

“Civilization from Savagery”: Amerika’s Indian Schools and cultural genocide

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2003

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Confining the indigenous peoples of south-western Amerika — notably Geronimo's refusenik Apaches — to reservations took a quarter of the (admittedly small) US army decades. One of those responsible, Lt. Richard Henry Pratt felt a more efficient method of controlling these rebellious native Americans was to indoctrinate them in "the knowledge, values and mores of Christian civilization", a process he started on Apache prisoners of war held at St Augustine, Florida in the 1875. Challenged by President Hayes that his time might be better spent in the (killing) field, Pratt responded: "Here a Lieutenant struggles to evolve order out of the chaos of fourteen different languages. Civilization out of savagery! Industry and thrift out of laziness! Education out of ignorance! Cleanliness out of filth!"

There's no suggestion here that native cultures had the slightest worth to Pratt's adherents, but then arrogant do-gooding 'we-know-best' liberals have always preferred their genocide cultural. Their interests dovetailed with the Army's. As US Indian Commissioner Thomas Morgan observed in 1882: "It cost \$1 million to kill an Indian in battle, but \$1,200 for eight years of schooling." After three years at St Augustine, Pratt was given a facility of his own, Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute, and the year following that disused barracks at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. As early as 1870, Congress cleared \$100,000 to allow churches and missionary societies to run schools for the Indians on reservations.

Towards the Total Institution

What Pratt did — in line with European mass education theory at that time — was to create the Indian School as a total institution in the Foucauldian sense.

Firstly, he shifted his focus from adult Prisoners of War to their children, judged more vulnerable. Secondly, feeling 'home influences' encouraged them to hang on to their culture, the children were transported thousands of miles from the reservation by train (and later Greyhound coach) and boarded at Carlisle in order to disorientate and isolate them. Thirdly, Carlisle had an extreme emphasis on order and military discipline, each child being issued a uniform, taught to drill and subjected to severe rules.

Parents refusing to send children to Indian School could have rations withheld by the reservation authorities or the children physically seized from them. They had little idea where they were going or the fate that awaited them on arrival — possibly even death in light of past experiences at the hands of Civilisation. On arrival, their clothes and travel bags were burned, and they were given regulation European clothes. Their hair — considered sacred in many native American societies — was shorn had their "unpronounceable" Indian name replaced with a European one and a number. One woman described her experience:

"When you first started school, they looked at you, guessed how old you were, set your birth date and gave you an age. Then they assigned you a Christian name. Mine turned out to be...Fred.

English was the only permitted language. Children caught speaking their own language or failing to understand orders in English were punished with beatings or being forced to eat soap or kneel for hours on bare floor-boards. They were only permitted to return home for short periods once or twice a year and those attempting to run away had bounties offered to recover them. Some died trying, others of epidemics that swept such schools — over a hundred received Christian

(not traditional) burials at Carlisle alone. Pratt boasted “each school has its own disciplinary cell”. Children were often chained there. They were considered “savages” to be “broken” in spirit like wild animals in need of domestication, though obviously it was Carlisle’s inculcation of Civilisation that was ‘savage’ (vicious) in its own terms. The emphasis on discipline and order even extended to Carlisle’s grounds:

The land was tamed, controlled and conquered and mirrored the process outlined and established to deal with the students, all an expression of the power of the white man... Never think for one minute that the Native children attending these schools were not at every turn reminded of their lesser status in comparison with white society.

Lessons Taught

So what – beyond a sense of inferiority – were the children taught? The young men spent even more time labouring than marching and the young women were taught how to do domestic chores. They were farmed out to local “Christian” families, supposedly to learn from their “Civilized” example but also to augment the School’s income. Implicitly, they were also being taught servile, dependant roles, particularly inappropriate for the young women given their power in their own societies as compared to their European sisters. What they also learned was brutalisation. Vi Hilbert of the Upper Skagit tribe remembers her time at an Indian School in Oregon, c. 1930:

[G]irls had to walk the gauntlet and get the backs of their legs switched [with belts, sticks or hairbrushes]. And if the switcher was too light on the switch, they had to do it hard. These girls had legs that were swollen three times their size.

As well as forcing them to beat each other, women graduating from these schools were sometimes made matrons, visiting their own brutalizing experience on others. Another side of the emotional trauma caused by education in such total institutions was an inability to express themselves. Oglala Sioux Ida Amiotte remembers:

My children always asked me ‘Why are you so cold? Why don’t you hug us?’ I said ‘I never learned how’.

In this way, the damage was transmitted from one generation to the next, instead of the traditional culture that would otherwise have been transmitted. Indian School survivors also recognise ‘Boarding School Syndrome’ of confusion and sudden rage, often suicidal.

When John Thomas, a Pima, shot himself in 1896, Phoenix Indian School officials claimed “No reason for such act can be ascertained”. They may have been arrogant and unreflective enough to have actually believed it themselves.

Beyond individual deaths, there was intended the death of entire cultures, as organiser of the excellent Heard Museum exhibition on Indian Schools LaRee Bates unequivocally put it: “This was an American Holocaust”. This was borne as much of crude economics as crude racism:

A wild Indian requires a thousand acres to roam over, while an intelligent man will find a comfortable support for his family on a very small tract... Barbarism is costly, wasteful and extravagant. Intelligence pro-motes thrift and increases prosperity.

European cattle ranching was probably as extensive as Apache huntergathering, though unprofitable. By forcing the Apache to settle and their children to become economically dependant on the European economy, they became locatable and controllable. A loose social structure that prevented the formation of permanent hierarchies and excess accumulation of private property was replaced by the authoritarian and capitalist European way of doing things, near-equality replaced by servitude, spiritual and emotional wholeness by loss of identity and missionary cant.

The Civilisers Lost

The Indian Schools movement has been described in David Wallace Adams' *Education for Extinction* as "the last great Indian war ... waged against children". Vastly powerful and surprising is that — for all its casualties — the (accurately) self styled Civilisers lost.

Given the brutality, the humiliation, the sheer lack of loving welcome, the children didn't want to adopt European culture. They secretly spoke their own languages, hid their medicine bundles. They longed for their short vacations home "when I speak Indian" and often tried to run away there across thousands of miles. In face of the spectacle of menial dependency, even European liberals like G Stanley Hall were arguing by the 1920s:

Why not make him a good Indian rather than a cheap imitation of the white man?

Come 1928, even the Indian Commission was inclined to agree. The Meriam Report condemned Indian Schools as both educationally and hygienically inadequate. Reforms were made in an attempt to save the system: uniforms and drill were phased out by the 1950s, outwork a decade later. By the 1960s, the federal government described Indian Schools as "deplorable" and they were turned over to native American administration, at the same time education radicals were demanding the teaching of Black history in mainstream schools.

Despite this, now only half a dozen such institutions survive in Amerika, most boarded up and awaiting redevelopment.

Graduation ceremonies at Carlisle ended with the triumphal acclamation that "the Indian in you is DEAD" but native American cultures live on and — in Amerika at least — it is Lt. Pratt's dream that has truly died.

Learning Lessons

Why, then, are Indian Schools still an issue? Firstly, the US administration still won't acknowledge responsibility for damage done to native Americans, their cultures and children. Whilst Canada acknowledges national shame for the abuse of First Nation children in their Church schools and Australia annually says "Sorry" to the Aborigines, the US government will not acknowledge their abuse, yet another attempt to evade admission a genocidal history that also bred the Indiana Eugenics laws and other grotesque examples of crass, racist social engineering later to sweep the world.

Secondly, what happened in Amerika up to half a century ago is still happening now across the world, particularly in Africa. From the deeply racist Botswanan government interning Bushmen

in the name of their human rights not to lead “wandering, illiterate, primitive lives” to the missionaries still dishing out new names, Western clothes and haircuts, the pattern set by Lt. Pratt is being replayed now in the name development, Civilisation and a compassionate deity.

But the third, most important lesson is that these genocidal measures can be defeated by the determined resistance of those it is intended to destroy. From Geronimo’s ‘last ditch’ resistance raising the cost of bullets above that of schoolbooks to those children that preferred death alone under bitter winter sky to a day’s more ‘liberal improvement’, it is as true now as then that “if they oppress us this badly when we resist, how much worse when we do not?”

Perhaps there is a fourth lesson too, one that goes beyond questions of cultural survival. Even run to that end by the native Americans themselves, the Schools still failed. Were they rejected because of the painful past associated with them or for the reason all schooling is instinctively rejected, as impersonal control, the same hatred of the wild and undirected, a shaping of identity and purpose to that of broader society and not our own freedom and authenticity?

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Retrieved on August 23, 2009 from green-anarchy.wikidot.com
From *Green Anarchist* Issue 68–69, Summer 2003

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