

1491 – New Discoveries about America before Columbus
Charles Mann

Mann's Atlantic Monthly article by the same title gave promise of a great book. This is it. A tour de force, referencing all of the specialized works which the media and other writers have brought to the attention of us non-specialists, and introducing much significant work that hadn't previously been widely reviewed.

Every author has his quirks. Mann sees anthropologists especially, but also the archaeologists, linguists and other specialists with whom they interact, as being constantly engaged in pitched battles defending their various pet theories, to such an extent that they abandon civil behavior towards one another. It's a bit of a bad rap. The anthropologists I've know, from Theodora Kroeber on down, have generally been a more agreeable lot.

Another quirk, not terribly surprising given his topic, is to inflate the significance of the accomplishments of American civilizations beyond even what his surprising findings might support. Yes, they did have fantastic architecture, well-developed and ecologically sensible architecture, elaborate social structures, writing, advanced arithmetic and vast cities and monuments. Even given all that, to suggest that they were on a par with or ahead of contemporaneous European or Chinese civilization seems to be a bit of a stretch.

Mann is very good on the subject of agriculture: the domestication of food crops. The story of maize/corn is especially interesting. It has been cultivated so long that it is the only grain the wild ancestors of which remain a mystery. His description of today's Amazon, Peru and Mexico are so accurate as to give great credence to his accounts of how they got the way they are.

His account of how and when the Americas were populated is likewise very thorough and balanced, giving thorough descriptions of the various schools of thought and well drawn support for his preference of one theory over another. His bottom line is that the continent was peopled well before the previous estimate of 12,000 years ago. He offers support for several novel ideas. The settlers may have traveled south by boat. The original Peruvian agriculture may have been to grow cotton for fishnets rather than food. Peruvian civilization started on the coast rather than in the Andes.

A question Mann chooses not to address is why these descendents of such grand civilizations have fared so poorly in modern times. Even granted their near extinction from European diseases, and their second-class status under the Spanish (the Portuguese and French are benignly overlooked), why is it that the native peoples of Bolivia have not adapted well to Western culture, and why does resentment run so high that the nativist politics of Evo Morales, Hugo Chavez, Ollanta Humala and others succeed as they do? Mann remarks several times on the minimal importance of marketplaces among the American civilizations. There was extensive trade, but it seems to have been on a tribe-to-tribe basis rather than person-to-person. Individual needs were satisfied by allocations from community stores. This description ties very well to what one observes in native

American ruins and among contemporary native Americans. Is there something in the Indian history and temperament that handicaps their progress in societies that are now patterned according to the European model?

In summary, this book does a wonderful job of filling the huge void in most of our knowledge of the native peoples of the Americas. One can hope that its success inspires imitation; it is a huge topic, with much left to be written.