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American Indians, American Dreams, and the Meaning of Success

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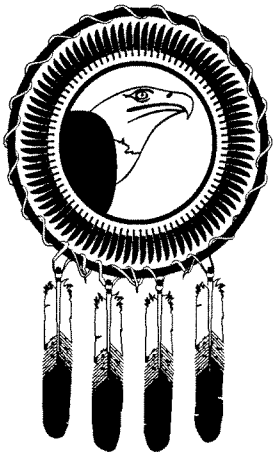

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On February 25 of this year the United States Supreme Court handed down a decision in the case of California, et al. v. the Cabezon Band of Mission Indians, et al. The decision had to do with bingo. It involved the attempt by the State of California and the County of Riverside to regulate or shut down bingo games set up by the Cabezon and Morongo Bands of Indians.

Bingo has become a major source of income on a number of Indian reservations. This income comes not from winnings, but from the profits that tribes make as operators of high stakes bingo operations. These operations have been challenged by the states, which have jurisdiction over gaming within their borders. California gaming laws, for example, place a cap of $250 per pot on all bingo games, require that bingo profits be used for charitable purposes only, and that those who run the games receive no pay for their work. Indian bingo, in contrast, is typically a high stakes game (pots may reach $100,000 or more); profits go to the operators, and employees are paid. The vast majority of players in these games are non-Indians. Indian bingo games in Oklahoma, for example, draw high-rollers from Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and even Texas to take advantage of what has become a big-time gambling operation.

Hence the conflict in court: are Indian tribes subject to state gaming regulations? In its February decision, the Supreme Court found in the Indians' favor, upholding the right of tribes to regulate gaming in Indian country, free from the interference of

state and local governments. Thanks to the court, Californians may continue to test their luck and pocket big bucks at the gaming tables of Morongo and Cabezon.

What does all this have to do with the American Dream? In an indirect way, quite a lot.

Indians and the American Dream

There is something both predictable and ironic about the citizens of California looking to Indian bingo as a vehicle by which they can achieve one version of the American Dream: figuratively speaking, a grand roll of the dice leading to the big bonanza. It is predictable in that Native Americans, in California and elsewhere, have paid a good deal of blood and treasure in the past on behalf of the dreams of other Americans. But it is ironic in that the tables now, in a sense, are turned. With bingo, Indians again hold the key to someone's success, but this time it is the Indians who stand to win the most.

Importantly, their winnings have to do with more than money. The California case is a milestone on the path toward another American dream, this one more classically Indian. It is a dream of community survival and collective political power, and it is an American dream quite different from the popular vision of individual success.

My purpose here is not to comment on how the American Dream has been realized or not realized among the first Americans. That Indians today, taken as a single population, remain among the poorest of the poor in the land of opportunity is a widely known

fact, and needs no further comment here. Nor can I claim to speak for Native Americans, or to be expert on what they think about the American Dream or anything else. But as a student of Indian-white relations and of Indian political action, I have some observations on the relationship between Indians as collective actors and the American Dream as an object of action.

But first, what is this Dream we are talking about? It has changed over the years and, like all powerful symbols, it surely means different things to different people. But at heart, it seems to me, it has included two things, a specification of both ends and means. On the one hand it is a dream of individual freedom and attendant economic success. On the other hand, that success is to be achieved in a particular way, through neither handouts nor special dispensations but via individual work. The image is of a nation of strivers, each making his or her way up an essentially accessible ladder of achievement through sweat and individual effort.

This may in fact be part of the objection to Indian bingo: Indians are going to make a killing with relatively little effort. Clearly the states have both an economic and a political interest in controlling Indian bingo, but their actions and the reluctance of the federal government to endorse Indian bingo as a development strategy may have a moral component as well. Certainly a similar argument was used in the 1880s to keep lands with major natural resource potential out of Indian hands: we wouldn't want them getting rich without having to work for it (Hagan 1976).

But whatever its precise form, this Dream has long been held out to Indians as the carrot which briefly precedes the stick, the reason why they should give up tribal life and massive bodies of land and enter the American mainstream: individual economic success was assumed to be a common goal. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, for example, when the fledgling United States found itself unable to cope with violent Indian resistance to American expansion on the northwestern frontier, Henry Knox, Secretary of War, urged that the government negotiate with the Indian nations, offering them, in return for their lands, the gift of American civilization, the dream of economic and social progress and individual freedom (Horsman 1967). Knox was only the first of a series of policy-makers and others who followed a similar path. In the 1880s the allotment policy--a major effort to end tribal land-holding and break up the remaining Indian land base--was justified as an attempt to create among Indians, as one policy-maker put it, "individuality, responsibility, and a desire to accumulate property" (Prucha 1973, p. 89). In the 1950s the federal government presented its so-called "termination" policy --an attempt to dismantle the reservation system and tribal structures--as the Indian key to the American Dream, an effort to provide Indians the opportunities for individual advancement which other Americans enjoyed. And in the 1980s citizens' groups such as Wisconsin's Equal Rights for Everyone have justified their assault on Indian treaty rights as an effort to set Indians free of government wardship and tribal bonds, and facilitate their participation in the great American dream of individual success.

Such offers--or impositions--assumed that individual economic success, the heart of the American Dream, was a common goal. But while this Dream may be a generalized expression of the ambitions of many persons in this society, it substantially misses the ambitions of many Native Americans. Many Indians are not full-fledged participants in American life, and one reason is that they do not necessarily share the Dream itself, or if they do, it is in some sense a subsidiary dream, ancillary to a larger set of concerns.[1] Indeed, the interesting thing is not that Indians have rejected this particular carrot; many have embraced it. But it has seldom been the focal point of Indian relations with the larger society.

The American Dream and Indian Collective Action

This is readily apparent in Indian collective action, and in particular in two areas: in the activist Indian politics which has emerged most clearly in the last three decades, and in the major economic development effort undertaken in the last two decades by a number of Indian nations.

The ethnic politics of the 1960s and 1970s was a largely distributional politics. The object was access to rewards, an opportunity to freely participate in the competition for jobs,

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1. I say many Indians because this paper, like most writing about Indian-White relations, runs the risk of overgeneralization. The Native American population is extraordinarily diverse, culturally, locationally, occupationally, politically. Every attempt, such as this one, to generalize about Indians and the American Dream, or Indians and anything else, risks doing violence to a complex Indian reality. What I have to say is put in general terms but speaks to only part of a complicated topic, and in particular to the reservation-based portion of the Indian population, although even there the diversity of populations and experience remains immense.

wealth, status, power in this society, or simply to obtain more of those goods.

Certainly Native Americans, like other Americans, have shared these concerns. Given the the extraordinary degree of poverty, unemployment, and related social pathologies found in many Indian communities, they had to. But as one looks back over the increasingly activist Indian politics of the post-War years, what is striking is the persistent salience of goals which have little to do directly with the common American vision of success. Again and again three intimately related concerns emerge: tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, land. All have to do fundamentally with the maintenance and protection of peoplehood, of community. This politics, in other words, has been concerned less with access to the larger society, or with equality of opportunity, than with those phenomena which distinctively separate Indian nations from other groups in American life. It has been a politics of national survival (for some discussion of the differences in Black and Indian agendas, see Deloria 1969, pp. 173-83).

Survival in this case, however, is not simply a question of economics. There is more at stake here. And this is all the more evident when we consider economic development. In the last fifteen years or so reservation economic development has become the centerpiece of Indian policy and of Indian action. Furthermore, as a consequence of recent policy moves toward Indian self-determination and of the substantial value of the natural resources found on some reservations, the development opportunity for many tribes has been greater than ever before. As a result, many tribes

are engaged in development programs of various kinds, or are in the process of organizing such programs.

The agendas of most of these tribes have two aspects. The first, simply put, is to construct viable economies which provide an adequate standard of living for reservation populations. Added to this objective is a second: to construct those economies while at the same time maintaining a maximum degree of political autonomy or sovereignty and as much social or cultural continuity as possible. What this means is that most reservation groups consciously or unconsciously place important sociopolitical constraints on the development process. Few Indian groups are willing to knowingly sacrifice political autonomy or cultural integrity for economic gains. In other words, many--perhaps most--Indian groups have been and remain committed to improving the material standard of living of their peoples, but only if such improvement does not come at the expense of group identity, political autonomy, and freedom of cultural choice.

This has been apparent, for example, in the decision by the Northern Cheyennes in the late 1970s to place moratorium on coal development on their reservation (Sootkis and Straus 1981). The last administration of the Navajo Tribe, no longer in office, deemphasized certain development plans not so much out of concern for inadequate economic payoffs--although these often have been at issue--as out of concern with the political and cultural consequences of rapid development. Other tribes have refused to allow mining on certain resource-rich lands considered sacred, while still others have opposed some development projects out of a

continuing concern with the issue of who will control the pace and direction of development (for some discussion and references, see Cornell 1984).

Indian development success, then, cannot be measured simply in terms of increases in per capita incomes or jobs. The bottom line is the success of the community, and this is neither purely economic nor simply the aggregation of the successes of individual community members.

In other parts of the world, and particularly in the Third World, such a two-part agenda would hardly seem exceptional. But in the U.S. it is unusual, and flies in the face of the idealized image of the lone individual, breaking free of group distinctions of various kinds, making his or her fortune as a member of a more or less unified, if diverse, society. Against this it posits the preservation of the group as the ultimate criterion against which development, like politics, is to be measured.

The Indian Agenda

All of which suggests three things. First, where the American Dream is a dream of individual achievement and success, Native Americans have tended to think in collective terms. This extends even to individual economic behavior. In many tribes the emphasis in individual economic behavior is not on accumulation but on sharing. Some retain what amount almost to normative prohibitions against the accumulation of wealth. Levelling mechanisms such as the potlatch or the giveaway, or simply community norms which encourage those who have to give to those who have not, lead to the

more or less continuous redistribution of goods. As Pueblo anthropologist Al Ortiz points out (1978, p. 151), "This raises all kinds of hell with the American ethic."

Second, where success in the American Dream is--or at least has become--largely economic, Native Americans, precisely because of this collective orientation, have a different and more complex notion of success, one in which the maintenance of peoplehood--in political and cultural as well as economic terms--is the fundamental issue.

And third, there is some skepticism in Indian communities about the institutional structure of American life, and especially the orientation to market criteria and to a highly individualized and secular politics. These institutional orientations are accepted for some purposes, but viewed as suspect for others, in particular for the preservation of community.

There is, of course, as in all things Indian, significant variation in the pattern I am describing. Some of that variation is a consequence of the uneven pattern of change in Indian societies; some is a consequence of indigenous cultural patterns of long standing. The Crows and Northern Cheyennes offer an example of the latter. Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations abut each other in eastern Montana. Both overlie large deposits of strip-minable coal worth a very great deal of money. But these tribes have chosen rather different development strategies: the Crows have enthusiastically pursued rapid coal development; the Cheyennes at first rejected coal development altogether, and have only reluctantly gone along with it. The reasons for these different

responses to a common economic opportunity are complex, but among them is a cultural difference. Traditional Crow culture awards honor and status to individual achievement; individual demonstrations of skill and power were keys to success in Crow society. Traditional Cheyenne culture, to a greater extent than Crow, subordinates individual achievement to community welfare. The survival of the Cheyennes as a distinct people remains the core concern of Cheyenne society; even today, although in different and somewhat attenuated ways, individual status is gained to the extent that the individual contributes to the welfare of the larger community. Duane Champagne, a Chippewa sociologist, has suggested that Crows pursue coal development in part because it offers opportunities for individual achievement in the economic arena. Northern Cheyennes are far more ambivalent because they fear the possible consequences of rapid development for political and cultural survival (Champagne, n.d.). Both are affirming identities which are in some sense "traditional," but they do so in different ways.

Whatever the specific case, however, the overall pattern separates Native Americans from most other American ethnic populations. This is not to say that community-oriented concerns have not been important to other groups. Community survival often has been the objective of group mobilization in American politics. But the most common political concerns of non-Indians have been matters of access and distribution. The object, for the most part, has been full participation in the economic and political mainstream, an attempt to reduce the extent to which group

boundaries shape individual fortunes. Only since the Second World War, with massive urbanization, have large numbers of Indians begun to leave the institutional context of tribe and the embrace of tribal community to pursue this more common conception of the American Dream.[2]

Explaining the Difference: Labor vs. Land

Part of the sociological agenda should be to account for such differences among the various groups in American life. The differences themselves are not intuitively obvious. Indeed, as far as Blacks and Indians are concerned, twe might plausibly expect the opposite. Blacks have been systematically excluded from much of American life; Indians often have been "invited," so to speak, into it. A persistent aspect of Indian-white relations has been its assimilationist orientation: the dominant-group effort to transform Indians into whites. It is an indicator of the different societal valuations of the two groups, and the different consequences of being associated with one or the other, that white Americans with Indian ancestry generally are proud to claim it; those with Black ancestry generally have tried to hide it. One might plausibly expect, therefore, that Indians would be participant in, and Blacks resistant to, the American Dream. Yet for the most part this has not been so.

The key, I think, lies in the historical pattern of linkages between each group--Indians, Blacks, many European migrants--and the

2. Not all Indians who move to the cities necessarily leave either one. Many either return to tribe, perhaps repeatedly; others bring it with them in urban extensions of the tribal community.

emergent society of the United States. The point is not coerced vs. voluntary entry, or Blauner's (1972) colonized vs. immigrant minorities. It has to do with the difference between intergroup relations which are individually structured and those which are communally structured. And this difference in turn has to do with the economic basis of intergroup relations.

At the heart of those relations, for both Blacks and European migrants, was labor. Europeans chose to come to the United States; Blacks were forced to come. But in each case what was of interest to the larger society was their labor power. Each, ultimately, was integrated into the labor market, and integrated as individuals, not, for the most part, as solidary groups. Certainly this was true of Europeans. With the exception of early religious refugees and later political ones, European migrants typically came to the United States as individuals, seeking opportunities for individual advancement, and competing as individuals in urban labor markets. Theirs was a politics of access, oriented toward entry into the society around them.

But it was true also in the Black case, where distinct ethnic populations, carried from Africa, were forcibly broken up by the forced labor market of slavery, which dealt with them as individual pieces of property. To be sure, in both cases--European and Black--new communities emerged in the United States--indeed, were created here--but in the context of an attempt to escape invidious group distinctions which limited individual freedom and achievement, an attempt to gain on an equal footing what other Americans already had achieved. Both groups engaged in institution-building, and continue

to do so, but those institutions, with some important exceptions, ultimately were directed toward the advancement, for the most part, of individual members of the group. Those which were not so directed--for example the Black nationalist institutions and more recent Black separatism--generally emerged in response to the barriers individual group members faced in their own attempts to accomplish what the larger society appeared to promise but forever withheld.

At the heart of Indian-white relations, on the other hand, was land. Excepting only the earliest period of those relations--the fur trade--what has been of interest to the larger society has been not Indians themselves but the lands and resources they have controlled.[3] Until recently Indians have had relatively little to do with urban labor markets or any others, nor have those markets, historically, shown much interest in them. Instead Indians were removed as groups from lands desired by non-Indians to less desirable lands. On those lands, called reservations, and despite assimilationist policies, both collective identity and significant aspects of indigenous institutions and culture survived.

Furthermore, that process of removal involved the signing of treaties between the United States and sovereign nations, treaties which established a highly anomalous set of rights or statuses for Indians, anomalous insofar as most rights in the American political system are vested not in groups but in individuals.

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3. South of the Rio Grande, of course, the situation was quite different. In Mexico and much of Central and South America Indian labor was crucial to the European economic enterprise.

And this situation has been self-reinforcing. In circumstances which helped to sustain Indian groups which themselves pre-dated the society of which they were now a part, Indian agendas and concerns also survived, and these in turn have shaped Indian action.

What we have, then, is one set of cases--Black and European--in which groups have been formed in a labor-oriented history of intergroup relations, and have directed much of their effort toward individual advancement. In the other case--Native Americans--we have pre-existing groups which are sustained in one form or another by a land-oriented history of intergroup relations, and which have directed most of their effort toward group survival. The processes and the dreams are different.

Indian Dreams and Indian Power

For the Indian future, perhaps this is the point. Dreams are a form of power. I mean this not simply in the anthropological sense that in many Native American cultures the dreams of individuals were--and in some cases remain--sources of individual and community power, but in the Lukesian sense that one aspect of power is the freedom and capacity to imagine alternative futures, to construct distinctive accounts or conceptions of the world we experience (Lukes 1974).

In this sense Indians have always had power: the capacity and the cultural resources with which to articulate alternative conceptions of reality and alternative visions of the future. The conflict between Indian and European has always been in part

ideological, a conflict between very different conceptions of how the world works, of appropriate relationships within it, and of the ends toward which human effort should be expended.

What makes recent years particularly interesting, however, is that Indians have achieved another kind of power as well. Since the mid-1970s, as a consequence largely of Indian political action, the organizing principle of Indian policy has been "self-determination," the idea that tribes themselves should make most of the decisions which substantially affect their communities and fortunes. This policy has been supported by a series of legislative acts and court decisions which have significantly expanded Indian governmental power. The California bingo decision is a case in point: a recognition of the right and power of Indian nations to control--and to transform if they wish--their own communities.

The issue this raises for Native Americans is this: given power at last, what dreams will they pursue? The issue it raises for the society at large is somewhat different: not can the American Dream find room within it for all those who wish to play a part, but can America tolerate within its midst those who have a radically different dream, and grant them the freedom to pursue it?

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