PREFACE: OCTOBER 10, 1492

When we reach the sea we’ll build a bigger boat and sail north to take Trinidad away from the Spanish Crown. From there we’ll go and take Mexico from Cortez. What a great betrayal that will be. We will then control all of New Spain. And we will stage history as others stage plays.

--Aguirre, Wrath of God

The Fiction of Hegemony

Even empires seek validation. No power can subsist on coercion alone. Hence Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s famous distinction between “hegemony” and “direct domination.” Hegemony is “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant social group.” Direct domination is exercised by “the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups which do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively.” Hegemony, in fact, is primary: for Gramsci, power is grounded in consent, and force is employed only secondarily, “in moments of crisis and command when spontaneous consent has failed.” Coercion supplements consent, rather than vice versa.
Hegemony is, in Gramsci’s view, the bedrock of social order. It is through the pedagogical activities of intellectuals in civil society that the state maintains its grip over the exploited, and the dominant group cements the “prestige” that it “enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”

At first sight, the Requerimiento that justified Spanish claims to the Americas is a classic illustration of the relation between hegemony and coercion. Formulated in 1512 or 1513 by legal scholar Juan López Palacios Rubios, the Requerimiento (“Requirement” or “Summons”) was a text to be read by the conquistadors when they encountered indigenous peoples. The document filled a hole in Spain’s legal claim to the New World, complementing and rationalizing the traditional European law of conquest. It outlines the case for the Empire’s legitimacy, based on the papal donation of the New World to Castile in 1493, by way of a brief history of God’s creation from Adam to the Spanish monarchs Fernando and Juana. Above all, it offers its indigenous addressees a choice: submit, or face violent subjugation. “Wherefore as best we can, we ask and require you,” the declaration states, “that you consider what we have said to you, and that you take the time that shall be necessary to understand and deliberate upon it.” Its audience are then to “consent and give place that these religious fathers should declare and preach to you the aforesaid.” Should, however, they refuse their “‘spontaneous’ consent” to occupation and Christian preaching, the indigenous are to expect the worst: “We shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can.” This is hegemony as a pedagogic enterprise to legitimate power, backed up by the threat of coercive discipline: the Requerimiento appears to encapsulate Gramscian theory in a nutshell.

On closer examination, however, Spanish practice had little in common with hegemony theory. The indigenous were seldom if ever given any real opportunity to
consent. Most obviously, the Requerimiento was written in Spanish, a language that
they did not speak. How would they agree to what they could not comprehend? Even
where there was some attempt at translation, “the interpreters themselves did not
understand what the document said.” Moreover, as historian Lewis Hanke notes, the
circumstances in which it was read out “might tax the reader’s patience and credulity,
for the Requirement was read to trees and empty huts when no Indians were to be
found. Captains muttered its theological phrases into their beard on the edge of
sleeping Indian settlements.” Sometimes the invaders read the document only after
they had already made prisoners of the natives. At best the exercise devolved into a
dialogue of the dumb, as when the Zuni Indians in what is now New Mexico responded
to the reading with a ritual of their own, laying down “a barrier of sacred cornmeal” to
prevent the Spaniards from entering the town. No wonder historian Henry Kamen
calls “the final result . . . little more than grotesque”; he reports that even the
document’s author “realized it was farcical.” Spanish chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de
Oviedo is said to have commented to his compatriot Pedrarias Dávila that “these
Indians have no wish to listen to the theology of this Requirement, nor do you have any
obligation to make them try and understand it.” Contrary to claims that the
Requerimiento was an instance of “Spanish rulers requir[ing] subject peoples to
reiterate and reaffirm Spanish hegemony on a regular basis,” in fact here hegemony is
not at issue. The indigenous never had the option to consent; they were in no position
to reaffirm anything.

Affects and Habits
Despite its transparent fictiveness and patent absurdity, the Requerimiento still served a purpose. For it was aimed not at the indigenous, but at the Spanish. Under the guise of an appeal to the consent of the subjugated, it shaped the habits and affects of the subjugators. The very fact of its redundant reiteration reveals that it was an exercise in habituation. And it was repeated for the Spaniards, not for their victims, who after all heard it only once, if at all. Each time the conquistadors recited the ritual declaration, their desires were synchronized and unified as part of a joint project. Rather than a gesture of incorporation, the edict was an act of constitution. Its confident self-justifications obscure the fact that it was needed only because the imperial state was so weak. It enfolded these European adventurers’ often excessive energies into an enterprise directed as though from above. The Requerimiento had nothing to do with any putative hegemonic project; it was a properly posthegemonic mechanism. It worked all the better precisely because it appeared to be part of a campaign, however ridiculous and ineffective, to win hearts and minds; precisely because its object seemed to be elsewhere. The Spaniards could feel superior to the dumb Indians who did not know what had hit them, but they were as much in the dark as anybody else. The Requerimiento functioned far beneath consciousness or ideology.

Bartolomé de las Casas, the sixteenth-century Dominican priest and defender of the indigenous, provides one version of the Requerimiento ritual. He tells us that when the Spaniards learned that there was gold in a particular town or village . . . [they made] their way there at dead of night, when the inhabitants were all in bed and sound asleep and, once they got within, say, half a league of the town itself, . . . read out the terms of this edict, proclaiming (and only to themselves): “Leaders and citizens of such-and-such a town of this
Mainland. Be it known to you that there is one true God, one Pope, and one King of Castile who is the rightful owner of all these lands. You are hereby summoned to pay allegiance, etc. Should you fail to do so, take notice that we shall make just war upon you, and your lives and liberty will be forfeit, etc.” Then, in the early hours of the morning, when the poor people were still innocently abed with their wives and their children, they would irrupt into the town, setting fire to the houses . . . and burning the women and children alive and often the men, too, before the poor wretches realized what was happening.9

Asleep in their beds, at dead of night, with the Spaniards half a league away, the indigenous are literally kept at a distance. Cultural critic Alberto Moreiras describes the Requerimiento as “differential inclusion”; but here the indigenous are not included at all. The native inhabitants can neither accept nor reject the choice that the Spaniards offer. They are beyond the pale of any possible community. Everything takes place before consciousness can take hold, “before the poor wretches realized what was happening.” The invaders are speaking “only to themselves.” But the mechanism in which they are participating depends no more on their understanding than it does on that of the indigenous. Moreiras points out that the indigenous inhabit a space that is “already marked by death and remains as such illegible.”10 The Requerimiento, too, is illegible, however much it is read: it defies interpretation, as if to show that its meaning is of little consequence.

Subalternist historian Patricia Seed shows that the Requerimiento drew heavily on the Islamic tradition of jihad, or holy war; it was a hybrid text that “often led to considerable incomprehension by traditional Christian observers both inside and outside Spain.” Unheard by its notional addressees, and almost as mystifying even to
those who pronounced it, the edict’s manifest content is beside the point, just as “whether the Spanish conquerors believed in it or found it personally compelling or convincing was irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{11} The text appears to seek consent and so to expand the community of believers, but those to whom it offers that possibility remain out of earshot, while those who are already within the circle are there regardless of any beliefs they might hold. The \textit{Requerimiento} is comparable to the Bible proffered before the Inca Atahualpa in Cajamarca as the conquistador Gonzalo Pizarro advanced in his conquest of what is now Peru. The indigenous emperor threw the book to the ground because it did not “speak” to him; this sacrilege towards the holy word was taken by the Europeans to be proof of indigenous barbarism and justification for bloodshed. Yet, as cultural critic Antonio Cornejo Polar observes, the Bible would have been equally illegible to most Spaniards, including Pizarro himself, not least because it was written in Latin.\textsuperscript{12} The book was more fetish than text, a shibboleth whose signification was purely incidental. Neither the Bible nor the \textit{Requerimiento} were documents that demanded interpretation; they were instead touchpapers for the violent explosion of imperial expansion, codewords in the “protocol for conquest” enacted by the Spaniards in the dark.\textsuperscript{13}

Las Casas had no illusions about the Spaniards’ motivations: they were driven by the search for gold. This was no civilizing mission. Indeed, the Dominican’s complaint was that the \textit{Requerimiento} bore no relationship to the reality of Spanish practice. Las Casas was hardly an anti-imperialist. If anything, his campaign was for the Spanish state to give substance to the fiction of hegemony.\textsuperscript{14} For Las Casas, the scandal was the unbridled desire that reduced the conquistadors to savages more dangerous than the indigenous peoples themselves; their “blind and obsessive greed” made them “more inhumane and more vicious than savage tigers, more ferocious than lions or than
ravening wolves." But he failed to see that the Requerimiento channeled that affect. It placed the lust for gold under the sign of a narrative of progress, and more importantly it unified the conquistadors, huddled together in an alien landscape. The reading helped bind the affect mobilized in their hunt for gold, counteracting its centrifugal tendencies by organizing it as part of an ecclesiastical, imperial, and monarchical hierarchy before the men were let loose as a war machine “irrupt[ing] into the town.”

The Requerimiento consolidates relations between the Spanish conquistadors after the fact of domination; it embodies them as agents of the state, as subjects of constituted power. Everybody knows that the text itself is unpersuasive. Instead of persuading the colonized, it works on the colonizers to establish a common habitus that lies beneath ideology, and beneath hegemony. As the invaders repeatedly intone these words that they themselves barely understand, they become habituated to a ritual through which the Spanish state, even at great distance, seeks to regulate their activities. Its men will at least have been singing from the same hymnbook, irrespective of their beliefs about or consent to the claims made in the hymns themselves. This is “dominance without hegemony,” in subaltern studies theorist Ranajit Guha’s words, “the fabrication of a spurious hegemony” that nobody believes, but which serves (thanks to the notarization and record-keeping that the edict itself demands) to emplot Latin America within a historical narrative generated by the European state. The subalterns will, simply, be eliminated, their culture excluded from the ambit of a Christian universe defined in terms of the centrality and rights of the Catholic monarchy. But the indigenous are never really a threat to those rights: the danger lies within, from the possibility that the conquistadors themselves might (as depicted in Werner Herzog’s film Aguirre, Wrath of God) establish a counter-state on American
soil. Behind the **Requerimiento** is the fear of betrayal, of sedition, by the men at arms who purportedly represent the Crown abroad.

**The Multitude and the Pact**

Postcolonial studies focuses on the relation between colonizer and colonized, between empire and its outside. It thereby takes the state for granted. Empire encounters the subaltern at its limit, but it already carries a multitude within. The agents of imperialism are as much escaping state control as expanding it. Colonialism’s weak point is always the passage between center and periphery, metropolis and colony. The Spanish empire was forced to establish an immense bureaucratic apparatus to guard this intermediate space, threatened constantly by piracy, fraud, desertion, and mutiny. The name given to this bureaucracy was the “Casa de Contratación”: the “Contraction House” or Office of Contracts. The European state depended on a diffuse group of adventurers and ne’er-do-wells to expand its sphere of influence until it covered the entire known world; but it had simultaneously to reign in this renegade subjectivity, to maintain the bounds of the social contract. Empire stretched the state to its limit: the Crown’s gravest problem was always its “inability . . . to control events from a distance.”\(^{17}\) The multitude, a motley crew that resisted authority, representation, or leadership, constituted Empire but also undermined the very power that it brought into being.

Christopher Columbus was a Genoese adventurer who believed he had visionary inspiration. For over a decade, he hocked his idea for an expedition over the Atlantic to a variety of private and public interests. In the end, he won the backing of the Spanish monarchy, but his enterprise was essentially a private one. Spain itself barely existed as
a modern nation state: the crowns of Castile and Aragon had come together with the wedding of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469, but it was only with the “reconquest” of Andalusia and the expulsion of Jews and Moors from the Iberian peninsula two decades that the state could even aspire to the fantasy of territorial integrity and ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Columbus gained royal approval for his voyage just days after the king and queen rode into Granada in triumph in January 1492. This year of settling boundaries was also a year of great movements of peoples, “swarms of refugees.” Jews who were camped around the ports and on sea-going vessels were given the order to “leave port on August 2, 1492, the day before Columbus set sail.” In the early morning of August 3, as Spain consolidated its territorial and ethnic limits, Columbus’s small fleet the Niña, Pinta, and Santa María constituted a seemingly insignificant line of flight westward. Something always escapes.

Columbus’s crew had reason to flee. Tradition portrays them as convicts motivated by the royal pardon they received for signing up. Historian and sailor Samuel Eliot Morison plays down this account of a crew “composed of desperate characters, criminals, and jailbirds,” but he does confirm that at least four of the men had indeed been reprieved from death row by enlisting. Even the full-time seafarers among them operated at the margins of the law. Columbus’s main associate, Martín Alonso Pinzón, who captained the Pinta while his brother Vicente took charge of the Niña, had “like many other mariners . . . occasionally engaged in piracy as well as legitimate trade.” This was an expedition packed with potentially unruly subordinates, exacerbated by an imbalance between crew and officers in that each ship’s crew was exceptionally large, perhaps double the normal complement. In any case, Columbus had trouble with his men from the start. Even before they set sail, at least two of the crew on the Pinta “had been grumbling and making difficulties,” and
were suspected of sabotaging the ship at the Canaries.\footnote{23} Once underway, the admiral was increasingly worried about a possible mutiny, and with good cause: Las Casas reports that as early as September 24, when they were almost exactly in mid-Atlantic, some of his crew argued “that the best thing of all would be to throw \cite{Columbus} overboard one night and put it about that he had fallen while trying to take a reading of the Pole Star with his quadrant or astrolabe.”\footnote{24}

The voyage is longer and further than any of the men had expected. From early on, Columbus is aware that the sheer extent to which they are collectively venturing into the unknown is a likely cause for dissent. From September 9 (just three days after leaving the Canaries) he maintains a double log, with “two reckonings, one false and the other true” of the distance traveled each day, because he is worried that his crew might “take fright or lose courage if the voyage were long.”\footnote{25} Only landfall will resolve the men’s concerns, yet land is frustratingly elusive. Expectation runs high, however. From September 14 Columbus reports that there are many sure signs of land, provoking a veritable interpretosis: there are no innocent objects in the Atlantic traversed by this convoy. On September 16, seeing “many patches of very green seaweed, which appeared only recently to have been uprooted[, a]ll considered therefore that they were near some island.” Likewise, a live crab on September 17 can be taken to be “a certain sign of land.” On September 25, both Columbus and the crew are certain that land has been sighted. They fall on their knees to give thanks to God, but “what they had taken for land was no land but cloud.” A week or so later, these “many signs of land,” previously heralded by Columbus with enthusiasm, have to be discounted as the crew lobbies for the expedition to return to investigate.\footnote{26} Columbus rejects the idea, and insists that they continue on westward. Historians William and Carla Phillips argue that he must have wanted “to maintain his authority over the captains and their crews. . . .
Allowing side excursions in search of islands would diminish the aura of certainty that he had been at pains to protect.”

Previous voyagers (notably Bartholomew Dias rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1487) had been forced by their crews to abandon further exploration; Columbus, too, is now seriously running the risk of mutiny.

As October arrives, the situation deteriorates. By October 1 there is a discrepancy of 121 leagues between Columbus’s “true calculation” of the distance they have traveled and “the lower figure . . . shown to the men.”

By October 11 that discrepancy will have risen to at least 195 leagues, or almost a quarter again of the distance that the men are told they have traveled. Yet even the phony log shows that the fleet has sailed much further than Columbus had predicted. In this context, what Morison calls the “incipient mutiny” of late September develops fast: “Columbus and the Pinzons needed all their moral force and prestige to prevent outbreaks or even mutiny.”

On October 6, in an “acrid interview,” Martín Pinzón himself questions the route they are taking, suggesting they should veer further south, but Columbus countermands his associate. One version of the admiral’s log has him reporting: “My decision has not pleased the men, for they continue to murmur and complain. Despite their grumblings I held fast to the west.”

The same day, in response to the near-mutinous atmosphere, with the crew of the _Santa María_ demanding that the fleet turn for Spain, he summons a council of his captains; both the Pinzón brothers are persuaded to support the decision to continue.

October 7 brings another false sighting of land, and Columbus changes his bearing slightly to the south. Two days later he tacks north. But by October 10, “the men could bear no more; they complained of the length of the voyage.”

In Morison’s words, “October 10 was the most critical day of the entire voyage, when the enterprise came nearest to failure,” as “all the smoldering discontent of the men flared up into open mutiny.” Columbus “encouraged them as best he could”: he
held out “high hopes of the gains they could make” and “he added that it was no use their complaining, because he had reached the Indies and must sail on until with the help of Our Lord he discovered land.”34 Perhaps the multiple signs led Columbus to claim that they had already “reached” the Indies, though if the signs could have been believed they would have seen land long before. Perhaps he was also referring to the fact that, by any measure, the fleet was now more than 800 leagues from Spain, and he had repeatedly declared that land would be sighted at 750 leagues. These arguments were now wearing thin. Even the ships’ captains were turning against their admiral. “The mutinous crewmen began to rattle their weapons.”35 The Admiral had to forestall panic among his crew, on whom he was totally dependent. There was no-one more vulnerable than Columbus, as he himself would later lament loudly and persistently.
Columbus makes a pact with his men. The compromise he suggests is that “they would continue on their westward course for two more days (or three or four; accounts vary). If they had not found land at the end of that period, they would turn back.” The precise details of the pact are sketchy: it is omitted from the admiral’s log and will become a bone of contention in a long-running court case years later in which the Crown will try to argue for the Pinzón brothers’ share of the voyage’s success. Some accounts claim that it is Columbus who has to be encouraged to continue, and others that the Pinzón brothers are fully part of the mutiny. What is clear is that only this last-ditch attempt at compromise keeps the voyage going on October 10, 1492, and that there are good reasons why even Columbus might be losing heart. But an indication of the type of pact he might have made comes from the admiral’s second voyage, in 1494. He and his men reconnoiter the coast of Cuba until, “fed by frustration and fantasy,” Columbus gives up when he begins to suspect that it is not in fact part of the Asian mainland. He again attempts a contract with his crew. “He called upon the ship’s scrivener,” Fernández-Armesto reports, “to record the oath of almost every man in the fleet that Cuba was a mainland and that no island of such magnitude had ever been known. . . . They further swore that had they navigated farther they would have encountered the Chinese.” If the men break their oath, they face dire consequences: “a fine of ten thousand maravedis and the loss by excision of their tongues.” If they refuse to abide by Columbus’s fantasy, the crew lose their place within this newly constituted imperial order and are cast into mute subalternity.

On October 10 of the first voyage, the fictions validating Columbus’s control are breaking down: he has given his men a false account of the distance traveled and has argued that they have already reached land, but the crew are no longer prepared to
swear agreement. They are an unruly multitude on the verge of overthrowing their master. His skin is only saved when, late the following night, the fleet finally makes landfall. Now the constitutive tension of Empire can be displaced elsewhere. Perhaps others will have better luck imposing the fiction of a contract, the illusion of consent. Or perhaps the slippage between constituent and constituted power will remain an open if unacknowledged wound throughout modernity.
Notes

1 Gramsci, Selections from Prison Notebooks, 12.

2 Quoted. in Hanke, History of Latin American Civilization, 1:125.

3 Kamen, Empire, 97.

4 Quoted. in Williams, The American Indian in Western Legal Thought, 92.

5 Hoffer, Law and People in Colonial America, 56.

6 Kamen, Empire, 97.

7 Quoted. in Kamen, Empire, 97.

8 Beezley et al., “Introduction,” xiii.

9 Las Casas, A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, 33.


11 Seed, Ceremonies of Possession, 88.

12 Cornejo Polar, Escribir en el aire, 40.

13 Seed, Ceremonies of Possession, 88.

14 See Castro, Another Face of Empire.

15 Las Casas, A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, 96.

16 Guha, Dominance without Hegemony, 72.

17 Kamen, Empire, 87.


19 Fernández-Armesto, Columbus, 46.

20 Morison, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, 142.


22 Cummins, The Voyage of Christopher Columbus, 55-56.

24 Quoted. in Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 76; see also Bedini, *Christopher Columbus*, 695.

25 Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 47, 41.

26 Ibid., 42, 43, 47, 49.


30 Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 50.

31 Fuson, *The Log of Christopher Columbus*, 71.


33 Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 51.


36 Ibid., 152-53.
