THE AMERICAN POPULATION BEFORE COLUMBUS

No one knows how many people lived in the Americas in the centuries before Columbus. But scholars and others have spent more than a century and have written many thousands of pages debating the question nevertheless. Interest in this question survives, despite the near impossibility of answering it, because the debate over the pre-Columbian population is closely connected to the much larger debate over the consequences of European settlement of the Western Hemisphere.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Native Americans—in the midst of their many losing battles against the spread of white civilization—spoke often of the great days before Columbus when there were many more people in their tribes. They drew from their own rich tradition of oral history handed down through storytelling from one generation to another. The painter and ethnographer George Catlin, who spent much time among the tribes in the 1830s painting portraits of a race that he feared was "fast passing to extinction," listened to these oral legends and estimated that there had been 16 million Indians in North America before the Europeans came. Most other white Americans who thought about this issue dismissed such claims as preposterous and insisted that the native population could not have been even as large as a million. Indian civilization was far too primitive, they claimed, to have been able to sustain so large a population.

In the early twentieth century, an ethnologist at the Smithsonian Institution, James Mooney, set out to find a method of estimating the early North American population that would be more scientific than the methods of the previous century, which were essentially guesses. He drew from early accounts of soldiers and missionaries in the sixteenth century and in 1928 came up with the implausibly precise figure of 1.15 million natives who lived north of Mexico in the early sixteenth century. That was a larger figure than nineteenth-century writers had suggested, but still much smaller than the Indians themselves claimed. A few years later, the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber used many of Mooney's methods to come up with an estimate of the population of the entire Western Hemisphere—considerably larger than Mooney's, but much lower than Catlin's.

(Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana, Firenze/IKONA, Rome)

He concluded in 1934 that there were 8.4 million people in the Americas in 1492, half in North America and half in the Caribbean and South America. His conclusions remained largely uncontested until the 1960s.

These low early estimates reflected, more than anything else, an assumption that the arrival of the Europeans did not much reduce the native population. Given that assumption, it seemed reasonable to assume that the relatively low numbers of Indians that Europeans encountered in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflected the numbers of natives living in the Americas in earlier centuries as well. A dramatic change in the scholarly approach to the early population came as a result of the discovery by a number of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s that the early tribes had been catastrophically decimated by European plagues not long after the arrival of Columbus—meaning that the numbers Europeans observed even in the late 1500s were already dramatically smaller than the numbers in 1492. Drawing on early work by anthropologists and others who discovered evidence of widespread deaths by disease, historians such as William McNeill in 1976 and Alfred Crosby a decade later produced powerful accounts of the near extinction of some tribes and the dramatic depopulation of others in a pestilential holocaust with few parallels in history. Almost all scholars now accept that much, perhaps most, of the native population was wiped out by disease—smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, and other plagues imported from Europe—before white settlers began serious efforts to count.

The belief that the native population was much bigger in 1492 than it would be a few decades later has helped spur much larger estimates of how many people were in America before Columbus. Henry Dobyns, an anthropologist who was one of the earliest scholars to challenge the early, low estimates, claimed in 1966 that there were between 10 and 12 million people north of Mexico in 1492, and between 90 and 112 million in all of the Americas. He reached those figures by concluding that epidemics had destroyed 95 percent of the pre-Columbian population. He then took the best information on the population after Columbus and multiplied it by 20. No subsequent scholar has made so high a claim, and most historians have concluded that the 95 percent figure of deaths by disease is too high except for a few, relatively isolated areas such as Hispaniola. But most subsequent estimates have been much closer to Dobyns's than to Kroeber's. The geographer William M. Denevan, for example, argued in 1976 that the American population in 1492 was around 55 million and that the population north of Mexico was under 4 million. Those are among the lowest of modern estimates, but still dramatically higher than the nineteenth-century numbers.

The vehemence with which scholars, and at times the larger public, have debated these figures is not just because it is very difficult to determine population size. It is also because the debate over the population is part of the debate over whether the arrival of Columbus—and the millions of Europeans who followed him—was a great advance in the history of civilization (as most Americans believed in 1892 when they joyously celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's voyage) or an unparalleled catastrophe that virtually exterminated a large and flourishing native population (as some Americans and Europeans argued during the far more somber commemoration of the 500th anniversary in 1992). How to balance the many achievements of European civilization in the New World after 1492 against the terrible destruction of native peoples that accompanied it is, in the end, less a historical question, perhaps, than a moral one.

WHY DO HISTORIANS SO OFTEN DIFFER?

There was a time, early in the twentieth century, while the professional study of history was still relatively new, when many historians believed that questions about the past could be answered with the same certainty and precision that questions in other, more scientific fields could be answered. By using precise methods of research and analysis, and by deploying armies of scholars to sift through available records and produce careful, closely argued accounts of the past, it would be possible to create something close to definitive histories that would survive without controversy for many generations. Scholars who believed this were known as "positivists," and they shared the views of such European thinkers as Auguste Comte and Thomas Henry Huxley that real knowledge can only be derived from direct, scientific observation of clear "facts." Historians, therefore, set out to answer questions for which extensive archival or statistical evidence was available.

Although a vigorous debate continues to this day over whether historical research can or should be truly objective, almost no historian any longer accepts the "positivist" claim that history could ever be anything like an exact science. Disagreement about the past is, in fact, at the very heart of the effort to understand history—just as disagreement about the present is at the heart of efforts to understand our own time. Critics of contemporary historical scholarship often denounce the way historians are constantly revising earlier interpretations; some denounce the act of interpretation itself. History, they claim, is "what happened." Historians should "stick to the facts." That scholars almost always find it impossible to do so helps account for the many controversies surrounding the historical profession today.

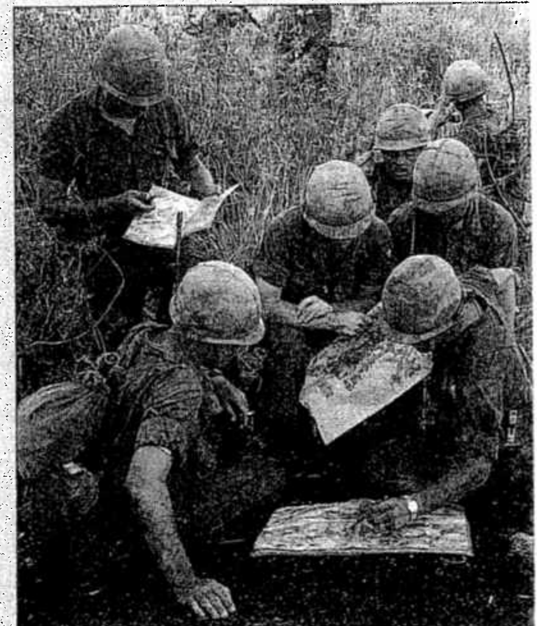
Historians differ with one another both because the "facts" are seldom as straightforward as their critics claim, and because facts by themselves mean almost nothing without an effort to assign meaning to them. There are, of course, some historical "facts" that are not in dispute. Everyone agrees, for example, that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, or that Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860. But many other "facts" are much harder to determine—among them, for example, the question of how large the American population was before the arrival of Columbus, which is discussed later in this chapter. How many slaves resisted slavery? This sounds like a reasonably straightforward question, but it is almost impossible to answer with any certainty—in part because the records of slave resistance are spotty, and in part because the definition of "resistance" is a matter of considerable dispute.

(Library of Congress)

Even when a set of facts is reasonably clear and straightforward, historians disagree—sometimes quite radically—over what they mean. Those disagreements can be the result of political and ideological disagreements. Some of the most vigorous debates in recent decades have been between scholars who believe that economic interests and class divisions are the key to understanding the past, and those committed to other assumptions who believe that ideas and culture are at least as important as material interests. The disagreements can be a result of the particular perspectives that people of different backgrounds bring to the study of the past. Whites and people of color, men and women, people from the American South and people from the North, young people and older people: these and many other points of difference find their way into scholarly disagreements. And debates can be a result as well of differences over methodology—differences, for example, between those who believe that quantitative studies can answer important historical questions and those who believe that other, less precise methods come closer to the truth.

Most of all, perhaps, historical interpretation changes in response to the time in which it is written. Historians may strive to be "objective" in their work, but no one can be entirely free from the assumptions and concerns of the present. In the 1950s, the omnipresent shadow of the Cold War had a profound effect on the way most historians viewed the past and produced much work that seemed to validate the American democratic experience in contrast to the new and dangerous alternatives that seemed to be challenging it at the time. In the 1960s, concerns about racial justice and disillusionment with the Vietnam War altered the way many historians thought. Those events introduced a much more critical tone to scholarship and turned the attention of scholars away from politics and government and toward the study of society and culture.

Many areas of scholarship in the late twentieth century are embroiled in a profound debate over whether there is such a thing as "truth." The world, some scholars argue, is simply a series of "narratives" constructed by people who view life in very different and often highly personal ways. "Truth" does not really exist. Everything is a product of interpretation. Not many historians embrace such radical ideas; most would agree that interpretations, to be of any value, must rest on a solid foundation of observable facts. But historians do recognize that even the most compelling facts are subject to many different interpretations and that the process of understanding the past is a forever continuing—and forever contested—process.



(Jim Pickerell/Black Star)