Today's Issues May 19 2019

For this Sunday, May 19, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the May 9 issue of the New York Review of Books.

Page 37, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Dialectics of Enlightenment," a review of *Irrationality:A History of the Dark Side of Reason* by Justin Smith. It's a discussion of enlightenment thinkers with reference to today's concerns about postmodernism and "alternative facts".

Page 44, J.H. Elliott, "Spain's America," a review of two books about Hispanic North America, e.g., those areas once owned by Spain but now part of the US.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the Church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the readings and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the readings is attached.

Dialectics of Enlightenment
Kwame Anthony Appiah MAY 9, 2019 ISSUE
Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason
by Justin E.H. Smith
Princeton University Press, 330 pp., $29.95
Justin E.H. Smith
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How enlightened was the Enlightenment? Not a few critics have seen it as profoundly benighted. For some, it was a seedbed for modern racism and imperialism; the light in the Enlightenment, one recent scholar has suggested, essentially meant "white." Voltaire emphatically believed in the inherent inferiority of les Nègres, who belonged to a separate species, or at least breed, from Europeans—as different from Europeans, he said, as spaniels from greyhounds. Kant remarked, of something a Negro carpenter opined, that "the fact that he was black from head to toe was proof that what he said was stupid." And David Hume wrote, in a notorious footnote, that he was "apt to suspect" that nonwhites were "naturally inferior to the whites," devoid of arts and science and "ingenious manufactures."

The more general critiques take up larger intellectual currents in the eighteenth century. The era's systematic forays into physical anthropology and human classification laid the foundation for the noxious race science that emerged in the nineteenth century. So did the rise of materialism: it became harder to argue that our varying physical carapaces housed equivalent souls implanted by God. A heedless sense of universalism, in turn, might encourage the thought that the more advanced civilizations were merely lifting up those more backward when they conquered and colonized them.

For critics like John Gray, the Enlightenment's self-satisfied rationalism and belief in progress were bound to fuel notions of racial and civilizational hierarchy, and can be linked to twentieth-century totalitarianism. And its toll continues: liberal rationalism is, in Gray's view, an impoverished creed that has asphyxiated richer forms of life. That's why, he says, Western societies that rely on liberal Enlightenment values "are plagued with anomie and nihilism."

Yet these objections don't settle the matter. The expressions of prejudice from Kant and Hume are worth noting not because they're peculiar to the so-called Enlightenment project but precisely because they aren't: so commonplace were such views that even these rarefied intellects weren't immune to them. What distinguished Voltaire from other Europeans was not his assumptions about the superiority of their stock but his eloquent opposition to slavery and colonialism. The grand projet of the era, the Encyclopédie, was rude about Africans but also filled with abolitionist fervor. Hume was no fan of slavery, mercantilism, or the apparatus of imperialism; Adam Smith, his compatriot, was more outspoken about these evils still.

As for Kant—well, his views seem to have evolved. In her study Kant and Cosmopolitanism (2012), the Dutch scholar Pauline Kleingeld persuasively argued that, in the 1790s, he moved away from hierarchical notions of human difference, perhaps partly under the influence of interlocutors like Georg Forster and Johann Gottfried Herder. He now offered a clear rebuke to slavery, imperial conquest, and great-power dominion. Given that slavery and imperialism are age-old practices, it may be more significant that so many Enlightenment figures opposed them than that some of them, in some respects, accommodated them.

What about the broader arguments? It's perfectly true that the sort of empirical physical anthropology that Johann Friedrich Blumenbach pioneered would turn toxic; but Blumenbach himself was a skeptic of discrete types and of hierarchies among them. Viewing human beings as creatures continuous with the rest of nature, as the philosopher Justin E.H. Smith argued in his valuable 2015 book, Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference, eased the way for the race science of the nineteenth century. But human beings are, in important ways, continuous with the rest of nature. The answer to bad science is good science, not no science.

So far, I've been using the term "Enlightenment" in its most conventional sense—referring to an eighteenth-century transnational movement that celebrated reason and was centered on philosophes and physiocrats in France (les Lumières) but that had important branch offices in Prussia (as die Aufklärung), Italy (l'Illuminismo), Scotland, and here in the Americas. Some scholars prefer a Long Enlightenment, which goes back to Descartes and Spinoza. Others talk of a fleet of distinct movements, partitioning an already cloudy phenomenon into smaller clouds. In this, as in all things, there are lumpers and splitters. But scholars who draw the lines differently have shared a larger worry about "rationalism" itself. In particular, what if the effort to shore up rationality invites its opposite? What if light is destined to generate shadows, Enlightenment a Counter-Enlightenment?

That's the thesis of Justin E.H. Smith's new book, Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason. The difficulty posed by reason, he suggests, is

evidently of a dialectical nature, where the thing desired contains its opposite, where every earnest stab at rationally building up society crosses over sooner or later, as if by some natural law, into an eruption of irrational violence. The harder we struggle for reason, it seems, the more we lapse into unreason.

Irrationality is not a tract, treatise, or systematic overview. This is a loosely plotted book, stippled with fascinating meditations and vignettes, although not necessarily where you might expect to find them. In addition to chapters on logic and on Enlightenment, there are chapters on dreams and what people have made of them over the centuries; on art (including a plangent account of Isaac Babel's lethal falling out with Soviet authorities); on pseudoscience (including a discussion of a creation science museum and the nature of flat-earth theory); on the Internet (deplored as a "Shiva-like" destroyer); on animal cognition (including an assessment of the wily, wriggly octopus); on death (including a visit with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich). Exemplars of irrationality range from Jacques Derrida to Donald Trump. Exemplars of hyperrationality—Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the AI researcher Eliezer Yudkowsky—don't always come off much better.

It's best to read the book as an assortment of mini essays—at its best, Sebald without the sojourns. At one point, Smith ruminates on the memes of the far right and wonders whether the irrationalism in segments of the 1960s New Left has reappeared with an opposite ideological spin: "Pepe the Frog owes more to Abbie Hoffman than to William F. Buckley; by certain measures Trump himself has more in common with, say, Wavy Gravy, than with Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan." In a discussion of lies, he ponders the troublesome phrase "the whole truth":

The whole truth would be an infinite concatenation of mostly irrelevant facts…. So we do not tell the whole truth; we tell carefully crafted stories, and we do this even when our moral purpose is to tell the truth.

Elsewhere, he compares his fear of flying with racism, which might seem like another irrational phobia. Why do we insist on intellectual justifications for the second while freely admitting the irrationality of the first? Perhaps it's because the aviophobe suffers through in-flight turbulence with a deep sense of solitude, he conjectures, while the racist enjoys solidarity with people not in the despised race.

A particularly delightful story in the book concerns an 1850 proposal for a "pasilalinic sympathetic compass"—a set of relay circuits for the projection of thoughts over distances that would be powered by telepathic snails. Smith suggests that the fact that our technologies can be imagined even before they are technologically feasible shows the continuities that underlie seeming transformations. The Internet of mollusks then prompts reflections on Russian interference in the 2016 election, via social media, and the way the St. Petersburg trolls

mobilized activists on the left and the right. The Internet, he says, “has destroyed or is in the process of destroying long-familiar objects: televisions, newspapers, musical instruments, clocks, books. It is also destroying institutions: stores, universities, banks, movie theaters, democracy.” Before long, he is arguing with Judith Butler’s theories of gender and lamenting the media’s preoccupation with identity, the rise of online “cancel culture” (Mao and Robespierre are invoked), and the vulnerability of moderates in an age of extremes.

Despite these nonlinear webs of association, the book has a fixed spindle: it’s what Smith describes as the “continuous movement between the two poles of rationality and irrationality—the aggressive turn that reason takes, transforming into its opposite.” The book is an homage, of sorts, to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, produced in 1944. That work, a wartime opus that the Frankfurt School Marxists produced while in California (“in strange sun-kissed exile,” Smith winningly says), used the term “Enlightenment” broadly and variously, reaching back certainly to Francis Bacon, and possibly to Homer. “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters,” Horkheimer and Adorno wrote at the start of the book. “Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.” Instrumental rationality had traced an arc down to twentieth-century fascism, and they anticipated that liberal political ideology was bound to follow a similarly malign path.

Smith’s book, though it shares these broad temporal horizons, finds an emblem for the dialectic; it regularly conjures a sort of double-pan balance in which Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment sit in equipoise. As he notes, it’s a model that was popularized almost half a century ago by Isaiah Berlin and was given a new polemical charge a decade and a half ago by the intellectual historian Zeev Sternhell. In Sternhell’s formula, which Smith enlarges upon, the same period “marks not only the birth of rationalist modernity, but also its antithesis.”

The Counter-Enlightenment, in this sense, refers not to the worldly adversaries of the philosophes—to their numerous ecclesiastical or royalist opponents—but to a small number of intellectuals who are said to have developed a contrary body of thought, opposing universalism with particularism, rationalism with vitalism. In Berlin’s account, the Enlightenment thinkers erred in their triumphalist belief that all real values could be harmonized. “They fought the good fight against superstition and ignorance,” Berlin remarked once. “So I am on their side.” Yet their hubris had to be checked: Berlin was inclined to see Soviet communism as a curdled version of the Enlightenment project. There was much to learn, he thought, from its Counter-Enlightenment foes. In Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann, and Herder, Berlin saw danger, but also genuine insight into the plural nature of values. According to Berlin, these thinkers recognized something crucial: that you couldn’t neatly reconcile the great goods—you couldn’t establish a Thomas Cook–style exchange rate between, say, freedom and equality. A choice might have to be made between them.

Sternhell’s fiercely Manichaean book The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition starts with roughly the same stage set, but paints over Berlin’s hues of gray in black and white. The great minds of

what Sternhell calls the Franco-Kantian Enlightenment—a berth that comfortably accommodates both Voltaire and Rousseau—created the basis for modern democracy, we're told, while the Counter-Enlightenment, exemplified by Edmund Burke and Herder, paved the way to fascism. Just a handful of begats, he suggests, separated Herder from Hitler. Because Berlin found some fault with the Enlightenment and some value in the likes of Herder, Sternhell denounced him as a conservative apologist for irrationalism and nationalism.

Between Berlin and Sternhell, Smith doesn't take sides; or, rather, he is on the side of sides—the model of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, as opposing endeavors that are dialectically linked. That model is, after all, the clearest illustration of his book's thesis. Smith follows Berlin in talking about the "hypocrisy and limitations" of the Enlightenment (its philosophical spirit, Smith thinks, has a "real genealogical link" to the Bolsheviks and the Khmer Rouge); he follows Sternhell in seeing the Counter-Enlightenment as proto-fascist. ("Herder's nationalism was soft while Hitler's was 'hard,'" Smith allows.) But how convincing is the basic distinction?

Here are two eighteenth-century European writers. One holds that Jews are not Europeans but "Asiatics," "all of them born with raging fanaticism in their hearts, just as the Bretons and the Germans are born with blond hair. I would not be in the least bit surprised if these people would not someday become deadly to the human race." Blacks "are not men, except in their stature, with the faculty of speech and thought at a degree far distant to ours." He despises democracy and consorts with despots.

Voltaire
Voltaire; drawing by David Levine
The second writer favors the full enfranchisement of Jews, whom he thinks are owed an apology for centuries of abuse. He argues for human equality across nations, writes movingly about the ill-used humanity of Africans, and favors republican democracy. He believes in the love of humankind over the love of fatherland and cherishes individual autonomy: "No individual has the right to believe that he exists for the sake of another individual, or for the sake of posterity."

The first is Voltaire, of course. The second is Herder—the paragon, for Berlin and Sternhell alike, of Counter-Enlightenment thought. How did they turn this open-hearted humanist into an arch-enemy of Enlightenment? By offering a version of him that was tendentious to the point of caricature. Berlin saw Herder as "the father of cultural (and ultimately every kind of) nationalism in Europe," in ways driven by Herder's "hatred of cosmopolitanism, universalism." In Sternhell's opinion, "Herder had a hold on European thought whose importance for the modern world can scarcely be exaggerated," and very much for the worse. Herder was not only "antirationalist," he was "antiuniversalist, anticosmopolitan, particularist, and by that very fact, nationalistic." What's more, he was committed to "the insignificance of the individual."1 (Cue the camps, the gulags.)

In fact, Herder was a pupil of Kant's in the early 1760s and found much of value in Kant's work, which was an enduring influence on him. (He was an enthusiast of Hume, too, along with the earlier work of Lord Shaftesbury.) He was also, deeply, a cosmopolitan who railed against narrow nationalism and detested Prussian parochialism. Yes, he held to a pluralist notion of cultural diversity (each people, each nation, had its particular way of being in the world), but it was always chastened by a universalist notion of Humanität—a shared human nature, a shared human dignity. Far from advancing the "insignificance of the individual," he cherished individuality and personal development, in ways that filtered down to John Stuart Mill. In "On the Cognition and Sensation," Herder wrote, "If a human being could sketch the deepest, most individual basis of his enthusiasms and feelings, of his dreams and trains of thought, what a novel!"

Some have imagined a crevasse separating Kantian universalism from Herder's pluralism. Yet Kant, especially in his later work, thought good cosmopolitans should be patriotic citizens of their nations, too. In his Lectures on Ethics, he said that both a "dutiful global and local patriotism…are proper to the cosmopolite, who in fealty to his country must have an inclination to promote the well-being of the entire world." The words are Kant's, but the sentiment could be Herder's. To hive off one as representing a "Counter-Enlightenment" is to caricature the Enlightenment.

There are other reasons to doubt the Counter-Enlightenment schema. Where to position Rousseau? For Sternhell, he's central to the Enlightenment; for several notable scholars of the era, he's central to the Counter-Enlightenment. Rousseau could certainly be a defender of local customs, but Kant didn't see him as a foe: he kept a picture of him in his study and credited his work with having awakened him to the truth of humanity's common dignity. The instabilities persist. Vico, whom Berlin took as a figure of the Counter-Enlightenment, emerges, in the work of the Enlightenment's most exhaustive modern chronicler, Jonathan Israel, as a major figure of the Radical Enlightenment, the movement at its best and boldest. Any demarcations of an intellectual territory will have vague borders, but these aren't border disputes: they run through the heartland.

I have no problem with models that imperfectly reflect reality: idealizations work because they idealize. All we ask of such models is that they help light our path. Given the strong impression that the "Counter-Enlightenment" mainly spreads shadow, though, it's hard to resist the thought that the very concept is due for retirement.

Even the equation of the Enlightenment with rationalism, with what Smith calls the "exaltation of reason," obscures as much as it reveals. Smith tells us that the Counter-Enlightenment has been wary of setting up reason "as the supreme principle of social organization." But elsewhere he tells us the very same thing about the Enlightenment:

The great majority of canonical Enlightenment philosophers placed great value on the role of the sentiments and passions in guiding the conduct of our lives, and warned of the many dangers of subordinating ourselves to the supreme authority of the faculty of reason.

It has been said, indeed, that the eighteenth century was less the Age of Reason than the Age of Feelings—because so many Enlightenment thinkers took pride in recognizing the importance of the sentiments, as their intellectual predecessors often had not. (In Hume's famous line: "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the Passions.") The aim of building a rational society meant contending with the ways in which human beings are not creatures of sweet reason. And that meant, in turn, having some way of deciding what rationality demanded.

Rather boldly, Smith has written a book on irrationality without even sketching an account of what rationality might consist of. Much modern thinking about that subject flows from distinctions, drawn from Max Weber, between formal, instrumental, means-ends rationality (Zweckrationalität), which aims to secure some end without judging its worth, and substantive rationality (Wertrationalität), which relates reason to clusters of norms and values. When Horkheimer and Adorno warn about the dangers of rationality, they seem to have in mind a Weberian notion of instrumental rationality within a disenchanted world—a realm of amoral scientists and technocrats ordering things to their liking, reducing all values to one, perhaps that of the marketplace. So there have been efforts to flesh out a substantive concept of rationality that encompasses moral judgment.

For better or worse, though, the modern philosophical literature on rationality figures little in Smith's capacious book. Unasked questions whisper beneath the floorboards. Is partiality toward kith and kin a departure from rationality (as the utilitarian William Godwin infamously proposed) or a constitutive part of it? How must theories of how we ought to be relate to how we actually are? How does the rationality of beliefs relate to their utility and to their truth? Is it a lapse of rationality when we employ rules of thumb or is it a rational recognition of the limits of our rational faculties?

Smith touches on an important point when he writes, in a passage linking Newton's rejection of Aristotelian authority to the anti-vaxxers of our own age:

It is not rejection of authority that is the problem, but only rejection of authority at the wrong times and for the wrong reasons. But how can we be sure of our ability to make such distinctions? It is not enough to say that the science itself is clear and dictates to us in its own clear voice, rather than in the voice of its human representatives, what is true and what is false. For most of us do not have a handle on the science at all. We have not read even a fraction of the relevant scientific literature, nor could we read it if we tried; far less have we carried out the relevant experiments ourselves.

This is so. The conclusion to be reached is that rationality, in a critical sense, isn't an individual attribute. Here I've sometimes found it convenient to distinguish between rationality and the

individual trait of reasonableness. The distinction I have in mind is between cognitive and practical procedures that are likely to be successful, given the way the world is (which I've called "rational"); and procedures that a normal human being in a society has no reason to doubt will be effective, whether or not, in fact, they are (which I've called "reasonable"). My father, as was the norm among Asante of his generation, thought that there were many invisible spirits in the world, who could advance his causes if he conformed to rules they had laid down, and he was taught that "avoid eating bush meat," a stipulation of his particular Asante clan, was one of those rules. He was being reasonable, therefore, in his avoidance of eating bush meat. From an outside perspective, though, we can see that it was not rational, because there are no such spirits. (Sorry, Dad.)

It's a critical fact that the cognitive division of labor in advanced societies provides each of us with epistemological resources far greater than any that would fit between our ears. We can talk casually about entangled electrons, the Bantu migration, gram-negative diplococci, and Petrarchan sonnets because there are communities of researchers who know about these things. "'Meanings' just ain't in the head!" the philosopher Hilary Putnam once observed: that is, the meaning of our sentences involves both a particular relation to reality and a particular relation to other, expert users of the language. Rationality, a fortiori, isn't in the head, either. It's something we do with one another and the world. To learn about an illness, my Asante ancestors might have consulted a fetish priest; today we might send a blood sample off to a lab. On an individual level, my Asante ancestors, acting on the basis of trusted authority, weren't less reasonable than we are. But the analysis of rationality must expand beyond the individual level. Where traditional belief practices and natural science differ is as institutions: the social organization of inquiry makes all the difference.2

"The structural irrationality that allowed Trump to end up where he never should have ended up, is one that in part channels the irrationality of individual members of society," Smith writes.

But he ended up there in part, also, as a result of a poorly designed system, by disorder in the way things are set up: gerrymandered voting districts that have no plausible justification in the language of democracy; an electoral college that trumps popular will; and mass media that make it effectively impossible for the low-information voter to apprehend what the relevant political issues in the campaign are.

Here, where a sense of crisis is near at hand, Smith allows himself the technocratic language of Weberian rationalization. Contributing to the spread of conspiracy theories like Pizzagate and the florid offerings of QAnon, he says, is a "structural irrationality, the failure of the algorithms to ensure serious political debate."

The observation is eminently plausible, but notice that it's about compounding irrationalities. What guidance is provided by Smith's central dialectic, in which reason turns into its opposite? Should we conclude that rational solutions—improved algorithms, better voting systems—are bound to worsen the underlying irrationality? Smith says that irrationality is "humanly

ineradicable, and that efforts to eradicate it are themselves supremely irrational"; but the efforts he largely has in mind, it seems, are efforts to manage human irrationality, not to eradicate it, and such efforts can be given old-fashioned, rationalist names: good governance, prudent policy.

Smith suggests, at one point, that we "consider the legacy of the Enlightenment in a far more cautious way than the usual presentation of the binary options, to accept or reject, would dictate." It would be tempting, instead, simply to echo Gandhi's (apocryphal) response to the question of what he thought about Western civilization: "It would be a good idea." For Enlightenment is a project that has not been and cannot be completed. By the same token, rationality itself is an ideal, both in the sense that it's worth aiming for and in the sense that it can't be realized. Yet no principle of cultural physics stipulates that every action must produce an equal-and-opposite reaction, that rationality is inherently a self-poisoning phenomenon. We can't solve all human problems with reason alone; but we can't solve any of them without it.

Spain's America
J.H. Elliott MAY 9, 2019 ISSUE
América: The Epic Story of Spanish North America, 1493–1898
by Robert Goodwin
Bloomsbury, 519 pp., $40.00
El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America
by Carrie Gibson
Atlantic Monthly, 560 pp., $30.00
The Destruction of the Saint Sabá Mission by José de Páez
Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City/Artchives/Alamy
José de Páez: The Destruction of the Saint Sabá Mission in the Province of Texas and the Martyrdom of the Priests, Fray Alonso Giraldo de Terreros and Fray José de Santiesteban, circa 1758
In the grand epic of American history, the English were latecomers. The failed colony of 1587 on Roanoke Island, off the North Carolina coast, was followed by the founding of two initially precarious settlements, Jamestown in 1607 and Plymouth Colony, far to the north, in 1620. By that date, over 400,000 Spaniards and over 30,000 Portuguese were living on the far side of the Atlantic, alongside indigenous inhabitants, peoples of mixed race, and a rapidly growing population transported from Africa to provide a labor supply. When the Pilgrims landed on the eastern fringe of modern Massachusetts, they set foot in an "America" that had been claimed for well over a century by the crowns of Spain and Portugal as their own exclusive preserve. Although doubts were beginning to surface, from the vantage point of the 1620s it may well have seemed that the hemisphere's future lay with people of Iberian stock.

The history of the next three centuries turned out otherwise. It was one thing to lay claim to vast tracts of territory and quite another to make that claim a reality. In the story of Spain's

colonization of America there was always an imbalance between space and people. With an emigration rate to the New World of perhaps two thousand a year, Spaniards, who tended to congregate in cities and towns, could hardly hope to occupy such a vast expanse of land, even though their numbers were growing. This created opportunities that their European rivals—the French, the English, and the Dutch—were all too happy to seize.

These northern Europeans were tempted above all by reports of the fabulous gold of an American El Dorado, and of the rich silver resources of the Spanish viceroyalties of New Spain (Mexico) and Peru. It was American silver, annually shipped in increasingly large quantities to Seville, that made the sixteenth-century Spain of Philip II the dominant European power and gave rise to fears across the continent that the king was well on his way to establishing a "universal monarchy." Northern European corsairs, with or without the permission of their rulers, responded with growing boldness, attacking Spanish shipping on the high seas, plundering coastal settlements, and tentatively setting up bases on Caribbean islands or the American mainland from which to conduct their depredations. But the silver convoys were well guarded, and Spain had the power to wreak terrible revenge on those who trespassed on its "Empire of the Indies." This was something that the French discovered in 1565, when a Spanish expeditionary force under the command of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés wiped out a nascent French settlement on the coast of Florida, then built a fortress and set up a town at St. Augustine, which was to become the longest continuously occupied European city in the United States.

It was uncertain, however, how long the Spanish authorities could hold off their European enemies. The territorial integrity of their American empire had to be defended at all costs, but nobody had any notion of the nature and extent of the territory involved. The cartography of the New World was largely a blank and had to be pieced together from information, much of it opaque or deliberately unreliable, provided by indigenous peoples encountered by Spanish expeditions moving northward into the American interior in pursuit of wild dreams, like finding the fountain of eternal youth or the Seven Cities of Cíbola.

While some of these expeditions have been largely forgotten, others have won a secure place in the annals of exploration and human endurance: that of Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, for instance, who started from Florida in 1528 and over the course of eight years covered some six thousand miles, through today's Texas, before stumbling, more dead than alive, across four fellow Spaniards in northern New Spain; or that of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, whose party left in 1540 from the coastal region of Jalisco in northwestern Mexico and wandered through the lands of the Pueblo Indians and into what is now northern Arizona before returning to Mexico two years later, disappointed in their hopes of riches, like so many before and after them.

The motives behind these expeditions were many and mixed, like those that led to the original Spanish conquests of Mexico and Peru. The world of the conquistadores was shaped by the long struggle to rid Spain of Moorish domination and by the religious and secular culture of

late-medieval and Renaissance Europe. Hopes of riches, lordship, and undying fame mingled with sheer curiosity about a world hitherto unknown to Europeans, as well as the desire and determination to bring its peoples to a knowledge of the true faith. That is why friars accompanied the raiders and explorers, and in the process so often met with and embraced martyrdom. Conquest, plunder, and conversion moved in concert.

Already by the beginning of the seventeenth century, bands of Spaniards had gone deep into what is now the United States, sometimes setting up garrisons and outposts to defend mining areas and vulnerable supply routes from the attacks of hostile Native Americans. These incursions into northern America and the consequences that flowed from them are the subject of two new books, Robert Goodwin's América: The Epic Story of Spanish North America, 1493–1898 and Carrie Gibson's El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America. It is perhaps unfortunate that they appeared at nearly the same time, since they cover much the same ground in much the same way. Both authors are historians and journalists who have written well-received books. Gibson is the author of a history of the Caribbean, Empire's Crossroads,1 while Goodwin, after following the wanderings of an African slave named Esteban through what is now New Mexico and Arizona in the early 1530s, published in 2015 an ambitious study of early-modern Spain as "the centre of the world."2 Both authors, moreover, were inspired by the same aim—to dispel what they see as ignorance of the part played by Spain and Spaniards in the making of the United States.

They rightly deplore such ignorance, but it has to be said that the topic of Spain in North America is hardly a new one, and many aspects of it have been extensively researched, although the Spanish contribution to the American Revolution still calls out for close examination. The Spanish presence in the northern hemisphere will forever be associated with the names of Hubert Howe Bancroft, with his thirty-nine volumes on the history of the American West and Central America, and Herbert Bolton, whose most famous book, The Spanish Borderlands (1921), illustrated the enduring legacy of Spain in Florida and the American Southwest. In his celebrated presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1932, Bolton appealed to his fellow historians to think in terms of "The Epic of Greater America," a genuinely hemispheric history that would give due weight to the Iberian contribution to the making of a New World civilization. If Bolton's plea fell largely on deaf ears, historians in more recent times have devoted considerable attention to Hispanic aspects of North American history. Among the best of them are Paul Hoffman3 and the late David Weber, whose publications included two outstanding studies of the Spanish frontier regions in the colonial era.4 Texas, too, has received much attention.5

If, as Gibson and Goodwin assert, the Spanish presence in North American history has been underrated or simply ignored among wide sections of the public, there are several reasons for this. One, and the most obvious, is the highly selective nature of the founding narrative itself, which notoriously privileges New England. The national concept of a shining city on a hill leaves little space even for the Jamestown settlement, let alone for Spanish settlements in California, Florida, and New Mexico. As an initially Protestant narrative, shot through with biblical

overtones of a chosen people, it owes much of its staying power to the religious character of its message. That message, however, was reinforced by the powerful images generated by the famous leyenda negra—the Black Legend.

World Map by Juan Vespucci, Seville, 1526
Hispanic Society of America, New York
Juan Vespucci: World Map, Seville, 1526. 'Note how little of North America is represented,' Robert Goodwin writes in América, whereas 'the Gulf of Mexico and the east coast of South America are shown in considerable detail, as is the isthmus at Panama.'
The Black Legend originated in European perceptions of late-medieval and early-modern Spain as an increasingly tyrannical power ruthlessly intent on imposing its domination, along with its own version of fanatical Catholicism, on the rest of the continent. It acquired a transatlantic dimension as the news filtered back to Europe of Spanish atrocities in the conquest of America, vividly described in the widely disseminated writings of the Spanish evangelist for the Indians Bartolomé de Las Casas. The legend, and the religious views that underlay it, were passed down from generation to generation. In the nineteenth century its component themes were encapsulated in "Prescott's paradigm," named after the historian W.H. Prescott, for whom the Spain of his day was the antithesis of the United States and all that it stood for. A fervent believer in American exceptionalism, Prescott saw the United States as a nation built on religious and political freedom, hard work, and individual enterprise. By contrast, Spain's despotism and bigotry were responsible for its decline and had prevented it from taking its place in the modern world, whose distinguishing features were its representative governments, the free spirit of inquiry, and scientific and technological progress.6

Prescott lived from 1796 to 1859, years that saw the emergence of the United States as a continental empire. In the course of its apparently inexorable advance during the opening decades of the nineteenth century it incorporated Louisiana, Florida, and Texas, and in the peace settlement that followed its victory in the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 it annexed Alta California and New Mexico and the lands to the north, now comprising the states of Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. Ironically, the war broke out only three years after the publication of Prescott's epic narrative of the conquest of Mexico by heroic bands of Spaniards, who for him were a very different breed from those of his own times.

While religion, the Black Legend, and American exceptionalism have all hindered the recognition of the Hispanic contribution to the shaping of the United States, there was another significant impediment to its appreciation. This lay in frontiers and borders, or, more properly, in their absence. It was only in the eighteenth century, as the rivalry of the major European powers acquired a global dimension and spilled over into a struggle for control of America and its resources, that the demarcation of borders became a priority for European chanceries. But even where the will existed, the absence or inadequacy of maps and the existence of vast areas of North America still unknown and unexplored by Europeans made actual demarcation an almost impossible task. Where, for instance, did Spanish New Mexico end and French Louisiana begin?7 There were numerous borderlands but very few clear borders.

It is the porousness of borders that explains and justifies the historical narrative of the two books under review. Both Gibson and Goodwin trace the movement across these porous borders of the Hispanic or hispanicized peoples of the Spanish colonial world and their interaction with European settlers and their descendants moving southward from the north. Goodwin stops his story at the end of the nineteenth century, while Gibson follows it through to the building, or nonbuilding, of President Trump's wall as the latest in a series of doomed attempts to seal off the southern border. Neither author has much to say about Native Americans, although the Comanches, after harnessing the potential of horses and firearms, make a brief appearance in Goodwin's book as they erupt in the mid-eighteenth century into the midst of European imperial rivalries in the American Southwest.8

Both authors are well versed in the literature, primary and secondary, and Goodwin in particular makes extensive use of quotations from contemporary chronicles, to which he brings a keen critical eye. Both authors, too, write with verve and can be read with pleasure. Perhaps Goodwin, who revels in set pieces, has the edge in evoking historical personalities, particularly swashbuckling characters like Bernardo de Gálvez, the late-eighteenth-century colonial governor of Louisiana after whom the port of Galveston took its name. Gibson, on the other hand, has a more vivid topographical sense, aided by the fact that she appears to have visited most of the places about which she writes, like the main square of St. Augustine with its white obelisk and the coast of Amelia Island with its "browning patch of grass" and the ruins of its fort. Every chapter of her book takes as its title the name of a town, a mission station, or a presidio—a Spanish frontier post—like the Texan presidio of San Antonio de Béxar, and then loosely hangs on it the narrative that follows. But while dwelling on particular episodes, she does not forget the overarching purpose of her book, whereas Goodwin often seems more interested in simply telling a rattling good story.

Inevitably the same cast of characters appears in both books—Juan Ponce de León and Hernán Cortés; Juan de Oñate, the Mexican creole chosen by Philip II to undertake the settlement of New Mexico; and missionaries like the famous Jesuit Father Kino and the Franciscan Junípero Serra, who would leave as his legacy the first nine of the twenty-one missions set up in Alta California between 1769 and 1823. Goodwin can allot more space to these remarkable characters than Gibson, whose book is heavily tilted toward the postcolonial period. Both devote several pages to the career of Andrew Jackson, but Gibson offers more detailed coverage than Goodwin of the presidency of James Polk, so crucial for the geographical shaping of the United States as we know it today. She is also able to explore topics beyond Goodwin's ending, such as the consequences of the annexation of Puerto Rico following the Spanish-American War of 1898 or the fraught relationship with Cuba.

Neither of these books can be said to add anything of great substance to the existing literature, and both are stronger on narrative and description than on analysis. But both demonstrate that the United States and its current social and political scene cannot be understood if the lands and peoples of the Caribbean and those located south of the Mexican border are airbrushed

from the story. Its crux is to be found above all in the borderlands, where frontiers, even when they were drawn, remained and still remain highly permeable. With an overall Hispanic population in 2015 of 57 million, which accounted for 54 percent of total population growth from 2000 to 2014, twenty-first-century North Americans need to be better acquainted with the realities of that story.

Amid all the claims of the United States being swamped by waves of Spanish-speaking immigrants, with their criminal records, their drugs, and their gangs, it is salutary to be reminded, as these books both do, that many of the territories that now contain large Hispanic populations were once settled, however sparsely, by people of Hispanic origin, and not by North Americans of Nordic ancestry. What we are witnessing today is in some sense a reconquista by Hispanics of lands once governed, at least nominally, by the Spanish Crown. Spanish rule would draw to an end with the collapse of Spain's American empire in the years after 1808, but Spanish-style cities, like Los Angeles, had by then been founded and settled, their inhabitants had put down roots, and, as a result, memories, language, and religion lived on.

It is also important to be reminded that movement was by no means all in one direction. Spanish-speaking settlers may gradually have moved northward from Mexico in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but as they did so they were increasingly likely to come face to face with North American settlers moving south. By the early nineteenth century, the influx of these northerners, hungry for land and for the new opportunities that the borderlands offered, was being transformed into a tidal wave, displacing in its irresistible advance the Native American peoples who could rightly claim to be the real owners of the land. As Gibson puts it, for Andrew Jackson, born of an Irish mother on the borders of the Carolinas,

the Indians in Florida needed to be destroyed and the runaway slaves returned to their owners, and he refused to let the issue of Spanish sovereignty stand in his way. A man of the frontier, Jackson was comfortable pushing boundaries, political and physical.

By 1830, the pushing of boundaries had reached such intensity that the government of the newly independent Mexican Republic found it necessary to pass a law to curb the inflow of immigrants into its territory from the north. Almost a hundred years later, in 1924, the United States established a Border Patrol. It was the first move in a process that would in due course, and by a supreme irony, mirror the legislation introduced in 1830 by the Mexicans. For each country its identity was at stake.

Both these books ultimately raise the same question: What does it mean to be an "American"? The exclusive appropriation of the term either by Anglos or Latinos can only lead to confrontation and mutual misunderstanding. "America" was created not by any single group of people, but by the interaction and intermingling of many. Although Herbert Bolton's argument for the existence of a "Greater America" had its weaknesses, he was right to recognize that the exclusion of any one of the many different Americas diminishes the whole. In its diversity lies

the richness of its civilization. For centuries the Americas have been a world without walls, and long may they remain so.

1
Empire's Crossroads: A History of the Caribbean from Columbus to the Present Day (Atlantic Monthly, 2014). ↩

2
Crossing the Continent, 1527–1540: The Story of the First African-American Explorer of the American South (Harper, 2008); Spain: The Centre of the World, 1519–1682 (Bloomsbury, 2015). ↩

3
A New Andalucia and a Way to the Orient: The American Southeast During the Sixteenth Century (Louisiana State University Press, 1990). ↩

4
The Spanish Frontier in North America (Yale University Press, 1992); Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of the Enlightenment (Yale University Press, 2005). See my reviews in these pages, June 24, 1993, and February 23, 2006. ↩

5
See, for instance, Donald E. Chipman, Spanish Texas, 1519–1821 (University of Texas Press, 1992). ↩

6
The term "Prescott's paradigm" was coined by Richard L. Kagan in an article under that title originally published in the American Historical Review in 1996, and published as an appendix in a volume of essays that he edited, Spain in America: The Origins of Hispanism in the United States (University of Illinois Press, 2002). ↩

7
For the problems involved in mapping and boundary-drawing in America, see Paul W. Mapp, The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire, 1713–1763 (University of North Carolina Press, 2011). ↩

8
See Pekka Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire (Yale University Press, 2008). ↩