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Commentary

American Indians, American Dreams, and the Meaning of Success

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On February 25, 1987, 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 involved the attempt by the state of California and the country 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 stipulate 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

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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 1987 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 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 of sorts 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 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. What does deserve comment, I think, is the relationship between Indians as collective actors and the American Dream as an object of action.

But first, what is this American Dream? 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 include two things: a specification of both ends and means. On the one hand it is a dream of individual freedom and attendant material success. On the other hand, that success is to be achieved in a particular way, through neither handouts nor special dispensations but individual work. The image is of a nation of strivers, each making his or her way up an essentially accessible ladder of economic achievement through individual effort.

This emphasis on work, in fact, may be part of the objection to Indian bingo: Indian tribes are likely 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.[2]

But whatever its precise form, this dream has long been held out to Indians as the carrot that 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.[3] 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."[4] 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 material 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 apparent ambitions of many Native Americans. Many Indians are not full-fledged participants in American life, and one reason seems to be 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.[5] The interesting thing is not that Indians have rejected this particular carrot; indeed, 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 fact 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, wealth, status, and power in United States society, or an opportunity simply to obtain more of those goods.

Certainly Native Americans, like other Americans, have shared these concerns. Given the extraordinary degree of poverty, unemployment, and related social pathologies found in many Indian communities, they have 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, and land. All fundamentally have to do with the maintenance and protection of peoplehood, of community. This politics, in other words, has been concerned less with access to the larger society and its material rewards, 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.[6]

Survival in this case, however, is not simply a question of economics. There is more at stake. And this is all the more evident in the area of 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 aggressive, self-initiated development programs of various kinds, or are in the process of organizing such programs.

The agendas of most of these tribes appear to 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 maintain at the same time 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 seem willing to sacrifice knowingly political autonomy or cultural integrity for economic gains. In other words, Indian nations typically 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 philosophy has been apparent, for example, in the decision by the Northern Cheyennes in the late 1970s to place a moratorium on coal development on their reservation. The Peterson Zah Administration of the Navajo Tribe, no longer in office, de-emphasized certain development plans not so much out of concern over 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 and other development activities on lands considered sacred or otherwise important to tribal self-concepts and cultural continuity, while still others have opposed some development projects out of continuing concern with the issue of who will control the pace and direction of development.[7]

Indian development success, then, cannot be measured simply in terms of increases in per capita incomes or jobs, at least not if many tribes' own conceptions of what constitutes success are to be taken into account. The bottom line is the success of the community, and this success is neither purely economic nor simply the aggregation of the successes of individual community members.

In other parts of the world, particularly in the Third World, such a two-part agenda might not seem exceptional. But in the United States it is unusual. It 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. By contrast, it posits the preservation of the group as the ultimate criterion against which development, like politics, is to be measured.

The Indian Agenda

The foregoing discussion suggests three things. First, whereas the American Dream is a dream of *individual* achievement and success, Native Americans have tended to think in collective terms. This collectivism 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 almost amount 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 Alfonso Ortiz has commented, "This raises all kinds of hell with the American ethic."[8]

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 orientations of American life, especially the orientation to market criteria as the measure of all value and to a highly individualized and secular politics. These institutional orientations are widely 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. That variation is probably rooted in a host of factors, among them the uneven pattern of change in Indian societies, and 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 one of them may be a cultural difference. Traditional Crow culture awards honor and status to individual achievement; individual demonstrations of skill and power are 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 at UCLA, 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.[9] 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 World War II, 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.[10]

Explaining the Difference: Labor vs. Land

Part of the sociological agenda should be to account for such differences among the various groups of American life. The differences themselves are not intuitively obvious. Indeed, as far as blacks and Indians are concerned, we 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. While one can overstate the case, in a way the American Dream has been more "open" or available to Indians than to blacks. One might plausibly expect that Indians would be more participant, and blacks less, in the pursuit of that dream. Yet for the most part this has not been so.

The key may lie in the historical pattern of linkages between various ethnic or racial populations—Indians, blacks, many European migrants—and the emergent society of the United States. The important point is the difference between intergroup relatons that are individually structured and those that 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 seeking opportunities for individual advancement, and competed as individuals in urban labor markets. Theirs was a politics of access, oriented toward entry into the society around them.

But the labor-market integration was true also in the black case, where distinct ethnic populations, carried from Africa, were forcibly broken up by the compulsory 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, and indeed, were created here, but they did so in the context of an attempt to escape invidious group distinctions that 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 that were not so directed—for example, 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—that of the fur trade—what has been of greatest interest to the larger society has been not Indians themselves or their labor but the lands and resources they have controlled.[11] Until recently Indians have had relatively little to do with urban labor markets or any others; nor have those markets, historically, shown substantial interest in them.[12] Instead Indians were removed *as groups* from those lands sought by non-Indians to lands nobody—other than tribes already there—wanted, at least at the time. On those lands, called reservations, 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.

This situation has been self-reinforcing. In circumstances that helped to sustain Indian groups, many of which pre-dated the society of which they were now a part, Indian agendas and concerns also survived, and in turn 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.[13] The processes and the dreams are different.

Indian Dreams and Indian Power

For the Indian future, perhaps this difference 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 the individual 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.[14]

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 Euroamerican 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, largely as a consequence 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 expanded significantly 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. The question is not whether the American Dream contains room within it for all those who wish to play a part, but whether the United States can tolerate within its midst those who have a radically different dream, and grant them the freedom to pursue that dream on their own terms.

NOTES

1. A slightly different version of this paper was presented to the Thematic Session on "Whose American Dream? National Symbol and Racial Reality," at the Annual Meetings of the Eastern Sociological Society, Boston, Massachusetts, May 1, 1987. I would like to thank David Harris for valuable commentary on an earlier draft, and Joseph P. Kalt for discussions which contributed much to some of the ideas expressed here.

2. William T. Hagan, "The Reservation Policy: Too Little and Too Late," in *Indian-White Relations: A Persistent Paradox,* ed. Jane F. Smith and Robert M. Kvasnicka (Washington: Howard University Press, 1976).

3. Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

4. Hiram Price, "Allotment of Land in Severalty and a Permanent Land Title," in *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880-1900,* ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 89.

5. 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 to generalize about Indians and the American Dream, or Indians and anything else, risks doing violence to a complex reality. What I have to say is put in general terms but speaks to only part of a complicated topic, and refers in particular to the reservation-based portion of the Indian population, although even there the diversity of populations and experience remains immense.

6. See, for example, the discussion in Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Avon, 1969), 173–83.

7. For some discussion, see Rubie Sooktis and Anne Terry Straus, "A Rock and a Hard Place: Mineral Resources on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation,"

Chicago Anthropology Exchange 14, no. 1 & 2(1981): 27–35; Stephen Cornell, "Crisis and Response in Indian-White Relations, 1960–1984," *Social Problems* 32, no.1(1984): 49–51.

8. Alfonso Ortiz, "Summary," in *Indian Sovereignty: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference on Problems and Issues Concerning American Indians Today*, ed. William R. Swagerty (Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1979), 151.

9. Duane Champagne, "Socio-Cultural Responses to Coal Development: A Comparison of the Crow and Northern Cheyenne," unpublished MS, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1983.

10. Of course not all Indians who move to the cities necessarily leave either institutional context or tribal embrace. Many return to tribe, perhaps repeatedly; others bring it with them in urban extensions of the tribal community. But in recent years the emergence of a large urban Indian population has included some Indians who apparently do neither. See the now somewhat dated but suggestive discussion in Sam Stanley and Robert K. Thomas, "Current Demographic and Social Trends among North American Indians," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 436(March 1978): 111–120.

11. 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.

12. Certainly there have been exceptions. See, for example, Albert L. Hurtado, " 'Hardly a Farm House—A Kitchen Without Them': Indian and White Households on the California Borderland Frontier in 1860," *Western Historical Quarterly* 13, no. 3(1982): 245–270; Cardell K. Jacobson, "Internal Colonialism and Native Americans: Indian Labor in the United States from 1871 to World War II," *Social Science Quarterly* 65, no. 1(1984): 158–171; Martha C. Knack, "The Role of Credit in Native Adaptation to the Great Basin Ranching Economy," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 11, no. 1(1987): 43–65. But generally speaking at a society-wide level, aside from the fur trade, Indian labor was only occasionally a critical feature of Indian-white relations in the United States.

13. For a more extended discussion, see Stephen Cornell, "Land, Labor, and Group Formation: Blacks and Indians in the United States," unpublished MS, Harvard University, 1988.

14. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).