

FIFTH SUN: A NEW HISTORY OF THE AZTECS

(CAMILLA TOWNSEND)

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I have long admired Hernán Cortes, conqueror of the Aztecs. He may not have gotten to Heaven, though who can say, but he exemplified the spirit of the West, that which from Charlemagne to Frémont drove the world forward. *Fifth Sun* would have us stop and shed a tear for the Aztecs, considering them on their own terms. It's a modest request, and when done is modestly interesting. But we should remember that unlike the Spanish, the Aztecs never accomplished anything notable, and never would have accomplished anything notable. Which raises the question—what price glory?

It helps the reader of this book that the author, Camilla Townsend, is a very good writer. Her method is to use post-Conquest writings of descendants of the Aztecs, combined with a small number of plausible fictional vignettes, to attempt to recapture the history of pre-Conquest Mexico, to “conjure the world of [the] long dead.” (The book's title comes from the Aztec creation myth, in which the cyclical rebirth of the Sun is triggered by an ordinary man choosing to sacrifice himself to the gods.) This method is more successful than it sounds it should be, but its accuracy is open to question. Nonetheless, I think it lets us get as much of a handle on the Aztecs as is worthwhile. Townsend further offers a good deal of detail about how she conducted her scholarship, her different sources, and an extensive bibliography, all of which are interesting in their own right.

Why are there few writings of Aztecs prior to the Spanish conquest of 1519, that Townsend could have used instead? Townsend says in passing that many were burned by the Spanish, although many also simply decayed, being composed on plant material. But the far more important reason, which Townsend at no point specifically admits, is that the Aztecs didn't have any writings in the modern sense, that would allow real transfer of information, because they lacked an alphabet. Their “writings” were mere pictographs, and Aztec culture an oral one, like primitive cultures the world over. We might learn a little if we had more of their pictures, but not likely much. Townsend claims the Aztecs used these pictographs as “records of business decisions and

chains of authority," but that seems very unlikely; certainly surviving pictographs don't allow any such precision.

Moreover, Townsend faces two problems as regards accuracy of the post-Conquest writings she uses (none of which are newly-discovered, despite breathless claims made on the book's blurb). First, those recording what supposedly happened decades before they were born are very likely to introduce distortions, either by choice or as a result of being given bad information by informants. Townsend claims to be able to tease out the truth; maybe she's right, but probably not, in many instances. Second, those recording here were not Aztecs, nor were they, as the blurb also claims, "indigenous people"; they were Spanish subjects, largely or completely Hispanized, most or all devout Roman Catholics, some of them of mixed parentage. Townsend assumes that when criticizing the Aztecs, they were lying or exaggerating, and when saying something positive, they were recording accurately. When writing a revisionist history, this approach gives the desired result, but it's not objective. And much of what these writers wrote are obvious tall tales and legends, so again, where the precise truth lies is open to question. On the other hand, this is often the historian's lot. One cannot uncritically rely, either, on Spanish reports contemporaneous with the Conquest, in particular reports to the King or his ministers, and much Spanish history of Mexico in this period was also written well after the fact.

Townsend is most of all keen to dispel what she claims are simplistic myths about the Aztecs at the time of the Conquest, such as that their leader when Cortes arrived, Moctezuma II, believed the Spanish to be the returning god Quetzalcoatl (a story I learned as a child). This notion only appeared a few decades after the Conquest, and Townsend makes a strong case it is a fiction. The Aztecs were primitive, not dumb, and as I have said before, it is a great error to believe that people who came before us were stupid—in fact, they usually had to be smarter than modern people. When the Aztecs captured cannon or crossbows, they couldn't use them, but they didn't consider Spanish technology magic. As with all peoples of the Americas, when the Europeans arrived, they simply lacked good choices. That's not some great tragedy; it's the normal course of all human history. Reading books like this isn't, or shouldn't be, some call to a ludicrous irredentism, merely a way to learn more about the human story.

Townsend proceeds chronologically, covering events pre-Conquest, during the Conquest, and for a hundred years after the Conquest. In general, Townsend spends more time than I would have liked on trying to reconstruct Aztec lineages and politics, and not as much as I would have liked on Aztec daily life. But it's her book. Other than a few ideological blind spots, she tries hard to not blur the truth, as when discussing population she calculates that the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, might have had a maximum of 50,000 people. She says claims for populations greater, up to 400,000, are "wild exaggerations," and obviously so, because they claim a density greater than modern Manhattan for a clearly-defined area composed of single-story homes.

The Aztecs, whose youthful minor empire was centered on what is now Mexico City, had only arrived in the Valley of Mexico recently, and had cemented their power less than a century before the Spanish arrived in 1519. The Mexica, as they called themselves (though that covered their enemies, too, and those in Central Mexico were collectively the Nahuatl), came from the north; where exactly we do not know (although maybe this is one of the many historical questions DNA evidence will answer). Migrations of nomadic peoples are the norm throughout history, and the same was true in the Americas. They were farmers, after a fashion. In the Americas, farming arose millennia after it did in the Old World, and was considerably cruder than in the Old World, as well as always combined with hunter-gatherer activities, but still often provided enough surplus to allow stratified societies.

Aztec social organization was complex, with extended families sharing power. Constantly shifting alliances with other tribes and groups, combined with continuous warfare, was the norm in Mexico. Within the Valley, links of kinship and marriage bound most or all of the tribes, sometimes to a degree that prevented war, sometimes causing war as an ambitious man sought the main chance. Crucially, with polygamy and an extractive society that ensured the nobility was well-fed, along with wars that killed few because of crude weaponry and cultural dictates, elite over-production very rapidly became a problem; the cracks were showing in the Aztec edifice before the Spanish arrived.

The upper classes kept the lower classes down. Slavery was extensive. As Townsend delicately concedes, Aztec slavery is rarely mentioned today, but as with all ancient non-nomadic societies, it was a key part of

the social structure. "Because the Aztecs were disparaged for so long as cannibalistic savages, serious scholars have been loath to write anything that might be perceived as detracting from their moral worth." In other words, any "scholarship" about the Aztecs from the past sixty years or so should be considered *prima facie* unreliable, because edited by the authors to present the Aztecs in the desired positive light.

And, in fact, the Aztecs were cannibalistic savages. There's no getting around that. They were cannibalistic, certainly, and they were savages in two ways. They behaved barbarously, famously engaging in massive amounts of human sacrifice, including of children, something Townsend tries to downplay but does not deny. And they were quite primitive, even by pre-modern standards, using only modest technologies (no smelted metal; no wheels) and developing none themselves. As extractive top dogs in the Valley, for a few decades, they were able to buy shiny baubles from far away (turquoise, feathers) and to use slave labor to build reasonably impressive temples, but that's about it.

Townsend tries to claim that had agriculture existed in Mesoamerica for longer, the Aztecs would have been the equal of the Europeans, but that's silly. The Europeans were unique in world history; as I like to say, without Europe, the world we live in would be the world of the sixteenth century, or before. How long the ground had been cultivated had nothing to do with it. Even by non-European, pre-Christian Old World standards the Aztecs were primitives. If not for the Spanish, we would probably know next to nothing about the Aztecs, as we know next to nothing about the other Mesoamericans who preceded them, whom they conquered or exterminated, because they would have been conquered or exterminated in their turn.

Unfortunately, one short section in *Fifth Sun* makes Townsend seem unserious, and casts doubt on the rest of her work. She pushes homosexuality among the Aztecs in an attempt to make them seem like good modern Americans. I know nothing about Aztec homosexuality, but Townsend's claim is that for the Aztecs "there was a range of sexual possibilities during one's time on earth, understood to be part of the joy of living, and it certainly was not unheard of for men to go to bed together in the celebrations connected with religious ceremonies, and presumably at other times as well." Her footnote to this passage, however, lends exactly zero support to this contention, and Wikipedia, always

aggressively curated to cosset sexual deviants, says (citing a Spanish-language source), “[Aztec] law punished sodomy with the gallows, impalement for the active homosexual, extraction of the entrails through the anal orifice for the passive homosexual, and death by garrote for the lesbians.” I’m putting my money on the impalement as the reality, not Townsend’s gauzy and unsupported fantasy. That elsewhere she notes that “Adultery, for example, was a crime for everyone, punishable by stoning or strangling,” suggests that in fact the Aztecs were very strict about sexual crimes. Once again, this sort of thing makes the reader wonder what else is being shaded.

The Aztecs were already tottering when Cortes arrived. Townsend admits that human sacrifice absorbed more and more of their energies and that “Moctezuma himself spent an exorbitant amount of time playing a sacrificial role,” so much that he couldn’t even attend battles. They also had innumerable bitter enemies surrounding them, and this, of course, is one important reason why Cortes was successful (the other reasons being steel, attitude, and the diseases the Spanish brought). Townsend insightfully points out that even had Moctezuma managed to defeat the Spanish, he still would have fallen, because the cost would have been enormous and the resulting weakness would certainly have led to the Aztecs being exterminated by their indigenous enemies. Thus, Moctezuma had to bargain, which is what he tried to do, but failed because he had nothing to offer the Spanish. He didn’t understand the bigger picture, that the Spanish had vastly more resources and power than he could ever hope to command.

Once they defeated the Aztecs, events Townsend describes relatively quickly and from the Aztec perspective, the Spanish only took a few years, less than a decade, to transform the Aztec capital into Mexico City. (Roma Agrawal’s *Built* describes in fascinating detail the engineering behind the five-hundred-year-old Cathedral of the Assumption, built by the Spanish on the site of a razed human sacrifice pyramid.) “By the early 1600s, Mexico City had become one of the wealthiest and most impressive metropolises in the world.” The Aztecs were, and are, nothing but a memory.

Would the Aztecs, and more broadly the Indians in Mexico, have been better off if the Spanish had never arrived? Not in the long run, and probably not in the short run, either, except for the upper classes.

Switching suzerains has no moral component and little impact on most in a primitive society, and that's what happened here. After all, the rest of the globe, disease and all, would have intruded sooner or later into Mesoamerica. Moreover, the Aztecs acted in an evil fashion; their human sacrifice alone made their destruction a virtue. It was less virtuous that the Spanish often mistreated the Indians, arguably worse than their own lords mistreated them, although to their credit they argued about it, and frequently undertook initiatives to curb the worst excesses. The Aztecs would have thought it bizarre to have an internal debate on how to treat their defeated enemies, and this debate shows how very different Christian Europeans were from any other human civilization (we retain some of these impulses, but they will soon be entirely gone).

The world is undoubtedly a better place, spiritually and physically, as a result of Cortes defeating the Aztecs. I shed no tears for their demise, any more than I shed tears for Neanderthals or the Hittites. In fact, less. The West was, before it fell in the twentieth century, an immeasurably superior civilization, and on balance, its expansion a high good in all the places to which it expanded. But what is the limiting principle in this conclusion? Or, as I asked at the beginning, what price glory?

Cortes, in the words of David Gress, "conquered Mexico for God, gold, and glory, and only a mundane imagination would distinguish these impulses, for they were one and the same." But what acts should we allow to be washed clean by this goal? How much brutal seeking after gold, or more broadly material advantage and advancement, can or should we tolerate, if that is part of God and glory? Cortes was not a nice man, and although his sins have long been exaggerated, even in his own time, for propaganda purposes, they were real enough, as were those of his lieutenants, such as Pedro de Alvarado, who slaughtered the Aztec nobles while Cortes was absent. We retrospectively sanitize great men of the past, and yes, it is true that the past is a foreign country. Nonetheless, it can't be that all violence and suffering inflicted on others is justified by the inseparable ends that drove Cortes. But if we can have "God, gold, and glory," is that possibility, or its achievement, and the passage of time, enough to balance the scales of justice? I am not sure.

Certainly, for our own civilization to be renewed, or more likely a new one to be born, extremes of violence and cruelty will be commonplace, and the basest of motives compete eagerly with high motives. Such is

the way of change, and the greater the change, the greater the sins in the transition, as men seek all of God, gold, and glory. I suppose my first-cut conclusion is that men being who they are, the evil will always accompany the good, and there is no cure for this. So we should accept it, as the price of necessary change. That, as with the Aztecs, what the West has become is truly evil makes this conclusion easier. We may not have racks of tens of thousands of skulls on display, but that's just because we hide them in the abortionist's dumpster, after we sell our children's other organs for experimentation and profit. Therefore, we should accept the costs of renewal, and as the Spanish did, try to curb the worst excesses that result, both juridically and ad hoc, hoping to get to a more stable and less brutal future as quickly as possible.

No doubt that I ask these questions itself proves I will never be the Man of Destiny, yet who can tell, if participation is offered, and the exchange of God, gold, and glory for the death of globohomo is offered, whether I would yet not seize the brass ring? Probably I am too introspective, and ultimately fearful of judgment, and would rather participate in a secondary capacity. We will see, each of us, what our choices are, in the times ahead. With luck, they will be better choices than those faced by Moctezuma and his people.