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Indigenous Americans Became Red: Racism and Exploitation of Native Americans

For most of human existence the Americas were unoccupied by people. Modern man, homo sapiens, evolved in Africa and about 60,000 years ago began diffusing throughout the contiguous continents, Africa, Europe, Asia. The amount of water captured by glaciers during the last Ice Age lowered the sea level and a land bridge referred to as Beringia emerged in the Bearing Straight between Siberia to Alaska. Some East Asians moved on to Beringia about 15,000 years ago and when they did, they changed continents. These were the first Americans. (Meltzer 2021, p.1).

Recent DNA studies have revealed the Asians that populating the Americas late in the Ice Age came in waves of admixtures from a variety of locations and ethnic, cultural groups. (Greshko 2018; Skoglund and Reich 2016). Over many thousand years, migrations involving different inter-related populations expanded across the frigid Arctic and filled the continents down to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. Original social organization was families, which expanded to clans and clans eventually joined together into tribes, though some remained in a smaller relationship called a "band." Weaving and pottery were developed and some animals were domesticated, including dogs and turkeys, plus llamas in the Andes. Agriculture was first developed about 9,000 years ago, though it took thousands of years to become widespread. With agriculture the populations grew larger, some societies became more complex and civilizations emerged.

The colossal heads and large pyramids constricted by the Olmec culture demonstrated a society with political centralization, class distinctions and cities existed beginning in about 1500 B.C. Bordering the Olmecs were the Mayans, whose settlements date from 1800 B.C. They

developed a form of writing, understood astronomy well enough to develop a 365-day calendar as well as a "Long Count Calendar" that extended 5,000 years, and did mathematics. Also in Mesoamerican culture was in the Valley of Mexico, Teotihuacán. This massive city of nine square miles at one point included 150 - 200, 000 people was ruled by a variety of people. In the early 13th century, the Aztecs arose in central Mexico and eventually took control of Teotihuacán. This warrior tribe conquered or came to rule over 500 small states in Mesoamerica and controlled up to five or six million people (Nichols and Evans 2009). In South America, the Inca who came to power in 1471 expanded their rule to a massive empire including parts of what are now Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina. 40,000 Incas controlled an immense empire that extended 3,400 miles south to north in the Andes, with ten million subjects who spoke over 30 different languages (Cartwright 2014). These master masons and craftsmen built canals, fortresses and 25,000 miles of roads, along with thousands of storehouses with food and coca for times of crop failure (Bloch 2015).

Civilization also developed in what is now the United States. The first urban center was the Cahokia Mounds where the Mississippian culture built and lived in a series earthen mounds, one being ten-stories tall and requiring more than 22 million cubic feet of soil to construct. By 1200 A.D. it was the largest Indian community to ever exist in what is now the United States (Iseminger 1977, p.117).

On October 12, 1492, Columbus arrived in the Bahamas, assuming he was in Asia and "discovered America," which also meant indigenous Americans discovered the existence of Europe. An interaction between the continents followed soon after that is often referred to as the "Columbian Exchange." The estimated population when Columbus arrived is put it at 12 million in Mexico and four million in what is now the United States and Canada by historian Daniel

Boorstin (and Kelley 1989, p.8). *U.S. News and World Report* wrote, "Give or take several million, the Western Hemisphere in 1492 had as many people as Europe." (Lord and Burke 1991, p.22)

Europeans reaching America introduced a new concept that still haunts the world today and had not existed previously, the idea of race (Hall 2000, p.18). Isabel Wilkerson states in her book *Caste* (2020), "It was in the making of the New World that Europeans became white, Africans black, and everyone else yellow, red, or brown." (p.53)

Most early chroniclers described America's natives as olive, tawny, or brown, occasionally russet or yellow. The earliest mention of "red skins" was a reference to Indians adorned with red paint on the war path (Berger 2009, p.611). During much of the colonial era it was believed that Indians were "born white," as was declared by Captain John Smith, head of the first English colony, Virginia (Vaughan 1982, p.925). They took on other colors since many went naked and were constantly exposed to sun, put ointments on their skin that stained it, were burned in ceremonies involving spending time in smokehouses and other external factors. Early Spanish settlers noted Indians had straight black hair, darker skin, trimmer bodies, and the men had very little beards. This was frequently attributed to diet. Climate was also asserted be the cause of races, as in John Davies' 1599 "This World's Sun": "It "Makes the More [Moor] black, & th' European white, Th' American tawny, and th' East-Indian red" (Vaughan, p.922).

In the century following Columbus, the indigenous people of America were commonly referred to by European settlers as "Indians," often "West Indians" to differentiate them from residents of India. Other frequently used terms were "savages," "barbarians," "heathens," "wild people," "brutish people." The name "Americans" soon became reserved for European immigrants and their descendants.

The results of the Columbian Exchange were tragic for America's indigenous people. Before Europeans arrived, Americans suffered no measles, no influenza, no smallpox, no chickenpox, no cholera, no malaria, no typhoid, no diphtheria, no scarlet fever, no whooping cough, no plague. It is estimated in the 150 years following Columbus with European colonization these diseases eliminated between 80-95% of the Native American population (Nunn and Qian 2010. p.165). At the time, some saw this as God's will. One was John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company, who wrote to a friend in England soon after his 1630 arrival (Pearce 1952), "For the natives, they are all neere dead of small Poxe, so the Lord hath cleared our tittle to what we possess."(p.51)

Europeans long claimed title to other peoples' land with two justifications, and these threads were bonded and strengthened by racism and white superiority. First was religion, arguing they were bringing the gift of Christianity to those doomed to hell. With the "Age of Discovery" and European hopes to find an all water route to Asia, Pope Nicholas V issued Portuguese King Alphonso the Papal Bull, *Dum Divaras*, in 1452. It was based on scriptural authority from the book of Matthew 28: 29: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you and, lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world." The year after Columbus first reached the Bahamas, Pope Alexander VI issued a Papal Bull assigning to Spain "a just title" to the Americas for the same reason. Portugal and Spain first divided the non-Christian world, then England and others followed, also justifying their colonization on spreading Christianity and saving heathens (Nussbaum 1952, p.678).

A second justification was bringing civilization to barbarians. *Mayflower* passenger Robert Cushman commented on this: "They are few and do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes

and wild beasts. They are not industrious, neither have [they] art, science, skill or faculty to use either the land or the commodities” (Madley 2015, p. 99). It was argued by John Locke who asked in his famous *Two Treatises* of 1689 whether a thousand acres of "uncultivated waste of America" yielded the "wretched inhabitants" as many conveniences, "as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire."(Ch. 5, § 37). He contended it would only be through labor and reason that the American Indian could be converted to civilized man. Locke's arguments became a philosophical justification for the usurpation of Indian land in colonial times.

There were colonies founded by Christian religious groups and in the early 1700s an estimated 75-80% of the colonial population attended church (Library of Congress, 1998). 13 English colonies lined the Atlantic coast of North America, with Spanish colonies to the south and New France to the north and farther west. Indian slavery existed in all 13 colonies at the time of declaring independence as well as in New France and the Spanish New World.

Early on, this brought attention to a theological debate first formally presented in Isaac La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae*, published in English as *Men Before Adam* in 1656. Both sides of the debate were consoling to colonists, as they offered religious justification for superiority of whites to Blacks and Indians and their exploitation in a debate would carry on to the present. The traditional view, monogenism, contends all humans descended from a common single ancestor, Adam. It comes from the Book of Genesis 2-4 and the story of two original people on earth, Adam and Eve and that all people derived from this original couple. Genesis 5 describes Adam and Eve's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who survived the Great Flood and all humans were their progenies.

To explain the racial differences among red, white, and black Americans, many monogenesisists argued that God had separated Caucasians, Indians, and Africans by altering the

color of Noah's sons Ham and Japheth. Noah was tawny or red. Shem took his color and was the founder of the "red race." God transformed Ham while he was in the womb and he was born black, while Japheth emerged white. Following the Great Flood, some of Shem's red descendants crossed the land bridge to the New World, Ham's descendants went to Africa, the descendants of Japheth went to populate Europe. The monogenesisist belief of the time was Noah cursed Ham and his descendants, and blessed Shem and Japheth. Shem was commission to preach God's words and the Jews flourished until they rejected Christ. Then the descendants of Japheth took up the mission after Christ's death, and Caucasians became the bearers of God's truth (McLoughlin and Conser, 1989, pp.250-251).

This interpretation worked well for Europeans and white colonists, but La Peyrère had been bothered by contradictions in the Bible. One that upset him was the story of Cain. In Genesis 4 there were four people in the world, Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Able. When Cain killed Able, God put a mark on his head so that nobody would injure him for his crime. Then Cain went off and got married, so there must have been people from a second creation somewhere was La Peyrère's conclusion. He proposed what came to be called polygenism, which held that there had been more than one "Adam," or person from whom the modern world's population had descended. By contending Blacks and Indians were not descendants of the same Adam as white people, polygenesis helped some white Americans to overcome their guilt about slavery and the extermination of Indians.

This theory fell out of favor for a time but was revived in America in the early 19th century when polygenesis and racism merged, claiming Blacks and American Indians were not the descendants of Adam. What had changed by then was racism was formalized. While race is said to have flourished as a concept with the emergence of the early European slave trade, there was

little use of the word "race" in the 1600s and 1700's. It appeared in the writings of Francois Bernier, Pierre Louis Maupertuis and Comte de Buffon (Douglas 2005, p.332). Their references were more as synonyms for varieties or kinds. Some credit Buffon with classifying people into four races in 1749 (Doron 2012). There was a preference among a few for use of Buffon's classifications because his categories were not rigid and preordained, but determined by climate and adaptable.

The idea of races that would be widely recognized was formally presented as a modern Western concept in the 18th Century by Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus. He developed a taxonomy of plants and animals and described subspecies of humans in *Systemae Naturae* (Leiden: Johann Wilhelm de Groot for Theodor Haak, 1735). Most important was the tenth edition Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*, published 1758. The volume also included a description of the "red" Americans, and Indians were designated as "choleric." His four categories of humans and their characteristics were:

Americanus rubescus (Americans red)-reddish, obstinate, and regulated by custom

Europaeus albus (Europeans white)-white, gentle, and governed by law

Asiaticus luridus (Asians yellow)-sallow, severe, and ruled by opinion

Afer niger (Africans black)-black, crafty, and governed by caprice (Lee et.al. 2001, p.6).

Linnaeus' taxonomy made it official. By the time the 19th century arrived, Indians were red, as human beings were classified and divided according to color, and red had become a universal symbol of what was the natural savagery and violence of Indians. Still, just as there are no yellow Asians, Indians are not red. As Native author John Smelcer who teaches writing to Indian students noted, "The discussions always begin with stereotypes: Indians are red-skinned. I've never seen a red-skinned person in my life except for extreme sunburn." (Seeds 2002, p.141).

The debate going back to Captain John Smith at Jamestown in England's first permanent colony was settled. Smith contended Indians were born white, lacking in civilization, which certainly did not protect them from incredible exploitation and mistreatment, perhaps kept their treatment more ethnic cleansing than genocide. While Indians in British America had suffered previously, it was not until they were thought of as inherently inferior "red men" rather than uncivilized "whites" that their reduced status become firmly established in the America. Following that, observes law professor Bethany Berger (2009) "Indians were prevented by nature-rather than by education or environment- from full participation in America's democracy and prosperity." (p.611).

Thomas Jefferson illustrates the transition. When he authored the 1776 Declaration of Independence, in the enumerated list of failures of George III he described Indians as "merciless savages." In 1788, he wrote on human nature, "This belief is founded on what I have seen of man, white, red, and black."(Jefferson 1788) Speaking to a Cherokee chief on January 9, 1806, Jefferson described him as a "useful example among the Red People." (McLoughlin, p.92).

It is in the 19th century when Manifest Destiny became popular and the removal of Indians from coast to coast to make way for whites began. Because Indians had a color and were a race, whites considered them inferior like Blacks. In some parts of the country, Indians were referred to as "timber niggers" (*Chippewa Indians v. Stop Treaty Abuse*, 1993) and in others, "prairie niggas" (Longie 2009). Andrew Jackson, in his 1829 State of the Union Address, proposed Indian removal, stating, "The waves of population and civilization are rolling to the westward, and we now propose to acquire the countries occupied by the red men of the South and West by a fair exchange." (p.19). The culmination and final defeat of Indian resistance to white expansion did not come by fair exchange, but at a massacre, the "Battle" of Wounded Knee in 1890. The

New York Times (December 30, 1890) reported it the day after it happened, describing defenseless men, women and children who were killed variously as "reds," "redskins," and "red skins," as the Native Americans had been reduced to a color.

While the 15th Amendment to the Constitution adopted in 1870 guaranteed U.S. citizens right to vote could not be abridged "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," America's first people did not gain citizenship and the vote until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. Prior to the Citizenship Act, they could become citizens following military service. This also involved color, as was reported on the ceremony for Indian veterans at Standing Rock Reservation. *Each chosen Indian was called from the crowd by his 'white' name, and handed a bow and arrow and directed to shoot. 'You have shot your last arrow,' said the secretary. 'This means that you are to no longer live the life of an Indian. You are from this day to live the life of a white man.'* (*Sioux County Pioneer* May 26, 1916).

The prejudice against Indians was so strong that on reservations they were denied the right to vote until 1957 in Utah and 1958 in North Dakota (Ferguson-Bohnee, 2020). It remains to the present, as recent polling (Datz 2017) shows more than a third of Native Americans experience racial slurs, violence, discrimination at work.

Indians being "red" has left them a minority in "white" America where despite being the original people, they have become a little noticed minority that is commonly ignored. There is a moral imperative to atone for their treatment as inferior beings and the arrogance of inflicting white culture and religion on them while taking their land because it was possible and done out of power and greed, not goodness. An official public acknowledgement and apology would be an appropriate beginning and the impoverished Native People deserve nothing less at the very least.

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