



THE NEW GENOCIDE

by Ward Churchill

"THE WHITE MAN MADE US MANY PROMISES, BUT HE KEPT ONLY ONE. HE PROMISED TO TAKE OUR LAND, AND HE TOOK IT."

— RED CLOUD, 1882

Within the rapidly proliferating industrial wasteland of the late twentieth century, the traditional Native American relationship to the environment has become the stuff of pop mythology. One need only tune in to any broadcast television network to get the picture. Here, we find "public service announcements" featuring the maudlin spectacle of an aging Indian, clad in beads and buckskins, breaching his birchbark canoe at the bank of a well-polluted river. This Hiawatha-like figure is then made to stroll along the shore amidst a swirl of windblown litter, picking his way carefully among mounds of rusting junk and backdropped by belching factory chimneys. He concludes his walk through the modern world with the emission of a tragic tear, induced by the panorama of rampant ecological devastation surrounding him.

The message undergirding this trite bit of Americana is clear enough: the common good requires that we "clean up our act" before the habitat becomes literally uninhabitable. The use of an archaic Indian image, an apparition from "the nation's past" conveying such an idea is intended not only to stir the country's sense of survival, but to strum the strings of collective guilt as well; having slaughtered the native population as a means to expropriate its landbase, the new North Americans now have a mystic obligation to "make things right" by preserving and protecting that which was stolen. As the noted Sioux author, Vine Deloria, Jr., long ago observed, such metaphors convey a distinct sense of atonement in Christianesque contexts such as the contemporary United States.

In any event, it is a theme which plays well in Peoria, as is evidenced by the substantial sales recorded by such epics of "Indian" kitsch as T. C. McLuhan's "Touch the Earth" and Thomas Mail's "Mystic Warriors of the Plains." Other manifestations of this shallow stereotype of Indian-as-extinct-but-innate-eco-warrior include everything from the "western" genre of topical filmmaking to hordes of Cub Scouts ("Order of the Arrow") annually performing imitation Indian rituals before busying themselves with projects such as picking up roadside tincans and bottles, planting saplings along expressways, and so on.

With such figurative homage to "the heritage of our Indian past" duly paid, the great bulk of socially conscious America rests on its laurels, feeling inappropriately good about itself and its future as it essentially continues with business as usual. This conveniently tidy mental construction effectively blinds "mainstream" society to several rather important realities, even as it congratulates itself by enjoying the benefits of a slightly (even superficially) more sanitary environment than it might reasonably have expected to be available to it in, say, 1960. Among these are:

- The fundamental, rather than mythological nature and requirements of the American Indian worldview which allowed ecologically sound occupancy of the hemisphere for many thousands of years prior to the coming of the European. This is as contrasted to the Europe-derived system which has generated environmental crisis on the same land, and over a span of barely two hundred years.

- The fact that, unlike the carrier pigeon, the Indian still exists and, in many cases, remains quite capable of articulating and practicing the traditional worldview. Although s/he is not — and never was — recognizable via the image projected by Iron Eyes Cody in television commercials, the Indian still retains aboriginal and treaty-guaranteed title to much of North America's land and resources. Hence, functioning models of Indian interaction with the natural world should stand today as adaptable examples of ecological alternatives available to all.

- That a goodly portion of the resources and consequent wealth by which America today maintains its style of living and attempts a technological solution to the ecologically catastrophic effects that style has spawned continue to be simply taken from rightful Indian owners. As in the nineteenth century, both the fact and methods employed in this theft continue to have the direct impacts upon Indian people and their environments.

- The fact that many of the gains achieved in terms of alleviating the worst aspects of industrially-related pollution across mainstream America during the past quarter of a century must be attributed, not to elimination of the problem, but to displacement of some of the most objectionable forms of production onto "remote" Indian land. This, of course, has the effect of hiding (temporarily, at least) rather than resolving many of the inherent issues of advanced industrialization, while imposing a number of its worst consequences upon those who have tended to be the most philosophically and practically resistant to it.

The purpose of this article is, ever so briefly and imperfectly, to strip away the blind-

ers, to replace the myth of the "noble savage" with the fact of a basis for an ecological alternative within the traditional Indian worldview, to demonstrate how the contemporary actualization of this perspective is prevented, and to provide examples of the results of such prevention. This is intended, not merely as an exercise in information sharing or an effort to instill guilt in non-Indians, but in the sense into which Winona LaDuke, an Anishinabe activist, has put it: "They sometimes call us 'the First Americans'. I've often wondered what that means, and the only thing I've come up with is that Indians are always the first to feel the sharp edge of the stick: the first to suffer biological and chemical warfare at the hands of the U.S. government, the first to lose their land to big business, the first to lose their legal and human rights 'in the national interest', the first to be laid off from any jobs they manage to find, the first to be cut from the social services budget every year. Now we are the first to be slated for sacrifice as whole peoples on the altar of continued industrial growth. But we are never the last to suffer what we first experience, and I think that's something everybody might think about. Non-Indians will be next."

LaDuke concluded with the observation that "What happens to Indians eventually happens to everyone else, sooner or later, one way or another. And if you don't want to believe me, go ask a farmer about his land these days. Go ask somebody from Love Canal or Three Mile Island about their health. Go ask an Appalachian miner about his job and the benefits of transient, extractive industries. Indians are only the guinea pigs in this whole thing, so I'm not asking for any favors when I tell you to wake up and help stop what's happening to us. You save the guinea pig, you ultimately save yourselves."

The notion underlying both popular and academic usages of the terms "primitive", "savage" and the like in defining precontact Native American existence has always been that the people thus described lived lives lacking almost all vestiges of social and cultural attainment. The general conception is that they wandered perpetually in scattered bands, grubbing out a marginal subsistence from hunting and gathering, never developing "serious" apprehensions of art, science, mathematics, governance, and so on. Aside from stumbling upon the utilization of furs and hides for clothing, the manufacture of crude stone implements, fire and domestication of the dog, there is little in this view to distinguish Indians from the higher orders of mammalian life surrounding them throughout the duration of "the American wilderness." (1)