



APOCALYPTO, the Explosion/Debunking of the 'Noble Savage', and with it of Enlightenment Ethics

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Abstract: Mel Gibson's movie APOCALYPTO calls into question the 'noble savage' by depicting indigenous Mayans engaging in human sacrifice, and also questions the deeper belief among 'post-Christian' Europeans in a 'universal natural ethic' that is superior to Christianity and that otherwise all people everywhere observe.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Colonization, Exploitation, Progress.

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Introduction

Mel Gibson's 2006 film *APOCALYPTO* was unusual in several respects. First of all, it was filmed entirely with indigenous actors speaking a Mayan dialect (with subtitles). As a 'western', it was strange in that its action took place before the arrival of Europeans, so the 'action' involved no interaction between those two groups. In fact, the film concludes with the first view of a Spanish ship to arrive in Central America, with the indigenous characters, who have been through a shattering experience (and probably thought that their unusual or difficult experiences were over), staring in stunned disbelief at this first-ever event in their culture. What significance does Mel Gibson mean us to attach to this?

The film begins with an extensive section depicting the indigenous warm and affectionate family life; there are events common to all families, and much humor. It is easy for the viewer to overcome all sense of alienation and conclude, 'You see, they are just like we are.' But then a hunting party emerges from the jungle and chases down the inhabitants of this village. It turns out that they are from a different and stronger branch of the Maya, and are seeking victims to offer to their high gods as human sacrifices.

This is far from an unusual event in this culture; in fact, it is quite normal or typical, for branches of the Maya to wage war to acquire captives and then transport them to their high altars built with impressive stone and rich carvings, to be kept as privileged prisoners until the day when they will be taken up *en masse* to have their hearts cut out and heads bloodied until their lifeless bodies are thrown down the steep steps to be collected in a pile at the bottom. Although painful to witness, it is not the purpose of the film to shock us by their brutality; in fact, it is the intent of the film to make us realize how usual and regular this is within their culture. Human sacrifice is the way to give highest praise and worship to their gods. It is the way to offer the most valuable thing we possess to the highest beings in the universe, to obtain their good will and

continued support for our crops and related economic-political-military activities. Although subordinate clans are not necessarily happy at having to supply these victims, they must grudgingly admit this behavior is what you would expect from the highest culture.

In fact, what the audience comes to notice is that, after you have gotten over your squeamishness at this brutal treatment, this is a picture with no 'heroes'. That is, the clans on the bottom of the social pyramid, who currently supply victims for the sacrifices, would do exactly the same thing if suddenly they came to occupy the top spot, or become the leading clan. The power of the film comes from the fact that the viewer is thrown off center, thoroughly disoriented and confused. Their social world has been ripped from them. Without knowing who to support or who to oppose, the viewer doesn't know what the director expects him to experience, or what to do with their emotion. One isn't sure what kind of emotional release one should be having – if any.

One effect of this experience is that it forces you to take seriously the indigenous world view – and to compare it with one's own. On the natural level it makes perfect sense. Blood is the most valuable human commodity. Mayan nobles used to deliberately puncture their skin with thorns, needles or sting ray spines as a means to achieve communion, harmony and peace with their gods. Such an experience achieves the highest level of intimacy and communion with the divine open to man. Such language is not foreign to the Christian tradition: in holy communion, Christ invites us to consume his 'body and blood', as he shared bread and wine with his disciples during the Last Supper. Christians pursue a symbolic union; the Mayans, without this symbolic option, sought a literal union. It is in making 'the old strange' and 'the new acceptable' that the film assaults our senses and minds by calling the deepest assumptions of our world into question.

Once before in the contemporary period an artist achieved this effect, but its intent was more superficial and

designed simply to shock. In 1948 Shirley Jackson published a short story in *The New Yorker* entitled *The Lottery*. It began as the simple story of a rural community assembling at a center for its annual festival. Everything is familiar and traditional; it is a time for seeing old friends and celebrating another year – until the final sentence, which informs us that the members conclude by picking up rocks and stoning an unfortunate young woman who has been chosen as this year's victim for the sacrifice. The members' lack of emotion or comment is meant to contrast with unspoken hysterics among the readers. The story was meant to shock the conventional pieties of post-World War II America, which was hoping to leave violence behind and get back to a 'civilized' way of life. It had no deeper ambition - but the same cannot be said of Gibson's film.

The image of the 'noble savage' was part of an ideological assault by the Enlightenment on the very notion of a 'Christian State' as the ideal of Western Civilization since Constantine accepted Christianity as the official religion for his Empire in the fourth century. The Enlightenment wanted to separate the West from its thousand-year tradition of official Christian allegiance, in preference for and to expose the merely 'natural' foundations for a state that were still present from its 'pagan' past. The Enlightenment program was to scrape off the Christian patina from Western intellectual development, leaving behind the previous pagan or 'natural' intellectual foundation that had laid undisturbed and dormant below it down the centuries, so that it was now fit to be re-discovered and re-installed as the basis for a purely 'natural' system of ethics and politics (that would also be acceptable to non-Christians and atheists in the West). Rousseau is the apostle and evangelist of this new gospel; he concomitantly raised the hope of discovering in the 'heathen' colonies this 'natural virtue' incarnate in an unconverted 'noble savage' who would lead 'European man' back to his proper development. Thus the American Indian was studied carefully for more than simply his curious folkways; he became a crucial piece in the ideological program to fortify the Enlightenment attack on the 'artificial' and 'unnatural' European ways that had grown up and as the indication of a more accurate, adequate, and indeed excellent, way of life. A tremendous ideological weight thus fell on such unprepossessing and supposedly 'unambitious' sociological investigations. Europe waited with mounting anticipation to see whether they would lead us back to our ancient greatness, or disappoint us by producing merely a degenerate mongrel like Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, set in recently-discovered Bermuda.

So what is Mel Gibson's verdict? What does he mean to say by having the first sailing ship of the Spanish Empire appear in the lagoon in the last scene of his film? Generally we would have to say it represents a 'No' to the question of whether there is such a thing as a 'noble savage' (a judgment made in the violent first part

of the film) but also as to whether there is such a thing as a beneficent 'Enlightenment ethic' (represented by the newly arriving Spanish in the second half). The Europeans will only superficially overthrow the cruel tyranny and exploitation of native peoples in the New World by virtue of their Christian faith; it is more accurate to say they will invade, defeat, and exploit their advantage in war through disease, steel and gun powder to achieve an even more vicious and cruel victory and stranglehold over the native inhabitants, leading to their enslavement as human chattel as an offering to the feverish search for gold, silver and other forms of wealth that could be transferred back to Europe. The newly-arriving Spanish are no exception to the already-established pattern of mutual enslavement and exploitation among the diverse American tribes, but will only install a more cruel and successful form of exploitation and eventual annihilation of the native stock in exchange for legal tender, mined specie and other forms of wealth.

As Gibson was born in America and raised in Australia (both 'Enlightenment' counties by their founding documents and early history), there is a fine distinction and irony between the way this dire verdict and message is delivered in the 'old world' of Europe (where the Enlightenment debate took place) and the 'new world' of the Americas and the colonies generally where its practical consequences will dictate the structure of a new society. A pessimistic 'No' to the Enlightenment debate as to whether there is such a thing as 'Enlightenment ethics' would serve as a social distraction and amusement, an artistic bauble, an intellectual pastime in the traditional cities, classrooms and estates of the European masters; in the novel and unprecedented' political experiments of post-revolutionary new world 'democracies', it takes on an immediate practical relevance and terrifying vital impulse. Those Europeans who were transported or chose to emigrate to the 'new' Enlightenment territories were potentially *both* masters *and* slaves, the exploiters *and* the exploited, under these new regimes and circumstances. They had a practical interest in the outcome of the abstract debate which their continental ancestors and contemporaries did not have. In a sense, they had to extract a 'Yes' vote to the theoretical question because without this the viability of their political system and practical experiment would lose its foundation, and vanish.

Gibson stays mum. Whether he has personal views or not, the film leaves us hanging. There simply *is* no conclusion. It terminates on the level of entertainment with the natives dumbstruck and staring in awe at the newly-arrived transport marvels from another world. There is not yet any disease, steel weapons, or gun powder. All that lies in the future, down to colonial Belgium in the Congo where King Leopold authorizes amputating the limbs of recalcitrant natives who did not work fast enough - while Joseph Conrad takes notes on shipboard on this 'heart of darkness' – helping us, perhaps, towards an answer to the question.