

**NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN NATIONALISM AND  
THE DECLINE OF SACRED AUTHENTICITY <sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT/RESUME**

The author reviews some concepts of nationalism, tribes and the nation-state. He considers the position of Native people in Canada in terms of rural homelands in an urban industrial society. The concept of "sacred authenticity" is presented in a discussion of Native education.

L'auteur passe en revue quelques concepts du nationalisme, des tribus et de la nation-Etat. Il considère la situation dans laquelle se trouvent les autochtones au Canada sur le plan d'une patrie rurale établie dans une société urbaine et industrielle. Le concept de "sacred authenticity" est présenté à travers l'examen de l'éducation des autochtones.

A few years ago, when I was on a sabbatical, I found myself writing a novel which I called "Gift of the Spirit Bird." The central character in the story is an intellectual and he is spiritually receptive. More specifically, he is Indian and he happens, as the story opens, to be chairperson of a Department of Native Studies at a Canadian university. The rest of the plot tells what happens to him during and after World War III.

I felt I had to write the story as a kind of science fiction because it seemed easier to get to the heart of the matter - to issues of assimilation, exploitation, nationalism and survival - by stripping away the dross of what so many of us assume to be the "reality" of our everyday world. I wanted to be able to think through the relationship of Native people to the larger society of which they are a part in North America and to do this by facing squarely the question of nuclear holocaust. Perhaps by facing the issue of the end of our present society we can get a clearer understanding of our priorities - just as a person who narrowly escapes death may sometimes be shocked into a beneficial clarity of purpose.

For people of every nationality there is an unspeakable alternative which may appear as a form of social death. For anglophone Canadians the unspeakable alternative is to become Americans; for Americans, on the other hand, the unspeakable alternative is to become socialist. Native people in North America also have an unspeakable alternative and that alternative is assimilation into urban society. In all three cases, however, although few advocate the unspeakable alternative, a lot of people are doing it, thus, the Americanization of Canada, the dependence of Americans upon government and the urbanization of Native people proceeds apace and without much explicit acknowledgement.

The struggle of the Native people of North America to persist as members of distinct communities has not been made easier by the refusal, much of the time, for either the Canadian or U.S. Governments to give much more than lip service to the will of these communities to survive. However, as with many other national minorities, (cum indigenous nations) such as the Samis, the Palistineans, the Kurds, the Basques, the Bretons or the Welsh, North American Indians seem intent upon acquiring what they regard as at least the minimum tools of self-determination which will enable them to survive as distinct peoples.

What all of these groups have in common, I believe are the following two characteristics:

1. a new or renewed concept of belonging to a "people", which has developed as a result of becoming enmeshed in, and exploited through, widespread social, economic and political networks;
2. the idea that in the cosmic scheme of things their people have been promised a political "destiny" or "destination" which can, through everyone pulling together, provide some hope for greater benefits of all kinds in the future.

In regards to North American Indians it is probably more true that the first of these characteristics has been realized than has the second, that is, that

there has emerged an "Indian consciousness" which transcends particular tribes and local communities, but which does not yet, to any great degree, at least proclaim a destiny. No one can dispute, however, that many Indian organizations and movements have progressed into being something more than alliances of political convenience between tribes or bands. In a few years, for instance, most of the Indians in Canada will live in cities and many Indians may have already become Indians first, with tribal or band affiliation being relegated to a matter of ancestry.

I am now ready to ask what I believe to be the central question of this presentation. Does modern Indian nationalism represent a continuity with the tribal past as represented by the elders or does it represent a break with the past and, perhaps, even a threat to it, which is being promoted by urban Indians?

The latter point of view -- that nationalism represents a break with tribal tradition, rather than a continuation of it, is expounded by a contemporary British social philosopher, Ernest Gellner, in an essay on "Nationalism" in his book of essays grouped under the title *Thought and Change* (1963). A few quotes from that essay will, I believe, reveal the thrust of his argument. First, Gellner himself quotes with approval an earlier writer on nationalism, Elie Kedourie, who noted "Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century."

Later in the essay, in his own words this time, he writes as follows:

The self-image of nationalism involves the stress of folk, folklore, popular culture, etc. In fact, nationalism becomes important precisely when these things become artificial. Genuine peasants or tribesmen, however proficient at folk dancing, do not generally make good nationalists.

Professor Gellner argues that a self-conscious concern with "culture" only occurs in the context of a modern state where education along particular lines - and especially in a particular language - is a gateway to jobs for individuals and economic success for the group at-large. He goes further to state that full citizenship in a modern state is only conceivable as a product of schooling. Peasants or tribesmen, on the other hand, need not be concerned with a common culture because their essential actions are determined, not by the content of a common culture, language or religion, but by the fixed requirements of their social structure, e.g. kinship, clan organization and political structures at the local, rather than at the national, level. It is for this reason, states Gellner, that tribal societies of widely differing cultural and linguistic affiliations can exist quite comfortably in the bosom of pre-industrial empires, which do not expect their subjects to be a part of a common labour pool; modern industrial states which do have a common labour pool cannot tolerate such diversity, because the status of each citizen is determined, not by prescription, but by having their ambitions funneled through a national educational system that puts a premium on uniformity of culture because it also must ensure mobility and interchangeability in the labour force.

This is how we arrive at a specific historical inception of nationalism and why it can be called "modern". As local areas become affected by industrialization, and particularly as they become subject to compulsory state education in order to participate in a larger economic orbit, culturally distinct groups seem to face a choice. Either they must create their own state machinery, especially their own state run educational system, or they must relegate their culture and language to the level of folkloristic nostalgia. Taking the first road leads directly into the United Nations or into constitutionally guaranteed rights to set up schools in their own language within a multi-national state. The second road, of course, is into the "melting pot" as a non-self-determining, often exploited, minority.

Perhaps putting it in terms of the two choices I have just described is a bit stark. In fact, some ethnic minorities within multi-national states seem to me to have vascilated over time between these two choices, sometimes seeming to go in one direction, sometimes in another. (There may also be differences among tribal groups that Professor Gellner does not address when he lumps tribesmen and peasants together; the histories of pre-industrial states or of tribal near-states, for instance, may reveal instances where tribes have become nations through a self-directed transformation of the old order which leaves much of it intact for a considerable period of time.) Finally, from the point of view of some rather specialized minorities, including a few North American ones, there may be a third option which lies outside the scope of Gellner's argument. He does not appear to have taken seriously the notion that a particular group may establish religious or other boundary maintaining mechanisms which isolate the entire group from the urban society of which it is legally a part, especially by repudiating the central premise of the national school system, which is to prepare children for competition in the national labour market. Gypsies, the Amish or some Pueblo Indian groups may indeed feel that they have a "destiny", but by not conceiving of that destiny in political terms, they are able to maintain their own, rather circumscribed, integrity.

What Professor Gellner does put his finger on, however, and which any serious analysis of the nationalist option must not neglect, is the contradiction between nationalist rhetoric and practice. He states that:

. . . ultimately the movements invariably contain both elements, a genuine modernism and a more or less spurious concern for local culture, or rather the re-employment of what had been a traditional culture for the enrichment and the trappings of a new education-rooted way of life, and for the provision of the defining differential of a new political unit.

Now it happens that a segment of my story "Gift of the Spirit Bird" provides an illustration of this point of Gellner's, although I had not read him at the time I wrote it. The plot involves the creation of an Indian state in North America, or not all North America, but the particular part of it with which I am familiar in Saskatchewan. In developing the idea of an Indian state I tried to

present a picture in which all the state machinery was put at the disposal of the Cree people of Saskatchewan; it was similar to many contemporary third world states and it exuded a great deal of revolutionary enthusiasm. I tried to present the case as fairly as I could and there were certainly many positive benefits for the Cree when all those governmental structures were used to make Cree people feel comfortable in a modern society: it was their own modern society and they did things in a Cree manner and, at least in appearance, in accordance with Cree values.

As a counter point, the central character in the story has a series of religious experiences in which he receives a certain degree of guidance from a spirit-helper. As the plot unfolds, the gulf between him and people who are running the government of this Indian state becomes wider and wider until he finally becomes a political prisoner in a mental hospital, a secret political prisoner because he is also the hero and founder of this state, its George Washington, so to speak. Thus, at the same time as his portrait appears on billboards throughout the country as the Indian nation's hero founder, he himself is languishing in a Siberia somewhere because the political managers who are running the government can't deal with a real live "saint".

I think we should pause at this point and ask ourselves just what is being lost here, or perhaps not gained, in the attempt to clothe tribal culture in "national" dress. It is not enough to say that personalism is replaced with "objectification" or that nationalists are often those people who have exchanged living in a community of extended families for an ideological community, but who really base their lives on consumerism. This is sometimes true, to be sure. However, there is something bigger than all of the words we social scientists use and I think it is the quality of "sacred authenticity." It is as if something has snapped, and when that happens all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put it together again. This "sacred authenticity" has very enduring qualities and it is hard to kill, but once it is gone, I believe it is even harder to recreate. I am an anthropologist, not a collector, and I have no personal nostalgia for a dead past. What I do regard with great respect is the living past, represented by many people in Canada, and I am concerned when I think I see what these people stand for being misunderstood.

A few years ago I heard a young man address the elders present at the Indian Ecumenical Conference at Morley, Alberta and he accused them of not teaching Indian traditions to the young people. It was evident that somehow this young man had been "brainwashed" by the white man's schools into thinking that elders could provide him with a kind of "crash course" in Indian religion rather than the establishment of personal relationships with knowledgeable people in an environment where they could experience things together.

In recent years, I have found myself coming to a conclusion which I do not want to reach. I do not want to find the gulf between official culture and personal culture to be unbridgeable. I do not want to believe the words of the historian Arnold Toynbee when he said that "Civilization feeds on the rot of the village." I am sure that many of you do not want to believe that the noble slogan of "Indian control of Indian education," which has spawned some very

interesting programs in Indian Studies, may result in a situation a generation hence where Indian traditions pass from the elders to people who are Indians by social or legal definition, but who have earned their right to be guardians of Indian traditions by being awarded degrees in Indian studies. I am dismayed when Professor Gellner tells us that "the philosopher-kings of the 'underdeveloped' world all act as westerners, and all talk like narodniks." (Narodniks were 19th century Russian intellectuals who idolized the mir, a kind of traditional Russian local community).

I remember an incident from about twenty years ago when I was teaching at a workshop for Indian university students in Colorado; we asked these students, of whom most had been consistently enthusiastic about and supportive of "Indian culture" and "Indian communities", where they thought they would be living in ten years. The almost unanimous answer - a very honest one, I thought at the time - was that each one decided that he or she personally would be living in a city.

I said earlier that I thought that the alternative of nationalism is based upon the world continuing as it has and especially on the idea that the bulk of the world's population will live in cities sooner than we realize. If the future does work out this way, that is, if present trends continue, then nationalist rhetoric may be of at least temporary help to Indians in the United States and in Canada as a means to serve Indian interests in their transition to city life. The educated Indian middle class, for example, may be able to expand its position by claiming exclusive rights to those jobs which involve the administration of social and educational services of various kinds to the urban Indian population at-large. Such a middle class can only benefit from anything which reinforces the position of Indians as a respected - and separate -- minority group. It remains to be seen, however, whether Indian claims to separate status in a political or legal sense can be maintained in an urban context for any length of time.

I do not want to end this presentation on such a pessimistic note, however, nor do I think that the analysis put before you here must lead in some inevitable way in that direction. It only leads that way if one first embraces the notion of entering a common labour market. It often seems as if the Canadian educational system rests on an assumption that all of the country's kids are put on some sort of a starting line at the age of five when they enter kindergarten; then someone fires a gun and based on ability, the kid from Forest Hill in Toronto and the kid from a Newfoundland outport or a rural Indian community has a supposedly equal chance of becoming a nuclear physicist or president of the Bank of Nova Scotia or what have you. That is perhaps, the Canadian ideal, but it is not, of course, the Canadian reality. Most of the suggestions one hears for educational reform are attempts to make the reality approach the ideal in a more perfect way, but perhaps we should go at this from another direction and make the ideal fit the reality. What I mean is that if you live in a community that lives by trapping, why worry about your kids becoming nuclear physicists or use that as an excuse to have schools which are oriented primarily towards satisfying the needs of people who are going to leave the community rather than towards

fulfilling the needs of those kids who are going to stay. Why, in fact, think of education as primarily a means of getting into an off-reserve labour market rather than as a means of providing lifelong comfort and enrichment to the community or as a means to obtain employment within commuting distance of that community.

The point of view presented here is that Indian/Native communities can stop being simply breeding grounds for new recruits to the cities. Perhaps some of the saddest communities one can sometimes see today are those which are inhabited disproportionately by the old and by the very young. It is also sad when "success" is identified with leaving the community and academic success is a way of buying a one way ticket to the city, leaving behind a rural ghetto.

One could make a thousand recommendations, perhaps, if one really took seriously the social and spiritual health of Indian/Native communities. But here are just three to consider:

- Bands might consider owning city property themselves to provide for the needs of those of their members who are in need of city services for a limited period of time.

- Many reserves are located in attractive resort areas and more urban oriented and affluent band members might be encouraged to invest in some of these opportunities.

- Travel funds might be established to help band members who live in cities get help in the expense of returning to the reserve for funerals.

Reserves are more than just places to be born and to die. As Harold Cardinal once said; "The reserves are our cathedrals." If they are seen as sacred communities by Indians now, someday they may be treasured by all Canadians as part of our national heritage and regarded as special and privileged places in which to live.

#### REFERENCES

Gellner, Ernest

1963 Nationalism, in *Thought and Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

#### NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Indian / Native Studies Association at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario November 1 - 3, 1985.