

THE NATIVE AMERICAN WORLD VIEW

By Gary Nash

While Native American and European cultures were not nearly so different as the concepts of "savagery" and "civilization" imply, societies on the eastern and western sides of the Atlantic had developed different systems of values in the centuries that preceded contact. Underlying the physical confrontations that would take place when European and Native American met were incompatible ways of looking at the world. These latent conflicts can be seen in contrasting European and Indian views of 1) man's relationship to his environment, 2) the concept of property, and 3) personal identity.

1) In the European view the natural world was a resource for man to use. "Subdue the earth," it was said in Genesis, "and have dominion over every living thing that moves on the earth." The cosmos was still ruled by God, of course, and supernatural forces, manifesting themselves in earthquakes, hurricanes, drought, and flood, could not be controlled by man. But a scientific revolution was under way in the early modern period, which gave humans more confidence that they could comprehend the natural world—and thus eventually control it. For Europeans the Secular and the sacred were distinct, and man's relationship to his natural environment fell into the secular sphere.

In the Indian ethos no such separation of secular and sacred existed. Every part of the natural world was sacred, for Native Americans believed the world was inhabited by a great variety of "beings," each possessing spiritual power and all linked together to form a sacred whole. "Plants, animals, rocks, and stars," explains Murray Wax, "are thus seen not as objects governed by laws of nature but as 'fellows' with whom the individual or band may have a more or less advantageous relationship." Consequently, if one offended the land by stripping it of its cover, the spiritual power in the land—called "manitou" by some woodlands tribes—would strike back. If one overfished or destroyed game beyond one's needs, the spiritual power inhering in fish and animals would take revenge because humans had broken the mutual trust and reciprocity that governed relations between all beings—human and nonhuman. To exploit the land or to treat with disrespect any part of the natural world was to cut oneself off from the spiritual power dwelling in all things and "was thus equivalent to repudiating the vital force in Nature."

2) Because Europeans regarded the land as a resource to be exploited for man's gain it was easier to regard it as a commodity to be privately held. Private ownership of property became one of the fundamental bases upon which European culture rested. Fences became the symbols of exclusively held property, inheritance became the mechanism for transmitting these "assets" from one generation to another within the same family, and courts provided the institutional apparatus for settling property disputes. In a largely agricultural society property became the basis of political power. In fact, political rights in England derived from the ownership of a specified quantity of land. In addition, the social structure was largely defined by

the distribution of property, with those possessing great quantities of it standing at the apex of the social pyramid and the mass of property less individuals forming the broad base.

In the Indian world this view of land as a privately held asset was incomprehensible. Tribes recognized territorial boundaries, but within these limits the land was held in common. Land was not a commodity but a part of nature that was entrusted to the living by the Creator. John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary who lived with the Delawares in the eighteenth century, explained that they believed the Creator "made the Earth and all that it contains for the common good of mankind; when he stocked the country that he gave them with plenty of game, it was not for the benefit of a few, but of all: Every thing was given in common to the sons of men. Whatever liveth on the land, whatsoever groweth out of the earth, and all that is in the rivers and waters . . . was given jointly to ail and every one is entitled to his share. From this principle hospitality flows as from its source." Thus, land was a gift of the Creator, to be used with care, and was not for the exclusive possession of particular human beings.

3) In the area of personal identity Indian and European values also differed sharply. Europeans were acquisitive, competitive, and over a long period of time had been enhancing the role of the individual. Wider choices and greater opportunities for the individual to improve his status—by industriousness, valor, or even personal sacrifice leading to martyrdom—were regarded as desirable. Personal ambition, in fact, played a large role in the migration of Europeans across the Atlantic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In contrast, the cultural traditions of Native Americans emphasized the collectivity rather than the individual. Because land and other natural resources were held in common and society was far less hierarchical than in Europe the accumulative spirit and personal ambition were inappropriate. "In contrast to the exalted position of man in Judeo-Christian tradition," writes Calvin Martin, "the Native American cosmology conferred upon the Indian a rather humble stature." Hence, individualism was more likely to lead to ostracism than admiration in Indian communities.

In spite of these differences it was not inevitable that the confrontation of European colonizers and Native Americans should lead to mortal combat. Inevitability is not a satisfactory explanation for any human event because it implies that man's destiny is beyond human control and thus relieves individuals and societies of responsibility for their actions. Inevitability, in fact, is a winner's rationalization for historical clashes; it is a mode of explanation rarely advanced by the losing side. And we shall see that the clash of cultures took many forms in the New World, with nothing predetermined.

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1. Compare and Contrast the European and Native American concepts of:
 - Man's relationship to his environment

- Private property and Land
- Personal identity

2. Agree or disagree: In spite of these differences, it was not inevitable that the confrontation of European colonizers and Native Americans should lead to mortal combat.