

EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF TRIBALISM IN  
THE UNITED STATES: THE CASE OF THE  
AMERICAN INDIAN<sup>1</sup>

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TO A good many Americans, the American Indians are a "problem," and by no means a simple problem that can be easily solved. This rather common American feeling cannot be accounted for alone by the position of the Indians as a minority or by the disadvantages that go with it. In actual situations of discrimination, the public mood is clear and action prompt. Thus, in Pontiac, Michigan, in 1960, when a Winnebago veteran was denied burial in a cemetery "restricted to Caucasians," the people were indignant and interred him with public ceremony and military honors. This kind of Indian "problem" is unlikely to leave vague discomforts unresolved.

The sense that Indians are a special "problem" comes, I think, from their unique position rather than from their minority situation—their distinctive legal status in relation to the nation and their stubborn insistence on their Indian identity. Neither of these is clearly understood by the public, and the intrusion of either or both may so color a situation that public reaction is confused and uncertain. The recent situation in New York illustrates this. Edmund Wilson in *Apologies to the Iroquois* observed in Niagara Falls that "a good deal of sympathy . . . for the fight of the Tuscaroras" against New

York Power Authority plans to take Tuscarora lands for a hydroelectric project "turned into a kind of resentment" when the Indians, invoking tribal rights under treaties with the United States, seemed to be winning; non-Indians in the same predicament had no such legal argument against condemnation. This kind of situation may not evoke a definitive public reaction; it is more likely to generate uneasiness and leave behind it a sense of "problems" unresolved.

A resolution of this special Indian "problem" is unlikely unless the factors involved in the Indian situation are understood and unless the historical significance of the position of the Indians in the United States is realized.

I

Americans not in direct contact with Indians may not even be aware of their existence most of the time, and the experience of rediscovery, when Indians make headlines, may itself be disturbing. Indians are a reminder of a past that troubles the American conscience. More than that, their existence as *Indians* unsettles the firm conviction that in this country, with its superior institutions, assimilation is proper and desirable and in fact an inevitable, automatic process. Why, after centuries of contact with us, should Indians still feel so separate and aloof?

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally circulated as "Occasional Paper No. 3" of the Phelps-Stokes Fund.



In 1961, the striking fact is that Indians are not only here with us to stay, in the sense of biological survival,<sup>2</sup> but that there are many thousands of Indians—in 29 of the 50 states—still essentially unassimilated. They have not experienced that identification of interests and outlook, that “interpenetration and fusion,” in which they would have acquired American “memories, sentiments, and attitudes” and come to share our “experiences and history” which the late Chicago sociologist, Robert E. Park, saw as the essence of assimilation.

Most unassimilated Indians live in Indian communities. There are many—in twenty-five states. Pueblo and Hopi communities of New Mexico and Arizona and the Navajos are perhaps best known. In the Southwest are also Apache communities, the Pima and the Papago and the Havasupai, among others. But Indian communities are found as well in other parts of the country. To mention a sample, there are the Eastern Cherokees of North Carolina; the Chippewas of Red Lake, Minnesota; the Menominis of Wisconsin; the Sauk and Fox of Iowa; the Hidatsa, Mandan, Arikara, and several divisions of Teton Sioux in the Dakotas; the Blackfeet and Cheyennes in Montana; the Klamaths in Oregon. Other states in which Indian groups survive include Oklahoma, California, Nebraska, Kansas, Wyoming, Idaho, and Washington. Americans recently

<sup>2</sup> The census shows a marked increase in Indians during recent generations and a rate of population growth more rapid than that of the country as a whole or of any other identifiable group. There are now between 400,000 and 500,000 Indians in the continental United States and Alaska, and, if the present rate of increase continues, descendants of the original Americans may be as numerous in another generation as their ancestors were in Columbus' day.

became aware of two in New York, the Tuscaroras and the Senecas, when these Iroquois opposed state and federal plans to inundate Iroquois lands by construction of dams for power and flood control. Edmund Wilson, in memorializing these people in *Apologies to the Iroquois*, gives eloquent testimony to the viable group life of these and other Iroquois communities of New York.

In size, these communities range from the Navajos, the largest, with more than 70,000 members, to small communities like the Sauk and Fox of Iowa, who number a few hundred. In culture, there is great diversity, and Indians still tend to identify themselves first as Navajos, Sioux, or Cherokees, and secondarily as Indians.

Indian groups are of course only a handful of the tribes who originally peopled the country. But their endurance, with the deep sense of tradition and identity which many retain, is a remarkable phenomenon. They have survived the exterminations which depleted and destroyed Indian peoples of the Atlantic seaboard and of California; the forced evacuations which took many from their homes into alien country; and the concentration of tribal groups in restricted areas, stripped of their traditional land base. Most important of all, they have survived despite the generations of national effort to force assimilation upon them, for our dominant Indian policy from the beginning has been assimilation. Their existence today reflects the voluntary decision of their members, as citizens of the United States,<sup>3</sup> to maintain tra-

<sup>3</sup> By 1924, more than two-thirds of the Indians were citizens under treaties and agreements. In that year citizenship was confirmed by enactment for all Indians born in the country. Indians have

ditional group life, in many cases on the homelands of their ancestors—a decision which speaks strongly for the vitality of the Indian way and the values of Indian group life.

How “Indian” is life in these communities? Measured by externals, by clothes and housing, by use of non-Indian technology and gadgets, or by ways in which many now make a living, it may appear that the people of these communities have on the whole adopted our ways. The San Carlos Apaches of New Mexico, for example, raise some of the finest American livestock for market. The Red Lake Chippewas of Minnesota ship fish by refrigerated trucks for sale in Chicago. The Sauk and Fox of Iowa make a living by working for wages among their non-Indian neighbors. Indian life has not been standing still. The Indians have been making accommodations and adjustments to our society and economy from early times, and they continue to do so.

But modern studies of Indian communities show that adoption of the externals of American life is not neatly correlated with accompanying changes in basic Indian attitudes, mind, and personality. Feelings and attitudes, the life of the inner man, change more slowly than utilitarian features of comfort and convenience. Studies among the Cherokees of North Carolina, for example—considered one of the Five Civilized Tribes for more than a century—and among the Navajos of the Southwest reveal the same inner Indian feelings about the world and man's

full rights of citizenship, which include, of course, the right to complete freedom of movement anywhere. The time is past when Indian communities can be dismissed as “segregation” or as “concentration camps.”

place in nature, the same non-competitive attitudes, the same disinterest in the American drive for progress and change.

The changes these community Indians have made over time, taken all in all, seem selective. Some inner man resisted complete annihilation of self and identity and held fast to values and attitudes acquired in a mother's arms and on a father's knee and chose from us some things of use but not others. They chose principally what we call material culture and technology and little of our sentiments and values and our philosophy of life.

## II

Indian non-assimilation in an America which has so largely assimilated many peoples from many lands is an anachronism only if we think of the Indians as merely one among many American minorities and if we look for the same process of cultural change and adjustment in them all. The others are immigrant minorities; with the exception of the Negroes, they came here voluntarily, and their coming, their choice of a new homeland, implies some commitment toward assimilation.

The Indian situation and Indian relations with the dominant culture in America are quite different. The Indians have roots deeply buried in the soil; their communities have a history in the land more ancient than that of the majority people. They can best be compared with European national minorities who became part of an alien country as a result of national expansion or, in North America, with the French-Canadians of Quebec who became part of an English country after 1763. In these cases, as among the Indian communities, the people are re-



sistant to assimilation and try to maintain traditional ways and even traditional language.

What is true of those who remain at home in close association with their own ethnic community, however, is not true of those who may migrate and take up life elsewhere. Members of European national minorities may move into industrial cities or emigrate to America; French-Canadians of Quebec may migrate to western provinces of Canada; American Indians may leave their tribal communities for life in our towns and cities. As in the case of European immigration to the United States, Canada, or Latin America, the migration is a movement of individuals and families.

If they do not return home, these migrants are subject to assimilating influences of a different culture to a degree that their kinfolk at home are not, and they are more likely to be receptive to assimilation. The process takes time and usually takes place over generations. The original migrants achieve only partial assimilation; their children, especially when schooled entirely in the new environment, carry the process further; and in the third generation assimilation becomes virtually complete.

This kind of assimilation has taken place over the years among our Indians, as individuals or families have left their communities and in time severed their tribal connections. How many have left Indianism behind in this way we do not know, for it is difficult to keep an accurate count, but there have been many.

A confusion between this process of assimilation of migrants over a period of generations and that of the adaptive change and accommodation going on in Indian home communities may explain

the confident predictions made on more than one occasion that this or that Indian community would become fully assimilated in some definite period of time. The stated period is often twenty-five years, approximately a generation. At the end of that time, however, contrary to predictions, the community is still there, as strong in numbers and as viable and unassimilated as ever. Some members may have left and chosen assimilation, but an increase of the population at home has usually more than made up for the loss. It has become increasingly probable that many of the communities that have endured are likely to be with us for a long and indefinite future unless radical or brutal measures are taken to disorganize and disperse them. We may have to come to terms with a people who seem determined to have a hand in shaping their own destiny.

Nor is the persistence of these Indian communities in an industrialized America a wholly exceptional fact in the modern world. Communities with strong commitments to traditional ways of life are known in industrialized European areas. For example, the Keurs, in *The Deeply Rooted*, describe a traditional Drents community in the Netherlands. More striking are studies in Wales and Cumberland, close to the heart of industrial England, the original home of the Industrial Revolution. Alwyn Rees, in *Life in a Welsh Countryside*, found country neighborhood patterns of life persisting in Wales in 1940 from a pre-industrial past and, in some ways, from a more remote pastoral and tribal past. W. M. Williams, in *Gosforth*, describes Cumberland ways in 1950 still unassimilated by industrial England, still persisting in traditional patterns hundreds of years old.

Such obstinate endurance, with its inner resistance to engulfment by dominant but alien traditions, can be understood, no doubt, as a reflection of the fundamental role of primary relationships—especially that of parents and children—in handing on basic attitudes, feelings, and patterns of interpersonal relations. But it is also a stubborn fact of vital importance in understanding the contemporary world of many peoples and many cultures, each of which may seek from the West ways to improve standards of life, but each of which may at the same time be determined to keep an identity and tradition of its own.

### III

The feeling that Indians are a special "problem" is not a reaction only to Indian non-assimilation. The unique legal status of Indians, when it obtrudes and reveals that Indians may have special rights other citizens do not have, is equally disturbing. It offends the American sense of fitness and equality, the feeling that there should be no special groups—none at a disadvantage and none that have advantages over others.

For it is true that the distinctive legal position of the Indians—their primary relation to the federal government—involves what may be called "special rights." The government, as trustee, protects Indian lands, and such trust-protected lands are exempt from state and local taxation.<sup>4</sup> The federal government provides services to Indians, including agricultural and soil conservation services and health and education services, that others receive principally through state and local

agencies. And Indian communities have under federal law rights of community self-government and the right to organize tribal business corporations.

The federal status of Indian communities began in early times, and it has a long history. For more than a century after colonization, the balance of power was on the Indian side, and the colonists, seeking peaceful relations essential to the survival and expansion of settlement, dealt with the Indian tribes as they found them—autonomous and self-governing. They made treaties and agreements with individual tribes through tribal leaders.

This recognition of the autonomy of the separate Indian tribes became a principle of dealing with them as independent nations which the United States inherited from British colonial rule. Thus, Indian relations were external affairs of the United States—a matter for treaty-making by the nation and not by the states. We "bought the United States" from the Indians, to use a phrase of Felix Cohen's, by treaties with individual Indian tribes, treaties which, as part of the bargain, guaranteed trust protection of remaining Indian lands and freedom from taxation on those lands. When the treaty-making period was ended by Congress in 1871, the Indians, as dependent groups within the nation, remained a federal responsibility and the provisions of treaties made before 1871 became continuing federal obligations to the Indians, the basis of most of the "special rights."

The special status of Indians and their "special rights" not only are themselves annoying to us but seem related to that other needling fact about Indians: the aloof pride with which many have persisted in remaining Indian. For

<sup>4</sup> However, Indians pay all other taxes paid by other citizens, including real estate taxes on Indian-owned land not in trust status.



their status and rights set the Indians apart, a unique group of American citizens, and thus aid and abet them in keeping a separate identity. On the whole, however, they help those remain Indian who want to be Indian, who express their wish by clinging together in a community; those who want assimilation can and do leave the community and go their separate ways.

During the more than a century of this country's commitment to a policy of assimilating and absorbing the Indians, the government has not been unaware of the role of Indian community life and the federal Indian tie in thwarting the assimilation process. In 1887, Congress saw Indian patterns of land tenure as the foundation of Indian community institutions and attacked them in the General Allotment Act. That act, by ending communal land tenure and making Indians individual property owners, was intended to break up tribal life and assimilate Indians as individuals; unhappily, when communities disintegrated under its pressures, the detribalized individuals who lost their lands became, not assimilated Americans, but paupers and public charges.<sup>5</sup> As recently as 1953, Congress proposed to terminate the federal In-

<sup>5</sup> The act was in force 47 years. During the period, two-thirds of Indian-owned lands of 1887 were alienated from Indian ownership, principally as a result of the procedure of first individualizing land holdings and then removing them from trust status. Some tribes were not subject to allotment, especially tribes in the Southwest. Of the many who were subject to the program but opposed it, few wholly escaped; the Red Lake Chippewas of Minnesota are perhaps the outstanding case. Some of the disastrous effects of the allotment program were remedied in the Indian New Deal period that began in 1934. In 1960, one tribe, the Northern Cheyennes of Montana, was trying to promote a tribal "Fifty-Year Unallotment Program" to return all allotted lands still Indian-owned to tribal ownership.

dian tie as rapidly as possible, including termination of trust protection and federal services to Indians. The intent was clear: immigrants do not become fully assimilated as tribal groups and neither would Indians. Although the termination program is at a standstill for the present, two large tribes, the Menomins of Wisconsin and the Klamaths of Oregon, are now going through the last stages of termination procedures enacted in 1954.

If it be admitted that the persistence of Indian communities is related to their federal status, and that Indian rejection of full assimilation is related to the fact that Indian communities survive, there still remains the question: Should the nation's Indian policy be committed to and directed toward assimilation?

For a brief period, while John Collier was Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1933-45), this question was courageously answered in the negative. The existence of Indian communities as a reality of the modern world was accepted and a program was designed, partly realized in legislation—the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 and supplementary legislation—to provide Indian communities with the legal status and machinery and the economic resources and opportunities they required to continue their existence for as long a time as they chose. Tribal self-government and tribal business corporations under this program have already been mentioned; the program also included provisions for an adequate land base, financial credit, and adequate training and education.

The charge that this program was intended to halt Indian progress and keep Indians, like museum specimens, in their ancient unchanging ways, stems

from a complete misunderstanding of its motivation or from die-hard assimilationism. The program was actually committed to more change and progress toward improved standards of Indian life than had ever been contemplated in the preceding century of Indian affairs. How Indian, in the sense of old Indian ways of life, are the livestock corporations, the farming and husbandry co-operatives, the co-operative tribal stores, or the commercial credit that were essential parts of the Collier program? The program was in fact dedicated to constructive accommodation and adjustment of Indians to modern American life, but also to the idea—unpopular, perhaps, among most Americans—that a decision to become completely assimilated and give up Indian identity and community life was not for the nation or the government to make but for the Indians to make for themselves.

#### IV

Some Americans see assimilation, and ending Indian communities and special Indian status, as in the best interests of Indians. The legal forms which now safeguard the status of Indian communities are seen as restrictions or limitations of Indian activity and opportunity and not as marks of Indian freedom. The Indian rights of tax exemption on trust property are not ordinarily so characterized, of course; they are usually written off as peculiarities which set Indians apart from others, increasing social distance and the difficulties of intergroup relations. But such features of the trust situation as government control over the use and disposition of trust-protected Indian lands and other tribal assets are seen as hampering and restrictive, as undue

paternalism and overprotection which increase Indian dependency and destroy Indian initiative.

Few would deny that overpaternalism has often impaired the administration of Indian affairs. The trustee relation is often ambiguous and difficult; abuse of power on the one hand or over-anxiety on the other both may have damaging effects.

The difficulty is compounded in Indian affairs because the federal government is in a trustee relation to both communities and individuals. The trust protection of individual property is an outgrowth of the federal trust relation to tribal property; tribal property may be individualized, but individual owners may hold restricted titles (in theory, being judged incompetent), rather than unrestricted titles in fee simple. This trust relation to individuals has all too often involved abuses or overprotection, and it may well be that the relation is more restrictive than liberating, especially if individuals have chosen the path of detribalization and assimilation. But it is the federal trust relation to Indian communities rather than individuals that is most germane in this discussion.

In the case of communities, it is doubtful that paternalistic abuses which have occurred are inherent in the federal trust relation. Tribal self-government, for example, since its organization under the IRA, has suffered on a good many occasions from unwarranted government interference. When Indians asked for clarification of their rights under new tribal constitutions, superintendents were often too prone to interpret provisions in favor of their own authority and against that of the tribe. And when graft or corruption is alleged against tribal coun-



cils and administration, officials all too often have intervened so eagerly that Indians have had little opportunity to work out democratic processes for themselves. Federal trusteeship can be operated without such abuses.

Perhaps the more important question about the restrictive or liberating character of the protected status of Indian communities is what kind of freedom we are talking about. The freedom of Indians to become as non-Indian and assimilated as they wish cannot be the issue here. The Indians are citizens with the full rights of citizenship, and many have exercised their freedom to become completely Americanized. But there are many who want and need the freedom to be Indian within the framework of America. For them the existence of the community to which they belong is essential to that freedom, and some defined legal status of the community is essential to its continued existence.

The disappearance of our Indian communities by assimilation has a crucial finality that assimilation can never have for other American minorities. Irish, or German, or Scandinavian, or Italian immigrants who become assimilated can still look toward a homeland from which they came, a viable tradition and culture which dignifies their origins. For the Indian, the tribal community is the only carrier of his tradition; if it disintegrates and disappears, his tradition becomes a matter of history, and he loses part of his identity. We are coming to know the importance of this sense of identification with a viable tradition in the meaning of Israel for the American Jew, or of the emergence of free African nations for the American Negro.

There is a tendency for people in the

United States to think in 1961 that we may be coming of age as a people, that now we may be able to accept diversity in our midst without condescension, and that we may be ready to accept as sovereign equals the many peoples, of many races and creeds and cultures, who coexist with us in the complex modern world. Such a liberalism, however, is not yet the American mood in Indian affairs.

While we are unable to rise above assimilationism in our attitude to the Indians, the legal forms which now safeguard their community life and their right to be Indian may be essential. No doubt other forms could be developed by them within the framework of American law, such as, for example, corporate community life without a federal tie, but Indians are unwilling to risk such a change. They hold fast, in the assimilationist mood of America, to the historical status which protects them.

In other respects, however, the Indians are changing and ready for greater changes. Still greatly handicapped by their predominantly rural situation in an industrialized America, they seek technical assistance and training if they can secure these without sacrificing the Indian status they have and want to keep.

Outstanding in the change going on among Indians is the sudden appearance in the last decade of a strong urge for advanced education. Less than two hundred Indians were in college in 1950. Yet by 1959 more than 4,300 were attending colleges and universities, and the number seems likely to continue to increase. This changed attitude toward education, which involves not only the young but their parents and families as well, implies other less

obvious changes in Indian attitudes toward their life in America.

Higher education means, of course, that more Indian individuals may choose the path of non-tribal, assimilated life. But it also means that Indian community life will soon be in the hands of a generation of educated Indians. Some communities may choose to disband, with their members going their separate ways; others may want to carry on group life for an indefinite future period. In either case, the decision is likely to be made by informed, educated people, aware of their past and also of their possibilities in America.

Meanwhile, the best we can do, as Felix Cohen once put it, may be "to

get out of the way" of the Indians, to stop hampering their efforts to work out their own destiny, and especially to stop trying to make them give up their Indian identity. In a world which may be moving toward greater internationalism, in which we hope that peoples, however diverse, will choose the way of democracy, we cannot avoid the responsibility for a democratic resolution of the American Indian situation. Our attitude toward the Indians, the stubbornest non-conformists among us, may be the touchstone of our tolerance of diversity anywhere.

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