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Amerindian resistance: the gathering of the fires*

For Albert White, Mohawk brother

Wounded Knee, Wounded Knee
What a cold heart place to be
With your brothers and your sisters
lying broken on their mother
but their spirits cry in triumph
that this place where they lay dying
holds the seeds of new beginnings
Wounded Knee.

Eileen Evans, 1983

The encounter of Europeans and Indians on the American continent is not simply a story of haughty conquerors overwhelming dumbfounded savages; rather, it is a drama of the interpenetration of two histories involving many peoples, European and American. There were considerable differences, however, between the patterns of colonisation in North and South America: notably that the Spanish were mainly interested in gold and silver, and mining formed the basis of their colonial economy; while in the North, the main economic preoccupations were

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the fur trade and settler agriculture, and the plantation system in the southern part, as in the Caribbean and Brazil. Moreover, North America and the Caribbean became zones of European rivalry, so that in these areas two sets of factors interacted: competition between European national and mercantile interests, and antagonisms between Indian peoples.

From the 1590s, the United Provinces and England began to take their struggle against the Spanish-Habsburg Empire overseas in order to threaten its lifelines of colonial wealth, for it was New World bullion that was the source of Spain's finance for her military campaigns in Europe. The Dutch sought to stir up discontent among the indigenous peoples subjected by the Iberian powers, in Chile, in Peru, on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua and in Brazil, and engaged in 'counter-colonisation', endeavouring to create a rival commercial and colonial empire.¹ Such operations were more successful in Asia and Africa than in the Americas, and more so in North than in South America. These European battles fought on the world's seas and shores lasted through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, until a new pattern of global hegemony had been established.

European rivalries were also reflected in Indian-white relations; as Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz noted:

Colonial regimes created complex phenomena in order to maintain footholds ... This was especially true in frontier areas of contact and competition over territory, often for strategic purposes to protect rich interior colonies, or due to their inability to overcome indigenous resistance. ... trade dependence ... was the lever used to create 'alliances' with Indian communities to hold the frontier against another colonial power.²

Thus, in the north-east the Iroquois sided with the British against the French and the Shawnee in the fur trade; the Comanches in the south-west allied themselves with the Spanish against the Navaho and the Apache; the Cherokee were at one time anti-French, then anti-English. Sometimes pro- and anti-white groups ran through one tribe, as with the Choctaw, who were pro-English in the east and pro-French in the west. Among the Natchez, around 1700, there were pro-French and anti-French factions, divided according to one interpretation between classes, in this peculiarly class-stratified nation, with the Great Sun and the majority of the higher aristocracy siding with the French; although in 1729 the Natchez, almost in concert, attacked the French in New Orleans.

This period has been referred to as the 'manipulation period' in Indian-white relations.³ However, to portray this as a relationship of manipulation by whites of Indians may be to overlook the other side of the relationship: the manipulation by Indians of alliances with Europeans

in order to settle rivalries with neighbouring peoples or, in some cases, between competing clans or factions. Here, divide-and-rule worked both ways, for a time. To overlook this dimension of divide-and-rule in reverse would be to deny the Indian peoples their sovereignty as actors in history. To a certain extent, the Europeans became participants in dynamics that had already been at work before they arrived. On the other hand, the Europeans also brought their conflicts to the new continent and this exerted a considerable influence upon the future intertribal relations. It is by viewing the Indian peoples not solely as victims of history, but also as its designers and participants, that a more realistic assessment – beyond the stage of moral indignation at the ‘Indian plight’ – is arrived at.

Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz argues that such alliances as that of the Miskitos and the Iroquois nations with the British against, respectively, the Spanish and the French were instances of ‘indirect colonisation’: ‘the recruitment of certain geographically opportune groups as surrogates’.⁴ But this portrayal of the Iroquois as merely an instrument in the hands of foreigners underrates their sovereignty – the sovereignty of a people who consider themselves as the Ongwehonwe, the Real People, who after thirty years of Iroquois wars controlled the entire region east of Lake Michigan and possibly the area extending from Carolina to Hudson Bay, a people whose political organisation, the League of the Iroquois, has been described by historians as ‘the strongest and most formidable organisation in North America’,⁵ and whose principles of political organisation, admired by Benjamin Franklin, have influenced the formulation of the Constitution of the United States. To argue that the Iroquois and their wars against the Hurons, the French and the Susquehanna were merely instruments of the British, victims of ‘indirect colonisation’, is to rob the Iroquois nations of their dignity as a people.

George Hunt, the historian, who examined the Iroquois wars, attributed them to the strategic location of the Iroquois in relation to New France and the Huron trading empire, and their interest in acquiring and controlling the fur trade. Hunt may have underestimated the qualities of the Iroquois confederacy (whose role had been emphasised by Lewis Morgan), but at least at no point does he portray the Iroquois as ‘British agents’ – he portrays them instead as defending their own interests. Hunt’s emphasis is on the importance to Indians of the European trade goods – ‘English powder burned on the Mississippi a half century before the English cabins reached Lake Ontario, and the Ottawa tribe had fought a commercial war with the Winnebago of Wisconsin, forcing French trade goods upon them, ten years before the hesitant French settlement had reached Montreal.’⁶

This parallels the account given by the Iroquois (Hau de no sau nee) of their own history and the Beaver wars:

Nations learned that to be without firearms meant physical annihilation. To be without access to beaver pelts meant no means to buy firearms.

Trade meant that long routes over which goods had to be transported had to be secured. The only way that was possible was for the entire area to be in friendly hands. Any potential disruptor of the trade routes must either be pacified or eliminated.⁷

There are certain parallels between the pattern of European-Indian relations and that between Europeans and Africans on the African coasts. The latter has been characterised as the 'gun-slave cycle'; perhaps the situation in North America could be termed a 'gun-fur cycle'. The relative autonomy of certain African peoples (the Oyo empire, Fon, Ashantis, etc.) in controlling their end of the trade cycle and conducting their own politics is generally acknowledged; the same recognition is due to the Iroquois and other Indian nations. Out of necessity, amidst new dynamics introduced by foreign peoples, the people held their own ground.

Gradually, as trade dependency deepened and the consequences of unequal exchange made themselves felt, as trappers and merchants made place for military trading posts, as the supply of pelts dried up and as the numbers and the land hunger of settlers increased, the balance of power between Europeans and Indians shifted. The time when a concerted attack of Indian nations could have wiped out the newcomers was past. Earlier attacks, by the Powhatan confederacy on Jamestown in 1622, and again in 1644, by the Pequot nation in Connecticut Valley in 1636, and even by the Wampanoag confederacy of twenty tribes brought together by Philip of Pokanoket for a coordinated attack on New England in 1675, had all been bloodily defeated. Now, as the balance of power shifted, the Europeans and their conflicts became preponderant factors, and it is perhaps this later period that could be called a 'manipulation period', in which Indian nations were used to fight inter-European wars. Except that, even then, this would underestimate Indian autonomy and the extent to which the Europeans were constrained and at times forced into action by their Indian allies.

In this period – lasting, at most, from the late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century – the keynote of Indian-white relations was no longer the fur trade but *land*. This introduced other dynamics into the situation. On the one hand, as Hunt noted, the fur trade divided the tribes, but on the question of land they could cooperate. On the other hand, the creeping advance of the Europeans began to push Indian peoples into the territories of other nations, and this intensified intertribal conflicts. With England in control of the Atlantic seaboard, Frenchmen entrenched in Canada and along the Mississippi river, and Spain in Florida and the south-west, the Indians in the east found themselves surrounded by white men.

The Ottawa war chief Pontiac was the Indian leader who took the politics of alignment to its ultimate consequence. The Ottawa had participated as French allies in the French and Indian war against the English that began in 1754; but after the capitulation of the French in 1760, Pontiac took up the war again: ‘Englishman! – Although you have conquered the French, you have not yet conquered us!’⁸ The confederacy organised by Pontiac had outstanding military success – in two months every Ohio Valley and Great Lakes military post was lost by the British and the remaining forts, including Fort Detroit, were under siege by Pontiac’s forces. It was under these circumstances that General Amherst wrote to Colonel Henry Bouquet in Pennsylvania his counsel of despair: ‘Could it not be contrived to send the small pox among the disaffected tribes of Indians? We must on this occasion use every stratagem in our power to reduce them’; and again, ‘You will do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets, as well as to try every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race.’⁹

But at this stage, the assistance from the French (and the Spanish) that Pontiac hoped for was not forthcoming. For at the time of Pontiac’s attack on Detroit, in May 1763, the English had already waxed victorious over France – not only in North America but also in West Africa, the West Indies and India – and the Peace of Paris, concluded in 1763, sealed what is considered ‘the most brilliant and significant British victory of modern history’. Pontiac conducted his politics in a regional theatre, whereas the outcome of the Anglo-French conflict was being decided in the global arena. The dialectics between a local theatre and geopolitics, and ignorance of the geopolitical ramifications of a conflict, has frequently turned out to be a trap for local anti-imperialist militants.

Nonetheless, the consequences of what is called Pontiac’s rebellion for the course of American history were profound: ‘The British Crown, in a hasty effort to stop the rebellion and prevent new rebellions from breaking out, set an official line of demarcation between the Indian and the colonists. This line ran along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains from north to south and prohibited white settlement west of this line ... the proclamation also outlawed private purchase of Indian property.’¹⁰

Tecumseh’s call for a red nation

The annihilation of our race is at hand unless we unite in one common cause against the common foe.

Tecumseh addressing the Chocktaws, 1811

This was the end of an era: European competition over North America was at an end, Anglo-Saxon hegemony was secure. The locus of conflict shifted – it was now between the settlers and the British government.

Notably, the proclamation of October 1763 directly confronted the land hunger of the settlers: 'It infuriated the colonists, especially the colonists on the western frontiers'; and it may be viewed 'as a precipitating cause of the "American" Revolution against the Crown taxes on tea and other things'.¹¹

The politics of playing off European rivals against one another and against rival tribes now no longer worked; an entirely new situation had come into being for Indian Americans. Knowing what they could expect from the settlers, 'not a single Indian tribe of consequence joined the colonists in the "American" revolution of 1776'.¹² Indians, of course, never considered American independence as 'their' independence; they understood it, as did Indians in South America, as the independence of European settlers in expropriating and exploiting Indian lands. White settlements now pushed into the North West Territory of Kentucky and Ohio and were met with Indian guerilla warfare. Indian war societies from six nations, led by Little Turtle, defeated the US Army in two battles, in 1790 and 1791 – the latter was described as 'one of the worst routs ever suffered by an American army'; but a third confrontation, the battle of the Fallen Timbers, ended in defeat for the Indians. In the subsequent treaty of Greenville (1795) nearly two-thirds of Ohio had to be given up.

'With the decrease of competition for Indian trade between different European groups, a major force that had worked to set nation against nation was weakened.'¹³ After 300 years of dealing with rival European powers, Indians were left with a single opponent, the United States. Inspired by prophets who engendered an Indian religious revival, a new spirit of unity emerged. That unity, embodied in the League of the Iroquois and the great Creek and Shawnee confederacies that had been in existence before the Europeans came, embodied in the fighting confederacy assembled by Pontiac, the confederacy brought together by Joseph Brant, was now brought to its culmination by the Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, in his vision of a red nation.

... unlike all previous native leaders, he looked beyond the mere resistance by a tribe or group of tribes to white encroachments. He was a Shawnee, but he considered himself first an Indian, and fought to give all Indians a national rather than a tribal consciousness, and to unite them in defence of a common homeland ...

As the greatest Indian nationalist, Tecumseh countered American expansionism with Indian unity, preaching for the first time that Indian land belonged to all the tribes in common ...¹⁴

Tecumseh participated in the battles led by Little Turtle but refused to be a part of the signing of the treaty of Greenville. A united Indian position on the lands that were their common heritage had become a logical option ever since the existence of the demarcation line between Indian

territory and white lands established in 1763. Earlier, in 1793, this position had been taken by the Mohawk chief, Joseph Brant. Tecumseh carried this development further.

He specifically protested against the practice of signing separate treaties; as he told Governor Harrison at Vincennes:

You endeavour to make distinctions. You wish to prevent the Indians doing as we wish them – to unite, and let them consider their lands as the common property of the whole . . . you want, by your distinctions of Indian tribes in allotting to each a particular tract of land, to make them to war with each other.

The way, and the only way, to check and to stop this evil, is, for all the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land; as it was at first, and should be yet; for it never was divided, but belongs to all, for the use of each. That no part has a right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers . . .¹⁵

Establishing his base at Tippecanoe, removed from the white frontier, Tecumseh also reformed tribal politics: ‘Since my residence at Tippecanoe we have endeavoured to level all distinctions – to destroy village chiefs, by whom all mischief is done. It is they who sell our lands to the Americans. Our object is to let our affairs be transacted by warriors.’¹⁶ His third and most momentous step was, after negotiations with Governor Harrison had become bogged down, to call the Indian tribes to a united war against the white Americans. To this end he travelled incessantly for four years, taking his message to the Chocktaws, the Creeks in the south-west, to the Seminole in Florida, to the Osages, the Potawatamies, and to the Huron in the north.

The unity called for by Tecumseh raised, as always, questions of leadership (united under whose leadership) and strategy. The leadership of most of the tribes that Tecumseh called on refused to heed his call. Tecumseh had to go against the currents of both traditional tribal politics and the divide-and-rule tactics of the US government. Slicing off tribes by separate treaties and promises was only one of the stratagems used. The objective of the US government was to turn the Indians from hunters into agriculturalists, who would then no longer need as much land. One of the methods for accelerating this transformation was, as President Jefferson wrote to Governor Harrison in 1803, to subsidise state trading houses to supply the Indians at cost prices: ‘we shall push our trading houses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them [the Indians] in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands.’¹⁷ In other words, a strategy of bribery, creating political dependency through debt, aimed at chiefs – precisely what Tecumseh had denounced. Later, the

premeditated assault which resulted in the extermination of the buffalo became an even more effective method of warfare, striking at the economic base of the hunting tribes. By then, virtually every conceivable method from germ warfare, psychological warfare using alcohol, economic warfare through trade and debt, ecological warfare using the reservation system, cultural warfare prohibiting Indian ceremonies, had come to be included in a politics of constantly increasing pressure in which military campaigns represented only the tip of the iceberg.

As none before him, Tecumseh gauged the implications of the white men's advance. Tecumseh's vision extended far beyond the horizon of tribal politics: the urgency of his call to a united stand stemmed from the realisation that unless Indians came together, the extinction of the race might be at hand. In all of the speeches to the tribes he visited this is the theme that comes through time and again. Unity was a condition for the survival of the Indian peoples.

In October 1811 Tecumseh told the Creeks: 'Soon shall you see my arm of fire stretched athwart the sky. I will stamp my foot at Tippecanoe, and the very earth shall shake.'¹⁸ Just as Popé before him, in 1680, had used cords of maguey fibres with knots tied in them to mark the number of days before joint action, Tecumseh gave out bundles of red sticks to count down time. Eventually the Creeks did take up the hatchet, as did the Seminoles, but not until after a civil war in which many of those who had resisted Tecumseh's call were killed, and not in the coordinated battlefield that Tecumseh had sought to create. During Tecumseh's absence, his base at Tippecanoe was raided and destroyed by Governor Harrison. Indian war societies retaliated with guerilla warfare, which, the Americans alleged, was being supported by the British from their forts in Canada. This was one of the developments that prompted the US declaration of war on England in June 1812. Tecumseh took a leading part in the war (he was appointed Brigadier-General by the British, although he did not wear the uniform), but it was not the great Indian war he had sought. He was fighting on the side of the British, rather than with British backing, and the British were fighting the US with reluctance. Tecumseh attributed this hesitancy to cowardice on the part of the British commander, but it probably also stemmed from instructions from London calling for restraint. England and the white (predominantly Anglo-)Americans already had the common satisfaction of ousting the French from North America; now they had a common interest in outmanoeuvring the Spanish in South America. Thus, unknown to Tecumseh, just as Pontiac had been unaware of the global political ramifications, there were larger interests at stake which called, in the long run, for Anglo-American cooperation. Tecumseh died in this war – the harbinger of Indian nationalism perished in the last battle involving Indians which was based on a conflict between Europeans.

The wars of the Plains

The period that followed was marked by the three Seminole wars and the forced removal of Indians from the south-east. The Indian Removal Bill (1830) was adopted under the presidency of General Jackson, when the 'West' was opened and the 'American way of life' took shape, the era famed for 'Jacksonian Democracy' – a democracy which, however, in the vein of exclusionist settler colonialism, excluded Indians and blacks. But his vision of Indian nationalism did not die with Tecumseh: 'There is an unbroken line of nationalist armed struggle from Tecumseh, to the Creek confederacy, to the three Seminole wars with the US up to 1840. When the US had militarily crushed the resistance, wealthy planters had occupied the lands and the Indian occupants involved had been removed to Oklahoma Territory, the focus of Indian nationalist struggle shifted to the Plains, with the formation of powerful confederacies led by the Sioux.'¹⁹

Beginning in 1861-3, when the Cheyennes took to the war path (coinciding with the 1861-5 Civil War), a struggle unfolded which was to occupy the US army for thirty years. The main phases of the Western war, according to the US army record, were the first phase of reversal (1867-9), a critical phase in which many western forts had to be abandoned, a phase of decision (1870s), a phase of mopping-up (1880s) involving the last Apache bands, and a finis (1890-1) which included the Wounded Knee massacre.

The Plains Indian 'has been characterised as among the most formidable fighters met during the entire frontier experience':

The mobility, tactics, arms, and training of the Plains Indians helped to make the Western War distinctive. The horse and the buffalo enabled him to hold out as long as he did, checking the advance of both the Spaniard and the Anglo-Saxon for a longer period than any other American aborigine was able to retard European invaders in the temperate zone. Because the Plains Indian lived in a horse culture, he was the only American Indian who was always mounted . . . He was a nomad without a settled village which could be made the target of attack . . . Mobile warfare, fought by a mobile civilisation, enabled the Plains Indian to frustrate even veterans who had learned something about mobility in the Civil War.²⁰

This was the era known by the names of war chiefs such as Little Crow, Big Eagle, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Geronimo, Cochise and Chief Joseph. One of the greatest shocks to white America was the defeat of the elite Seventh Cavalry under Colonel Custer: 'It was the kind of humiliating defeat that simply could not be handed to a modern nation of 40 million people by a few scarecrow savages. Especially not in the very middle of the great centennial celebration . . .' In effect, 'Crazy

Horse and Sitting Bull lost by winning. Troops harried them without mercy, and the Indians had no means of keeping a standing army in the field indefinitely.²¹ These imbalances, in numbers and economic development, ultimately took their toll, and modern weapons in combination with the extermination of the buffalo completed the American enterprise. After 1866, the breech-loading rifle and the revolver came into use, followed by heavier weapons – Gatling guns and howitzers. At Wounded Knee, it was Hotchkiss guns that killed most of the 300 that perished out of the 350 Minneconjou Sioux.

As Black Elk said: ‘a people’s dream died there.’ Yet this is also true: ‘Not only did this unrelenting warfare absorb the resources of the US as a state, but more important, it assured Indian survival and the maintenance of a land base, however narrow ... The treaties represent victory even in the face of defeat’, in the words of Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz.²² The value of resistance is measured not simply by whether or not its stated goals are achieved, but rather by the likely course of development in the absence of resistance. Armed resistance, from the Powhatan confederacy to the Nez Percés, pressured the European Americans and forced concessions from them, even when they possessed overwhelming superiority in numbers and technology. The attack on New England by the Wampanoag confederacy, led by Philip of Pokanoket in 1675, even though defeated, was among the circumstances that set the stage for the first treaty, between William Penn and the Delaware Nation in 1682. The successes of the Sioux in the Plains wars in the 1860s led up to the 1868 Fort Laramie treaty, famed as ‘one of a very few times that Indians were able to dictate the terms of peace’. Conversely, the end of the critical phase in the Indian wars coincided with the termination, in 1871, of the practice of concluding treaties with Indian nations.

Limited as they were, ‘tools of peaceful invasion and conquest’, and leaving a trail of broken promises, the treaties yet recognised Indian sovereignty and assured the survival of Indians even if under barely minimal conditions. They provided a land base and focal points of Indian identity, which could sustain enduring ‘cultures of struggle and resistance’. On this basis, the Indian struggle could resurrect in different forms in the course of the twentieth century – as cultural emancipation, civil and human rights struggles. In a song of the Thunderbird Sisters which chronicles some of the recent manifestations of Indian resistance, these connections, links in the great chain of Indian resistance, are illustrated:

We are the children of our ancestors
 born in the seventh generation
 We are the ones they fought to protect
 so we could build a new nation
 They lived a lifetime in those years

The occupation of Alcatraz
The takeover of the BIA
The liberation of Wounded Knee
The independent Nation of Caughnawaga
The reclaiming of the abbey by Menomini
The walk from California to DC
The creation of the Women of all Red Nations
The sovereign rights of Akwesasne.²³

Prophecy and resistance

The deterministic preoccupation of many Marxists with material conditions and technical factors has led to a general neglect of the autonomous force of spiritual motives as decisive factors throughout the entire history of humanity.

Wim Wertheim, 1970

In our ways spiritual consciousness is the highest form of politics.

Haudenosaunee, 1977

A key role in inspiring American Indian resistance has been played by medicine men and prophets or visionaries. In the older literature, this is mentioned frequently as a matter of course, but rarely is it discussed.

There are several facets to the role played by traditional religion which it may be helpful to distinguish. In the first place, religion or spirituality forms a part of human experience – dreams, visions, altered states of consciousness represent human faculties as much as physical, emotional, mental activities, as modes of obtaining and digesting experience. Second, in most societies religion stands in a certain relationship to power – considered to be identical with it, forming its foundation, or somehow orienting or guiding authority. Also, nowadays, some spiritual referent is seldom far removed from any centre of power, although the extent to which this is publicised varies greatly. Third, religion bears a certain relation to warfare, perhaps an aspect of societal conduct which is in need of spiritual sanction more than almost any other, precisely because of its proximity to the borderline between life and death. It is here that the role of prophecy in relation to Indian resistance comes in.

These roles played by religion are by no means unique to traditional societies – with some exceptions, they are almost universal to human societies. In interpreting the role of Indian prophecy, it serves to bear in mind its relationship to the totality and logic of human experience. Similar phenomena have been observed in relation to many resistance and revolutionary movements,²⁴ although they are not commonly discussed – earlier because they were dismissed as ‘superstitious’, and presently due to the prevailing marxist framework in interpreting revolutionary and anti-imperialist movements.

For the Europeans, religion formed part, and an important part, of the experience of conquest. If it served as a weapon of resistance, it was also an instrument of conquest. Religion has served not merely as an inspiration for and justification of conquest, but also as an instrument of control and psychological warfare, in the sphere nowadays referred to as the 'battle for hearts and minds'. This has been the case from the *reducciones* controlled by the Catholic Church in sixteenth-century Iberian America, to the 'missionary dictatorships' which accompanied the reservation system established by President Grant, to the evangelical organisations currently active in Latin America.²⁵ As the Haudenosaunee drily observe: 'Missionaries spread more than the word of God.'²⁶ But it is indigenous spiritual politics which are at issue now.

Indian religion has played, and continues to play, a creative role at every stage of Indian-white relations: as the foundation of Indian sovereignty, in resistance, defeat and resurrection. The European invasion and conquest represented not only a political and material crisis but a spiritual and moral crisis as well. As for other peoples who had not made contact with the European world before, their arrival introduced a new element – 'just the knowledge of their existence forces people to reassess completely their sense of their own place within the universe.'²⁷ Dreams and prophecies often announced the coming of the white men before they actually arrived. Among the Klikitat Indians on the west coast, decades before the Europeans actually appeared, the Washani religion of dream dances developed, as 'one of the first of the many waves of prophecy and dancing which swept through American Indian tribes of the Plains and the West coast when they were confronted by the white men'.²⁸ The prophecies said that a new race of men was coming bearing gifts for the Indians, while other prophecies told of the coming destruction of the Indian nation. Such dual features were also to be found in the prophecies relating to Quetzalcoatl (Aztec) and Kukulcan (Maya), essentially gods of rebirth and resurrection whose composite nature indicated the process of spiritual achievement overcoming the bondage of material conditions.

A similar way of thinking, based on the unity of opposites in process, in European thought is dialectics – a mode of thought that stems from Greek philosophy where it formed part of the philosophical thought common to antiquity both in the Hellenic world and in the Orient. The root idea of the unity of opposites was no doubt earlier expressed in religious thought, where it is a familiar notion – for instance in the Vedic description of Shiva as both creator and destroyer. With Marx, dialectics was essential to the interpretation of the inherently contradictory nature of capitalism, as in his famous dictum about the impact of English colonialism on India: both destructive of old, communal society and creative in implanting the seed of capitalist development. It is striking that a similar line of thinking (although not identical in content) is

expressed in prophetic-religious form among American Indians relating to a certain ambivalence surrounding the coming of the white men.

In Indian societies, the principles of social and political organisation derived from a spiritual world view. Sacred bundles, wampum belts, totem poles or other ceremonial objects betokened this spiritual charter, as did elaborate temples and sacred books among peoples in the south. The spiritual tradition established the people's relationship with the universe, and as such, it formed the core of their inheritance, a source of self-confidence and the foundation of their sovereignty.

The powerful League of the Iroquois, which related to Europeans through negotiated settlements and alliances on the basis of sovereignty rather than abject dependence – a trendsetting influence in having Indian sovereignty recognised – was itself rooted in a profound spiritual legacy: the Great Law of Peace. It conferred on the Haudenosaunee a strong sense of their continuity as a people: 'Our culture is among the most ancient continuously existing cultures in the world.'²⁹

It is clear, then, that to Indians any political attack would be experienced also as a spiritual assault. As the arrival of the Europeans occasioned a spiritual readjustment, so did European aggression. As Crazy Horse was to say, the white men represented a 'new Power'.³⁰ As such, they had to be met in the way Indians customarily reacted to dilemma or novelty, by their seeking new powers themselves, through vision questing, dances or ceremonies. Hence every turn of the road, every stand taken by Indians in defence of their identity and their rights, was accompanied by a religious reorientation, of the kind usually referred to as a 'religious revival'.

Almost invariably, the names of the great war chiefs occur in conjunction with the names of prophets, who contributed the spiritual regeneration that created the moral basis for resistance. The Pueblo revolt was a religious war in origin, organised by medicine men, notably Popé, a Tewa medicine man from Taos. Pontiac's name is connected to that of the Delaware Prophet.

The years following the American revolution were a period of particularly profound crisis for North American Indians. White settlers swarmed into Indian territory and with them, disease, death, liquor, degeneration, prostitution and poverty, and a general erosion of the Indian identity. In these years a 'force of regeneration and of Indian unity made itself felt in the teachings of Indian prophets who preached that the Indians must forsake the white man's teachings and his influence', prophets 'reasserting a clear division between the ways of the white man and the ways of the Indian'.³¹ In the east, the Seneca prophet, Handsome Lake, preached this Indian way; in the north-west, the most well-known prophet was Tekwansa, Tecumseh's brother. Formerly a drunk, he began to preach against alcohol and for abstinence from all of the white men's ways. With Tecumseh, 'Together they

became a force that on the one hand appealed to Indian spiritual pride and self-respect and on the other, demanded strength and unity for the struggle against the white advance.³² Tekwansa (Open Door) was also known as the Shawnee Prophet. The ‘retreat of Tippecanoe’, the base they established remote from the white frontier and its corrosive influence, carried a religious as well as a political significance: spiritually, it was a place of cleansing that drew many followers from every tribe in the north-west; politically, it set up a contrast with the Indians known as the ‘Hangers around the fort’, i.e., Indians susceptible to the manipulations of the white men.³³

The war years of the nineteenth century also saw the appearance of prophets, sometimes in the guise of war chiefs. The name of Black Hawk is associated with that of White Cloud, the Winnebago Prophet. Osceola, a chief in the Second Seminole War, was named after Black Drink, a ceremonial purification medicine. Crazy Horse was the son of a Sioux holy man and Black Elk speaks about him as ‘our great chief and priest Crazy Horse’: ‘he received most of his great power through the “lamenting” which he did many times a year’, so Black Elk explains.³⁴ His was the era of what T.E. Mails called *the Mystic Warriors of the Plains*.

Without this spiritual dimension, the resistance which held the Europeans at bay for so long would not have been possible – before resistance can be a political or military reality, it must first be a psychological reality. As Balandier remarked about decolonisation movements, *libération psychologique* is an essential precondition for political liberation.³⁵ Spiritual regeneration, therefore, is not just a byproduct or background music to indigenous resistance, but rather its wellspring and epicentre.

Traditional religion was involved not only in motivating Indian resistance but also in organising it. The spiritual foundations of Indian societies also found expression in the clans and war societies, each with its particular medicine ways. There was a close bond, as in most other societies, between warriors and shamans. The shaman has been characterised as the sacred politician: ‘The shaman’s work entails maintaining balance in the human community as well as in the relationships between the community and the gods or divine forces that direct the life of the culture.’³⁶

The warrior and the shaman are kin in that the medicine man is also a warrior of a kind – Carlos Castaneda’s Don Juan, for instance, frequently describes himself as a warrior. In his turn, the warrior also ‘makes medicine’ in preparation for battle. Every description of Indian warrior ways includes how soul-cleansing ceremonies precede battle, as they do the killing of animals in the hunt.³⁷ Power on the battlefield, which means personal courage to the Indian brave, is fuelled from the same source as spiritual strength. To the warriors of the Plains, purification

rites and vision quests are the same as Shinto ceremonies and Zen meditations to the Samurai: rites of consecration and exercises in self-mastery.

When, in the 1880s, defeat was becoming a glaring reality, this necessitated yet another spiritual reorientation: 'Thoroughly defeated by the might of the white man's armies, removed from their sacred homeland, with their leaders killed or rendered powerless, the Indians were at a point where only a spiritual revival could bring them from the depths of despair.'³⁸ It was this crisis that produced Wavoka's Ghost Dance, the Drum religion or Powwow introduced by Tail Feather Woman among northern tribes, the spreading of the Peyote cult, as the Native American Church, and Black Elk's vision of the sacred tree. The Ghost Dance was a movement that still inspired resistance, but the massacre of Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee in 1890 was the end of it. The other cults and perspectives were concerned not with resistance but with reorientation, under a new moon and a horizon dominated by Europeans. They enabled Indians to maintain their identity and their sanity, amidst the depth of misery. As new departures, different from the traditional ceremonies, they gave sustenance in the time of transition, comparable perhaps to the cargo cults of Melanesian societies.

Time and again, then, political shifts have been accompanied by religious reorientations, testifying to the wholeness of American Indian culture. This has also been the case south of the Rio Grande. In Mexico in 1810, and again in 1910, rebelling Indian peasants marched to demand land in the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Virgin of Guadalupe is another instance of Indians following their own religion under Christian camouflage: 'the scene of her appearance to the Indian Juan Diego was a hill that formerly contained a sanctuary dedicated to Tonantzin, "Our Mother", the Aztec goddess of fertility.' Many Indians still call her Guadalupe-Tonantzin.³⁹ Tonantzin is also an aspect of the widely worshipped Corn Mother. Catholics gave her the name of the Virgin, which signifies another concept of motherhood, as mother of Christ. The syncretism of the Indian Virgin, a merger of Indian and Christian heavens, served to facilitate the European political take-over and spiritual penetration of Indian society. It also forms part of a civilisational synthesis which in Mexico is more developed than anywhere else.

For North American Indians, the period from the 1880s to the 1920s was a dark time of demoralisation and poverty. In the United States neocolonialism was institutionalised successively through measures such as the Dawes Act (1886), which sought to turn Indian lands into privately owned allotments, the American Indian Citizenship Act (1924), the Indian Reorganisation Act (1934), which provided for local self-determination although under the federal tutelage of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Claims Commission Act (1946), which was

marred by too many loopholes, and the Termination Policy of the 1950s, which sought to eliminate the treaties.

From the late 1960s, simultaneous with a vast global upsurge of mass activism, there was an Indian awakening and a growth of mass movements. 1968 saw both the occupation of Alcatraz and the birth of the American Indian Movement (AIM). During the 1970s, there were many manifestations of Indian mass activism, of which the take-over of Wounded Knee in 1973 is the most well known. The Indian resurrection was, as before, accompanied by a spiritual reawakening and a mass return to traditional ceremonies. And as they did to the war societies of earlier times, medicine men act as the spiritual advisors of Indian political organisations, such as AIM.

In the different countries of Central and South America, divergent cyclical rhythms of activism and recuperation existed, but in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been an Indian resurrection here also – among the Quechua and Aymara peoples in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, the Amazonian peoples in Brazil and Paraguay, the Mapuches in Chile, and Indian peoples in Colombia, Venezuela and Panama. Sendero Luminoso, presently active in Peru, is essentially a Quechua movement. The massive participation, particularly since 1980, of Indians in the guerilla movements in Guatemala is well known. It is a participation which is consistent with the Indian world view which, underneath the mimicry of conditional assimilation, has retained its integrity and continues to be inspired by the perspectives and prophecies of the sacred book, the *Popol Vuh*.

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