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The Overthrowing of a Nation

Historical research has shown that the idea of ‘race’ has always carried more meanings than mere physical differences; indeed, physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them. Today scholars in many fields argue that ‘race’ as it is understood in the United States of America was a social mechanism invented during the 18th century to refer to those populations brought together in colonial America: the English and other European settlers [and] the conquered Indian peoples (AAA 1)

European settlers created and used the concept of race in order to further their economic gain and to justify their horrific actions against the indigenous people of North America. The initial concept of “race” was derived from an ancient theorem, the Great Chain of Being, which, implied that God had created a natural hierarchical system of racial categorization (AAA 1). Whites, being “pure” descendants of Adam and Eve, were of course, at the top of this chain. Race classification, which in itself was set up to be a system based in inequality, became a way for Europeans to rationalize the mistreatment of colonized people. This code of beliefs appealed to many white settlers because it offered a complete set of moral standards by which to live since these inequalities were God-given. Disparities were based upon status differences that were typically seen in physical traits such as skin, hair and eye color. “European racial theories were used to justify a set of economic and social practices which, in fact, made the “races” socially unequal” (Amott 17). Racial discrimination inherently affected social, political and economic

status. European settlers considered Native Americans inferior on all levels, which set the precedence for their infamous superiority and rule. White supremacy has played a huge role in the creation and history of the United States. All we have to do is look to the founding fathers and we will see that our country was established on racism and class stratification, which was effectively used by whites to gain power and economic dominance.

European settlers used God and other Christian based justifications as a way and means to acquire and dominate the land and people of North America. Indigenous cultures differed so dramatically from European cultures that upon arrival European settlers were caught between feelings of awe and fear. Settlers did not initially fear natives physically; the fear was more based in social prejudice—the desire to maintain the chain of social status due to an inherent fear of losing power (Parillo 557). European customs and social laws taught that people of lower class were subordinate and inferior; their God-given place was to serve the wealthy. The sense of awe, which Columbus wrote about, came from observing natives’ “naivety” especially with regards to weaponry, their sense of peacefulness, and most of all their incredible generosity. Their awe changed quickly in the face of greed and the image of natives was transformed into a society of savage uncivilized beasts whose culture must be destroyed. “Not able to enslave the Indians, and not able to live with them, the English decided to exterminate them”(Zinn 13). Through complete genocide more than half of the indigenous peoples were eradicated in the name of God (Zinn 1-15). “It became the white man’s burden to conquer and Christianize the land”(Lubrage1). This was the beginning of Manifest Destiny.

Manifest Destiny—the belief that settlers of European descent had a God-given right to North American land (Lubrage 1)— was present in action (the slaughter of thousands of indigenous people for land and gold), long before it became an intellectual doctrine. The “chain”

of racial and class hierarchy had already been established, which made room for this idea to become popular belief amongst settlers and also served as a convenient justification to gain wealth and propriety through land ownership. Contrary to popular belief and historical testimony European settlers did not find a continent “empty” of inhabitants. In fact, pioneers had to first clear the land of inhabitants in order to successfully conquest and spread over the entire continent (Amott 17). “The pioneers looked upon the Indians as little more than obnoxious obstacles in the path of their advancement who had to be cleared away by any means and at all costs. The English colonists rid their settlements of Indians as ruthlessly as they cleared the lands of trees and wild animals” (Novack 27). To say the least, European advancement came at the expense of Indian life (Novack 29).

Europeans’ desire for private property, which they saw as the primary foundation of all “civilized” societies, became the motivation behind the attempted assimilation of Native Americans into white society. The movement of assimilating American Indians is an interesting one because there appears to be a couple very conflicting components to this process. At that time many people still held the belief that there were “no good Indians except dead Indians” (qtd. in Novack 38). Also, “the three decades following the Civil War have been...[considered] the history of aboriginal extermination” (Novack 38). In addition to all that there seems to be another component—the idea that we could erase the history of Indian existence by pushing them out of sight—moving them westward. The latter of these three components would have accomplished two major goals. The first, European settlers could effectively hide from the horrors of their conquests; blocking out their shameful acts by removing the Indians who were a constant reminder. The second would be a more coercive strategy. The displacement of Native Americans could help to support the myth that lands were empty upon arrival and would help in

the concealment of native traditions and customs that could endanger the pervasive ideas about land ownership amongst the ruling class (Novack 28-38). Although these racist ideas were very popular, the tendency, as it still is today, was to sugar coat them with nice sentiments about “civilizing” the savage beasts and how the white’s greed-based actions were actually good planned intentions to help natives with the process of assimilation.

Francis Amasa Walker, the commissioner of Indian affairs during the 1870’s, held the same racist vision of expansion that Thomas Jefferson proclaimed. Natives, who were regarded as domestic subjects, were pushed on to reservations to be monitored by military force. The Naturalization Act of 1790 had excluded all minorities including Native Americans; the intent was to build a homogenous society (Takaki 80). In order to maintain the racial and class hierarchy needed for this ideal to be accomplished there would be a great need to define the borders and parameters of our country. Reservations became the solution to defining these lines of separation in addition to supporting Walker’s belief in “social engineering,” “which was the idea that the government should scientifically manage the affairs and welfare of Indians” (Takaki 232). Under this ideology US government brought to end the signing of treaties. The U.S. government no longer acknowledged Indian tribes as sovereign nations and attempts were made to undermine the power of the tribal leaders. “ To advance the Indians, the white reformers argued, the tribal system had to be destroyed, for it was perpetuating habits of nomadic barbarism,’ and ‘savagery’ (Takaki 235). Under the guise of “saving” Indian culture Walker installed the reservation system that ultimately cleared the way and allowed for the development of the railroad and the “oh so” precious gold mining. Walker continued with his prevarications and explained that the ultimate goal of this was the assimilation of Indians (Takaki 232-233).

Another group of land hungry white reformers who called themselves “friends” of the red man had a different perspective on how to best divide and assimilate native peoples. This stance led to the disbanding of reservations and the installation of the General Allotment Act also known as the Dawes Act of 1887. Congressman Henry Dawes believed that “...the key to civilizing Indians was to convert them into individual landowners” (Takaki 235). Without the Indians consent the federal government divided up reservation lands into 160-acre allotments to be partitioned out to individual heads of families. These lands would be protected under a 25-year trust set up by the government designed specifically to fend off land grabbers. Citizenship was to be granted as soon as the Indian received his land allotment. Individual land ownership was the ultimate proof of civilization.

The federal government was authorized to sell ‘surplus’ reservation land—land that remained after allotment— to white settlers in 160-acre tracts. Such transactions required tribal consent, and money derived from the sales would be held in trust for the Indians to be used for their ‘education and civilization.’
(Takaki 234)

The land allotment system proved to be detrimental to Native Americans. Despite the governments’ 25-year trust, lands were swindled out of the hands of Indians at little or no cost. Native Americans were not only loosing their land and their people they were experiencing cultural genocide (Takaki 234-235).

The Indian Peace Commission was responsible not only for putting an end to tribal government; they had a much larger goal—the extermination of Indian culture. Boarding schools were set up for this purpose. Even though historical references attempt to make these boarding schools look like positive resources for Indians there is a serious neglect and oversight behind the motivation of these institutions. Colonel Henry Pratt, the man who opened Carlisle,

which was the first of these boarding schools, was known for his dictum “kill the Indian; save the man” (Nabokov 405). These schools were not at all interested in the preservation of Indian culture. In fact Indian culture was still deemed savage and inappropriate for civilization. The schools followed the belief of “...evolutionism: simply put, the idea that human cultures evolve through predetermined stages, from ‘savagery’ to ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilization.’ According to this theory, it was both natural and desirable for ‘lower’ cultures to die out and be replaced by ‘higher’ cultures—and for ‘lower’ languages to be replaced by ‘higher’ languages” (Crawford 5). There was a strong emphasis placed on language within these schools. Native American children were often severely punished and abused for speaking their native dialect. The purpose behind this was that no part of Indian culture was to remain a part of the modern world, especially the language.

Acculturation of natives was dependant on the eradication of their language. In “What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language,” Joshua Fishman gives a comprehensive explanation regarding the motivation for language removal in the boarding schools.

The most important relationship between language and culture... is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. The culture...[can] not be expressed and handed on in any other way.

What would be left? (3)

Ultimately when you lose a language you lose the culture and that was the BIA’s intention. Assimilation in this fashion was looked upon as less costly and more humane than military action. Through boarding schools, Indian children were supposed to learn English along with other types of intellectual academia. The BIA’s plan was to have these children re-enter their

communities and teach their tribes to be “civilized.” However, this rarely worked. Most often members of their tribe spurned the returning children or they just went back to the old ways of their community (Crawford 6). Because the assimilation process was proving to be unsuccessful many educators pushed for vocational training (Hoxie 220-221). “Estelle Reel, who served as Superintendent of Indian Education from 1898 to 1910, was a strong advocate of this curriculum, which gave primary importance to learning manual skills. No amount of book learning, she felt, could result in economic independence for Indian people” (Marr 4). On the contrary, limiting the curriculum to vocational training solidified racial inequalities and kept the social hierarchy in place.

To this day you will find that many vocational training programs and schools are in lower income minority neighborhoods and that wealthy predominantly white neighborhoods promote education through a more academic curriculum. The children of poorer people do not get the same chance for success. These kids are “...locked into bottom-level... track[s]...” (Kozel 119) are being institutionalized as early as kindergarten (Colombo 236). They are being prepared for jail and prison. They are not learning skills to help them succeed in higher levels of education or even to enter the work field. It’s no mystery why this societies socioeconomic structure has maintained white dominance.

The ‘racial’ worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth, The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans [and] Native Americans.... Given what we know about the capacity of normal humans to achieve and function within any culture, we conclude that present-day inequalities between so-

called 'racial' groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances. (AAA 3)

The Capitalist rulers of our society understand that giving everyone a fair chance would mean that they would lose. Capitalism is based on private or corporate ownership, which implies the existence of inequality. By creating the American dream the moneyed population can maintain their social status without much interference. Every American wants to achieve the Dream—that America is the land of equal opportunity where everybody can achieve success if they work hard enough. The problem is, can minorities ever work hard enough to reach the same success and level of power that the wealthy white have had since the beginning of the United States? I don't think so. In order for our societies racial and class structure to change there must be an internal dismantling of governmental and corporate systems. The infrastructure as we know it must be abolished and we will need to pick and choose the things we wish to bring into the new society and which things to leave behind. It is my hope that if this kind of change does happen that we remember the ancestors of our land and choose to carry some of their traditions and peaceful ways of life into our new world.

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