it was the internal discourse, coming from the “inside”, from the American reality. America’s mismatch with Europe is the mismatch of the real America with its ideal model (“due to be”), thus challenging the internal discourse by “not only what America really is but also by what it “considers itself to be”, or even what it “would like to be” [10].

The change of perspectives is reflected in what has been defined as the American period of America’s historical invention. This period began as a rationalization of an American person’s otherness in comparison to the European. Represented by a various version of the intellectual project, “providing the renewal of America” (L. Zea), it received its specificity in the change of self-identity models, by which the cultural-civilizational self-determination (autodeterminación) occurred and the idea of “America” was being crystallized.

In continental reflection, the development of the idea of America as a project unfolded against the background of the creation of the morphology of American culture and history; the process, reduced to the limiting grounds, to the consistent identification of “Us” in opposition to the “Other” within the boundaries of own tradition [11]. The need to reveal the individuality, originality, i.e. the otherness of America’s existence by referring to its morphology, predetermined the fact of the extraordinary inclusion of the continent in the structure of world history. Because of Europe’s “geographical error”, thus being “geographically accidental”, America’s formation occurred in the historical instability with the inherent ontological insufficiency in form of desubstantialization and marginality.

The polarity of chronological sections, the plurality of entities in form of radical heterogeneity of cultural topologies led to the emergence of lacunas in America’s historical and cultural development. The exposure of topological characteristics – intermediacy, set by the zones of its formation in the forms of violations/discontinuities/lacunas, was a motive to

comprehend the existence of America not as something given and complete, but as something not-yet-achieved and demanding the implementation. At the same time, the ability and possibility of having one’s own true and authentic story were scrutinized. Consequently, a few concepts emerged for its description, including “always-still-not-being” (E. Mayz Vallenilla), “being-which-is-not-yet” (O. Ardiles), etc.

The emergence in the continental reflection the topic of ontological deficiency and a-/non-historicity of America brought to the foreground the issue of its self-realization as a cultural-historical subject. Ontological weakness and temporal uncertainty, having formed in an American person the “inferiority complex”, turned the latter not into an obstacle but, on the contrary, into a powerful actuator of compensatory mechanisms of its culture. These mechanisms, aimed at overcoming the functional shifts and failures, supplementing of inadequacies and inferiority, defined the strategy of America’s self-creation. By setting the targeted and specific creative direction, the strength and potency were concentrated on the invention as the creation of the cultural and historical identity of America.

The implementation of the idea of America correlated with the general historical shifts taking place in the region. (Their) imagination, working as a modeling mechanism, facilitated the process of the creation of culture by producing such ways of America’s presentation that expressed its cultural identity in the form of exhaustive and comprehensive “formulas” in the branching points of the continent’s historical development. As for their range, covering the content and limits, these constructs were both universal to American cultural constants or coded racial-ethnic and cultural typology in its historical variability.

The (top) continental level was presented by the identity constructs in which the idea of America and its otherness were associated with the phenomenon of interracial synthesis, unique to the world history in scale and the depth of the actions. The core, forming the tradition, was forged out of formulas, developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, assimilating and revealing the experience of America (in its otherness) from the initial moment – the colonial period up to the 20th century, the age of the continent’s immersion in the global context. The key concepts in this regard are: the new “human race in miniature” (S. Bolívar), “Our America” with the original postulate of the Indo-Afro-Ibero-American “Us” (J. Martí), “Arielism”/“Latinism”, concentrating the Greek-Latin-Roman cultural heritage (J. E. Rodó), “the fifth race” – the new human community, possessing the “synthetic cosmovision” (J. Vasconcelos). Starting from the initial ideas, the laconic Bolivian concept of the “middle kind” of America, the idea of polyethnic originality, having received an ideological design, is fixed in a specific system of views known as “americanismo”.

Along with the idea of integral, synthesized comprehension of America as a historical entity, no less important for revealing its otherness are those cultural and typological concepts, which have been reflected in geopolitical denominations. If they, taken together, support the idea of classifying America as a polymorphic,



polycultural formation, then each separate case sees and deals with the problem of the dualism of America's historical and cultural roots. There's a reference to the statement of the impossibility to pack all the region's ethnic and racial diversity in one usual unit of cultural measurement: a nation in America isn't a nation in the traditional sense of the world, America is a "people – continent" (A. Orrego). A textbook example at this level is a complex of determinants such as "Afroamerica", "Indoamerica", "Creole America", "Luso America" with the accompanying ideological constructs: afroamericanism (counting various versions: Brazil Black Movement, Antilles Négritude, Afrocubanismo), Indeanism, Creolism, (Luso)tropicalism. In each determinant, the message about its geographical localization leads to the historical dimension, where, in fact, "historical reversion" (E.C. Frost) takes place in the form of revalorization/actualization of the ethnic-racial/cultural component [12].

By becoming a derivative of particular circumstances, the idea of America was aimed overcoming them, which was accomplished by going beyond them. The imagination, called to life by a "force to perceive as ours something, that is being dispersed, removed, (...) ceased to be a living world", creates America as a self-contained (mental) construct, representing the attempts for perfect self-description, exhaustive specificity of its existence [13]. In such a construct, America is bound and held together in an inextricable unity of its dimensions – spatial, geographical, temporal, and collective in the form of an emotionally experienced sense of the (national) unity. To exist, America moves beyond self; as a construct, it is a "perfect reflection (...) of things, the idea of what they would have to be" [14]. Each time updating America as an idea, but moving it into the space of imagination, continental reflection carried out the transition from the disordered and discrete state of America (in the aspect of anthropological, cultural fragmentation and temporal stratification) to the state of the desired ideal – completeness (in the aspect of the desired continuity) as ontological feature of the unity, given in historical connection as correlation with the axis of time, that is with condition, creating its presence.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In (Latin) American optics the concept of "The Discovery of America" is revealed in a wide range of historical, cultural and philosophical problems. As a result, a researcher uncovers heterogeneity, ambivalence, the complexity of the phenomena itself. The concept, passing the (re)interpretation of the subject involved in world history, absorbs many meanings of self-identification which receive the reflection in the own historical and cultural experience.

The continental cultural-philosophical tradition refers to "cultural memory" of the concept by setting the etymological angle. Actualizing the aspect of the invention in the field of the discovery's values, the strategy of America's self-creation via the understanding of the invention is revealed. This stimulates the emergence of conscious mindset for creativity in the cultural paradigm, correcting the weakness or anomalous immaturity of the cultural forms, initially

provided by the historical heredity, and implementing the will of America to exist – "our will to be" (Octavio Paz).

For an American, whose consciousness is creative, the concept of the invention, "notional and speculative, is superimposed in its contagiousness with the operational activity" [15]. As a tool for comprehension and interpretation of the American way to exist, it reveals its inherent projectivity, incompleteness, transitivity, openness to the future. Expressing America's desire and willingness for self-realization, this category cuts open the boundaries of the "geographical reliability" and, expanding the scope of reality, determines the coordinates of accomplishment – the Future (lo Porvenir/lo Advinidero), the New World (Nuevo Mundo), etc.

The paradigm of "discovery", concentrating in it the cultural, self-creating forces of America, is being transcribed as a prospect of always-open self-creation, self-perception, always found in the future – beyond the available historical reality. Open to future, "we go beyond ourselves to be complete" [16].

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