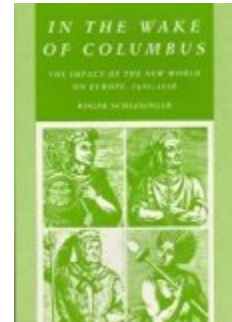


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger Schlesinger. *In the Wake of Columbus: The Impact of the New World on Europe, 1492-1650*. Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1996. xx + 128 pp. \$11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88295-917-7.

Reviewed by Martin V. Fleming (Tulane University)
Published on H-LatAm (November, 1997)



In this book, Roger Schlesinger provides the general reader a well-written, concise synthesis of the historiographical debates surrounding the ways in which New World colonies transformed Europe in the two hundred years after Columbus' first voyage. Schlesinger's central thesis is that contact with America fundamentally altered European society and its world view. He acknowledges that there is significant disagreement among scholars over the degree of change exerted by American influences. Yet, he is able to balance competing schools of interpretation with remarkable fairness and equal coverage. Citing John Elliott's *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), the author states that, "Europeans simply were overwhelmed with all of the new information coming from America. 'Mental shutters' came down, and Europeans simply ignored the American challenge to their traditional values and beliefs..." (p. xx). Schlesinger hopes to analyze years later what Europeans living between 1492 and 1650 were simply unable to notice. To do so, the author divides his book into four chapters: 1) European Economics and America, 2) European Politics and America, 3) European Conceptions of Native Americans, and 4) European Daily Life and America.

After a brief introduction which contains an overview of the Columbian voyages, Schlesinger examines the impact of the American colonies on the European economy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europe witnessed a dramatic rise in prices in comparison to wages. Following Jean Bodin, many Europeans attributed the "Price Revolution" to the influx of American silver into the European economy. They reasoned that, if there was an increase in the money in circulation while the supply of products remained stable, then there would follow

logically a rise in prices. Schlesinger argues that modern scholars now know that grain prices normally rose twice as much as non-agricultural items. The demand for food grew faster than the demand for manufactured goods, in part a function of a constantly increasing population, leading to inflationary pressure and a rise in prices (pp. 7-8).

The influx of American silver also financed the "Commercial Revolution," a series of changes in the way Europeans did business. Following Earl J. Hamilton, Schlesinger states that because of its staggering debt and low supply of workers, Spain's excess profits were not reinvested in industry, leaving her far behind the rest of the Atlantic world in the seventeenth century.

Schlesinger concludes the first chapter with a comparison of the mercantilist policies of the Spanish, Portuguese, English, French and Dutch. He argues that the expense, risk and potential reward of American investment led to the formation of joint-stock companies, which he considers one of the "most important innovations in business organization in the history of European civilization" (p. 13). The entire chapter contains an implicit argument of the decline of Spain. While there was certainly a decline in the Spanish economy, Schlesinger fails to credit the successes of the internal Spanish American economies and the general recovery of the Spanish economy in the last decades of the seventeenth century.

In the second chapter, Schlesinger examines European political rivalries in the wake of the European discovery of America. He argues that the wealth, territory, and geo-political benefits of American possession exacerbated already existing political rivalries and "stimulated nationalistic beliefs of Renaissance Europeans" (p. 37).

While the point of fueling rivalries is well taken, it was fundamentally a rivalry between the crowns of Europe. It is a dangerous precedent to speak of European nationalism in the Renaissance. In the case of Spain, local and regional loyalties were far more powerful and realistic than any notion of a Spanish nation well into the nineteenth century. Continuing in the vein of international rivalry, Schlesinger discusses Bartolome de Las Casas and the promulgation of the New Laws in 1542. In this well conceived analysis, he focuses on the ways in which Spain's European rivals seized Las Casas' rhetoric to attack Spain in formation of the "black legend." In a strong transition to the next chapter, Schlesinger concludes his discussion of European politics and the Americas by introducing the writings of Francisco de Vitoria, ideas of international law and the conflict between Las Casas and Juan Gines de Sep? lveda in the Great Debate of Valladolid in 1551.

In the third chapter, Schlesinger focuses on European conceptions of Native American society through the mediums of the written word and art. Combining the best techniques of historians and literary scholars, the author examines a variety of representation of indigenous society in the writings of Europeans. He argues that Europeans made an effort to understand Native Americans and to write about them, an effort defined and limited by European preconceptions. Any description, therefore is faulty on some level because "Europeans narrowed their vision to such an extent that they found it very difficult to appreciate the distinctive character of the cultures they had encountered" (p. 52). While there is nothing new about Schlesinger's argument, there are very few examples of clear exposition of literary-historical theory in general synthetic texts. It is a clear reminder that historians, anthropologists and others must be cautious when reading the first accounts of the American Indigenous. They are extremely valuable sources of pre-Columbian history that must be used with caution. Most of the authors that Schlesinger discusses are Spanish, but he does include a useful introduction to the writings of various English, French, Italian and Dutch authors, whose opinions of the Indigenous ranged from the sub-human to the noble savage.

In the realm of art, Schlesinger argues that American art had no significant influence on the development of Renaissance and Baroque art. Most of the themes represented in European art continued to flow from the world of classical antiquity. When American images appeared in European art, they were generally exotic objects inserted into the background. Many of these curious American objects became the prizes of social elites who added

them to their "cabinets of curiosity" along with strange items from the rest of the world (p. 73). While American objects tended to appear only as curiosities in European art, images proved to be very powerful illustrations of European conceptions of Native Americans. Engravers illustrated many of the histories and travel accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Few of the illustrators had ever seen the Americas or the people living there, so they relied upon written descriptions and the ideal physiognomies of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In his numerous illustrations, Theodore de Bry portrayed the Spanish as brutal, Catholic beasts and the Native Americans as gentle innocents with the bodies of Greek gods (p. 76). The words of Las Casas and the images of de Bry laid the foundation for what is today known as the "black legend." Finally, after the 1570s, Europeans began to fill allegorical paintings with American images. Popular allegories represented the three continents as the women Europa, America and Africa. These images generally served political or religious purposes as Europe expanded conquering civilizations around the globe.

In the final chapter, Schlesinger examines the biological impact of America on European daily life, dividing the chapter with short discussions of food, plants, animals and disease. Essentially, the biological flow across both sides of the Atlantic increased the bio-diversity of both continents. Yet Americans and Europeans slowly adopted the others' cuisines. Many Europeans believed that the tomato was poisonous. Others called it the "love apple," believing that it was a powerful aphrodisiac. Others still believed that the tomato had no food value at all and was merely an ornamental plant. The tomato was, therefore, slowly absorbed into the European diet. The same is true of potatoes and corn, which were originally grown in Spain as animal feed because they were considered unfit for human consumption. Over time, these foods came to provide high caloric value to the diets of Europe's poor (pp. 83-9). The author discusses the full range of foodstuffs that contributed to the changing European diet after 1492. Since these are known to most scholars, it will not be discussed here. Many American plants began to appear in European gardens as Europeans returned home after a stint in the Americas. The author argues that tobacco was the American plant which had the greatest impact on Europeans society. Reaching most of Europe, tobacco soon became a popular habit of the upper class, which attributed many health benefits to the "American weed." The impact of American animals on Europe was minimal. Europeans

were fascinated by the beauty of the toucan and parrot and the exotic of some of America's more unusual four-footed animals (p. 99). Schlesinger concludes the final chapter with a discussion of the impact of syphilis on European life. After a discussion of contemporary accounts of syphilis, he states that modern historians now believe that syphilis had relatively little impact on Renaissance society as a whole (p. 104). Indebted largely to the work of Alfred Crosby, the chapter is a well-written introduction to the "Columbian Exchange."

While it contains little new information of use to scholars, most of whom will have already read Elliott, Hamilton, Crosby and the contemporary accounts cited, *In the Wake of Columbus* is an excellent book for what it claims to be, a clearly-written synthesis of major historiographical themes in European history for use by undergraduates and general readers. The author's coverage is balanced and fair to a wide variety of schools of historical interpretation. Also useful is the strong bibliographical essay.

Scholars often write about the ways that Europeans

changed American society, but few discuss the changes that took place in Europe after 1492. The book would be quite useful as supplementary reading for a Western Civilizations course or even a introduction to colonial Latin America, although some would prefer to use Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange*, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1972). I have only one criticism of the book: the author's misrepresentation of the *encomienda*. He states that the *encomienda* originated when Columbus gave pieces of land and the Indigenous people living on that land to individual Spaniards. After the death of the original owner, the property and slaves passed on to his heir (p. xvii). The *encomienda* was neither an institution of slavery nor land ownership as the author implies. On the whole, however, Schlesinger, has made a very useful contribution to didactic reading materials available for undergraduate classes.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Martin V. Fleming. Review of Schlesinger, Roger, *In the Wake of Columbus: The Impact of the New World on Europe, 1492-1650*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1476>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.