

# **Savage representations in the discourse of modernity: Liberal ideology and the impossibility of nativist longing<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In “Educating Savages,” intercultural communication scholar Richard Morris notes with poignancy that even when Native Americans realize their “true” history, there is in such realization “a sense of curiosity, even a sense of loss, but not quite a sense of longing.” Using perspectives in critical intercultural communication, this study seeks to uncover the mechanisms of domination in the discourse of modernity that makes nativist longing all but impossible for the assimilated native. Although I find insightful Morris’ formulation of the process of modern education as a form of violent transculturation for native subjects, I argue that such phenomenon cannot be fully explained without taking into account the particular *oeuvre* of liberal ideology that underpins much of modern thought and education. To analyze the surreptitious ways by which liberal epistemology subverts nativist desire, the study revisits the material and psychic mechanisms of the colonial process, unpacks the hidden discourse of liberalism as its justifying content, and argues for the disavowal of liberalism’s premises as indispensable to empowering decolonization. It concludes by outlining the contours of an emerging counter-discourse, ‘anarcho-primitivism,’ as a way of breaking open modernity’s foreclosures and allowing the imagining of alternative human futures.

**Keywords:** *liberalism; modernity; Indigenous; native; colonial violence; anarcho-primitivism*

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<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt gratitude to dear friend and colleague, Richard Morris, whose brilliant essay, “Educating savages” inspired this reflection piece.

In fact, acculturation has always been a matter of conquest. Either civilization directly shatters a primitive culture that happens to stand in its historical right of way; or a primitive social economy, in the grip of a civilized market, becomes so attenuated and weakened that it can no longer contain the traditional culture. In both cases, refugees from the foundering groups may adopt the standards of the more potent society in order to survive as individuals. But these are conscripts of civilization, not volunteers.

Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive*, p. 204

To control the conceptual scheme is . . . to command one's world.

Goldberg, 1993, p. 9

## **Prolegomena to acquiescence and alternatives**

In one section of her devastating book, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Canadian investigative journalist Naomi Klein (2007) makes the claim that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the other command economies of Eastern Europe, proponents of Western neoliberal economics lost no time in foreclosing the possible emergence of a third model, positing a mixed economy as an alternative to monopolistic capitalism, now seemingly the sole remaining hegemonic model for organizing human economic activity around the globe. Francis Fukuyuma's (1992) "end of history" thesis, along with the swift and ruthless imposition of so-called "market fundamentals" as a precondition for aiding collapsed and collapsing economies during this period, according to Klein, allowed predatory capitalism to run amuck in the world, taking advantage of the shock of crisis to further accelerate the transfer of wealth from the impoverished sectors of the world's population to the already mega-rich few. The precluding of any other alternative to market capitalism, Klein contends, was stage-managed not just at the level of policy,<sup>2</sup> but just as importantly, *at the level of discourse*. In portraying the triumph of free market capitalism as both natural and inevitable (i.e. of the order of historical necessity), unregulated corporate greed managed to overrun the globe with its disastrous policies in the two-decade long period following the post-Soviet collapse. It is only with the spectacular unraveling of the world's biggest economy - that of the United States - beginning in the summer of 2008 that many in the Southern Hemisphere seem to have begun to see what to them must be a just and fitting comeuppance for a predatory system that has long been wreaking havoc on their economies through state-corporate collusion.

I open with this seemingly unrelated political scenario to signal the burden of this piece, one that has to do with the creation of a discursive condition for a people that, not unlike the

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<sup>2</sup> As in the case of continuing United States trade, economic, and financial embargo against Cuba.

monopolization of the discursive space by capitalist ideology described in the foregoing scenario, precludes the possibility of an alternate response (besides acquiescence) to the violence of an imposed social order; only this time, within the context of that quintessential intercultural encounter in modern human history: the European colonization of the so-called New World and the consequences of that colonial encounter for the conquered native peoples. The questions I pose are age-old and almost trite: How does self-subjection happen? How does acquiescence close out memory or imagination of alternatives? Is mere absence of overt coercion or violence the equivalent of freedom of thought? That domination happens not only through direct physical threat, but also through the manipulation of symbols, images, and representations - i.e., through ideological and discursive means - is, one hopes, by now a scholarly truism.<sup>3</sup> But commonplace as ideological and discursive critiques of symbolic power have currently become in cultural and critical studies, there appears to be one glaring social and discursive formation as yet to be fully wrestled with in all its subtle but devastating implications. I am referring to the core logic and culture of modern civilization itself and its claim to monopoly of the only legitimate vision of what it means to be a human being on the planet. The presumption, of course, is ironic, if not altogether preposterous, especially when one considers modernity's very short career on the face of the planet (at least relative to the totality of humankind's history<sup>4</sup>) with roots in a mere 10,000 years of settled agriculture; inaugurated on a grand scale with the onset of the project of colonial conquest (1492 onwards); accelerating to its most productive moment in the era of the Industrial Revolution (beginning in the 1800s); and now hurtling into what some say is its dizzying last phase or final stage accompanied by never-before seen time-space compression in the age of information technology and economic globalization. A now globalized culture wedded primarily to wealth accumulation, individualism, private ownership, racial supremacy, and consumption as the taken-for-granted key signifiers of being human, it is a culture whose record of the past five hundred years has brought, ironically, not the promised thriving of all but rather the institutionalization of inequality, violence, militarism, ecocide, and the patent rule of brute

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<sup>3</sup> Though obviously, in popular culture, one often still runs up against the assumption that coercion is only real if physical threat is present. For example, in a recent classroom episode, students wrestled with the story of a diasporic Filipina American recounting how, growing up colonial she had wanted nothing more than to be a little white princess like the characters in the ubiquitous English fairy tales in her childhood. Once having moved Stateside, however, she was rudely disabused of her expectations of easy inclusion into white identity when her unbleachable brown skin invariably brought subtle and not-so-subtle forms of rejection her way. Upon reading such, one student responded to the writer's rudely interrupted dream of qualifying as white by saying: "But nobody held a gun to her head!" - as if the choice was entirely hers in aspiring to such nonsense in the first place.

<sup>4</sup> Best-known scientific estimates of human existence outside settlement and agricultural surplus production place the period anywhere from two hundred thousand to 2-3 million years (depending on how "human being" is defined, whether or not it includes hominid prototypes such as *homo habilis*, *homo erectus*, etc.).

economic/financial/political power over any avowed democratic ideal in international and global relations.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the mythic narrative continues; material/economic wealth signifies and signifies powerfully. Even as land, mineral, fossil fuel, water, and other resource grabs are carried on to exhaustion around the globe (with horrific consequences for those dispossessed in the process), the recourse is to a subliminal reasoning by now guaranteed in its efficacy. The logic goes: “The peoples under whose feet are found the last remaining resources needed for industrial production don’t look like us, don’t live like us, don’t value and think like us; are lazy and unmotivated or are otherwise incapable of developing such resources for themselves; and are therefore undeserving of them. We<sup>6</sup> can negotiate and offer provisions for their relocation elsewhere, but if they refuse, we have no other choice but to do what we have to do; too bad if they don’t know what’s good for them.” Whether we are speaking of the clear-cutting of tropical rainforests in the Amazon region to make way for biodiesel production, the disastrous Athabasca Tar Sands mining in Alberta, Canada, the devastating diamond mining by Gem and De Beers Corporations in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve or a host of other corporate incursions in the regions of hitherto unassimilated or previously uncontacted Indigenous peoples around the globe, the consequences for the regions’ inhabitants - in the form of enslavement as cheap laborers for the corporations, cultural genocide, or their outright extinction - rarely inspires a serious cry of protest from the rest of us modern humans who, in the end, are the de facto beneficiaries of the projects of such extractive industries.<sup>7</sup> It is as though despite whatever protestations we make after the fact, underneath, we are all just social Darwinists by subconscious persuasion, believing that “whatever [is] happening to ‘uncivilized’ peoples around the world [is] not just natural and inevitable, but also an aspect of humanity’s ‘progress’ upwards from the apes” (Brantlinger, 1995, p.54).

The thesis of this paper is not one of essentializing a Hobbesean-like vision of human nature as inherently greedy, callous, or indifferent to others, but rather of exploring the ways by which such a response (of callous indifference) is made possible and perhaps even necessary, as a survival mechanism within modernity’s logic. After all, there is evidence to show that even

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<sup>5</sup> See the candid discourse on “plutonomy” (i.e., the rule of the wealthy) in the confidential report of Citigroup’s global strategist, Ajay Kapur in <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/6674234/Citigroup-Oct-16-2005-Plutonomy-Report-Part-1>>; also, Angela Barnes’ “Want wealth? Invest in the uber-rich,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 2, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The use of the collective personal pronoun here is deliberate and is meant to designate all modern subjects, this author included. To the extent that the majority of us now no longer live indigenously but by the industrial machine, *we* share complicity (albeit to varying degrees) with the decimation going on among the globe’s last remaining indigenous peoples.

<sup>7</sup> See for example the film documentary by Christopher Walker, *Trinkets and Beads*, chronicling the cultural and environmental havoc wrought by oil drilling in the Huaorani and other neighboring tribes’ territories in the Amazon heartland –all for the sake of a volume of oil extracted from the region sufficient to power cars in the U.S. for 13 days of driving.

Indigenous peoples, once “successfully<sup>8</sup>” acculturated into modern lifeways, are quite susceptible to developing the same propensities as their more civilized cousins. Indeed, it is the problematic of native acquiescence to the civilizing logic of modernity that is the burden of this exploration—an acquiescence so subtly induced and coercively ramified that its historical force now comports as irresistible and potentially catastrophic for an entire planet. Key to the exploration here is a critique of liberal ideology’s function as a primitivizing discourse hidden in modernity’s logic.

One may say there is nothing new in this kind of critical tack; after all, countless volumes have already been written critiquing the liberal vision of human life (cf. bibliographic list in Nicolacopoulos, 2008); besides, one may legitimately ask whether one can even refer to a singular consensus around the meaning of the term “liberalism” given its productive elaboration - over time and diverse contexts - in response to its critics. But to follow Saussure’s (1972) dictum that meaning only emerges in difference, the invitation here is to revisit the discourse of liberalism within the anchoring limits of what I would propose today is fundamentally liberalism’s only other: the differing rationality and way of being of the “savage” or the “primitive” that in today’s mainstream scholarship is hardly given space or place to speak other than as a degraded sub-human being. Thus, the conceptual innovation here is not in the simple rehashing of the postcolonial critique of liberalism (of which much has already been done), but rather the re-rooting of critique in an alternative counter-logic, in a kind of reverse interrogation; this time, from modernity’s universally excluded other, in the hope that, by doing so, alternative possibilities may be opened up and made thinkable for the human future.

## **Colonial violence revisited**

The originary inspiration of this line of argument comes from an essay by Native American intercultural scholar Richard Morris, titled, “Educating Savages” (1997). The subject of the piece is familiar: one that has to do with the violent consequences of epistemic colonization for American Indians<sup>9</sup> in North America whose virtual genocide and cultural decimation beginning

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<sup>8</sup> Often after a total destruction of their cultures and economies that forbids them any other choice.

<sup>9</sup> A note on naming: The terms “Native American” and “American Indian” are concededly highly problematic terms as ascriptions coming from an outsider/colonizer perspective; their use here is not without recognition of their fraught provenance. Indeed, casting vastly diverse populations under a singular rubric carries with it the danger of erasure of distinctiveness and internal differences, not to mention, at one level, falling complicit with the colonial ascription. However, to the extent that such diverse peoples have been positioned historically as sharing a common fate under what has been deemed the most massive holocaust known in history, the covering terms, for lack of a better alternative, serve the purpose of highlighting such shared history of suffering and oppression. This is in much the same way that the term “African American” or, for that matter, “Filipino American,” have come to denote, for better or worse, a common subjectivity—despite vast internal differences—through shared histories of suffering under slavery and under colonial domination, respectively. For a thorough discussion of the political

in 1492, with the so-called “discovery” of the New World by Columbus, is noted by the author as continuing unabated to this day. Having quite belatedly begun my own decolonization process as a postcolonial Filipina subject in the late 1980s,<sup>10</sup> it was easy enough in the fervor of my awakening to draw an almost one-to-one correspondence between the American Indian experience of ruthless deracination as described by the author and my own colonial angst as a decolonizing subject.

But Native American experience was by far more horrendous, as I was to learn reading for the first time about Native history. Stripped of their land, with 95% of their total population in North America killed in the encounter with European settlers<sup>11</sup> and the remaining 5% deprived of almost all of their anchoring symbols including their historic landscape, communities, and cultural traditions, one can only begin to imagine what the psychic trauma must have been like and its consequences for today’s survivors of that holocaust. Unlike my people who were at least fortunate enough not to have been completely overrun and permanently supplanted by their European and North American colonizers (as was the case with the Maori of New Zealand or the Australian aborigines), surviving Native Americans have had little choice but to be imprisoned in circumscribed territories called “reservations” right in the heart of Empire. But quite apart from the historic terror of physical and biological genocide, what has served as a continuing instrument of psychic torture for American Indian populations in North America was a state-sponsored educational apparatus in the form of residential schooling. Instituted in 1879 and maintained in some places all the way up to 1980, its original purpose and explicit policy was the destruction of the natives’ “savage” character, and, conversely, their tutelage and incorporation into the U.S. mainstream (i.e., white, European) society. In this system, American Indian children were forcibly torn away from their families and communities, and schooled in a regime, as Osage scholar George Tinker (in Churchill, 2004) notes, where they were “methodically stripped of their cultural identities and just as methodically indoctrinated to see their traditions - and thus themselves - through the eyes of their colonizers, chronically malnourished and overworked, drilled to regimental order and subjected to the harshest forms of corporal punishment” (p. xviii).

“The nature of the ‘national crime,’ bound up in this coldly calculated ‘education for extinction,’” according to American Indian scholar Ward Churchill, “was put quite bluntly by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the army officer selected by the U.S. to create and supervise its

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complexities and conundrums of naming, see d’Errico’s essay, “Native American Studies: A Note on Naming” <http://www.umass.edu/legal/derrico/name.html> (accessed 2/16/2013).

<sup>10</sup> I was a proselytizing born-again Christian from my late high school to college and post-college years while many of my high school classmates, disabused much earlier on of the universalizing claims of the U.S. brand of liberal democracy, were already either up in the hills with the guerilla underground movement or on the streets protesting with the movement’s political arm, the National Democratic Front.

<sup>11</sup> Estimates today of pre-Columbian Native American populations range anywhere from 100-145 million with the majority getting decimated either by disease or outright extermination policy by the Europeans.

system in 1879. The objective, Pratt publicly declaimed in 1895, was to ‘kill the Indian, [to] save the man’ in every pupil” (Churchill, 2004, p. 14). In a book titled after the said notorious policy, Churchill documents, tactic by gruesome tactic, the genocidal impact of American Indian Residential schools in North America. Taking to task some scholars’ equivocation over the use of the term “genocide” in the case of Native Americans, he rejects the hairsplitting and asserts that ultimately there is “no way of segregating the effects of cultural genocide from its physical and biological counterparts” (p. 6). Noting the devastating legacy of colonial conquest, anthropologist Mary Louis Pratt (1994) likewise remarks, “Under conquest social and cultural formations enter long-term, often permanent states of crisis that cannot be resolved by either conqueror or conquered” (p. 26).

There is nothing earthshakingly surprising in either Churchill’s or Morris’ tracking of the savage cruelty of European assimilationist policies. Indeed, reading page after page of the systematic violence of North European settler policy throughout U.S. history, along with other subaltern recountings of the same, after a while, begins to sound like a broken record: first, we hear of the awakened European appetite upon casting sight on the vast natural wealth of Indigenous territories (as the famous words of Hernando Cortez who followed after Columbus to plunder the gold and silver of Central America for Spain declared, “We Spaniards know a sickness of the heart that only gold can cure”<sup>12</sup>); then the search for rational justification as to why they, the European explorers, and not the native inhabitants, are entitled to such wealth and have the sole right to its disposition; followed by the ensuing massacre and/or use of Indigenous populations as slave labor in extracting wealth from the conquered territories, resulting in the permanent exploitation, displacement, and disorientation of conquered populations; and, finally, the culmination in the subsequent “whitewashing” in contemporary times of the historical narrative, as a way of acquitting the White settlers for their atrocities. One theory concocted in the service of this pattern of colonial takeover is the social evolutionary argument that makes the claim that “all ‘primitive races’ [are] doomed to extinction through mere ‘contact’ with civilization” (Brantlinger, 1995, p. 44) - claiming inevitability, rather than human choice and rapacity, for such an occurrence.<sup>13</sup> While the monotonous repetitiveness of the murderous pattern of European conquest and takeover of the New World by no means takes away from the savagery of the colonial project, what is striking in Morris’ piece is not so much the fact of colonialism’s brutality in the moment, as its poignant aftermath.

## **Colonial process: Didactic mimesis and native capitulation**

Morris (1997) frames what happens generally in systematized educational processes such as formal schooling in colonial or post-colonial situations, as a form of “transculturation,” i.e., “the

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<sup>12</sup> In Horwitz, 2008, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> A comparison of such dynamic with today’s corporate plunder and the consequent rationalizations that follow would be fascinating, if beyond the scope of this paper.

process whereby contact between and among cultures leads to exchange” (p. 155). Although he finds nothing inherently problematic in transculturation (“or with other processes through which individuals might seek *voluntarily* to acculturate and/or assimilate”) he considers entirely problematic “processes that coerce, manipulate, or otherwise require individuals to shed (or alter) their resident culture and ingest an alien culture” (p. 155). Here, he sees transculturation as involving two moments: acculturation and assimilation. He defines acculturation as “a moment within a larger process, a moment of divestment where one symbolically seeks or is invited or required to shed the world view and ethos of the resident culture” (p. 155). Its purpose is oriented towards a second moment of assimilation, “where one symbolically seeks or is invited or required to ingest the world view and ethos of a second culture” (p. 155).

There is much to parse out or even critique in this particular formulation of the acculturative and assimilative experience,<sup>14</sup> but setting this concern aside for the moment, my interest in this essay is in one particular form of experience acquired through such an educative process that Morris elaborates under the rubric “transformational mimesis.” Morris sees all processes of learning as involving some kind of imitation or mimesis; for example, “when a child in play mimics the behavior of a parent,” or when an admiring reader takes up the style of writing of her favorite author (p. 154). There is a form of mimesis, however, that is not merely imitative but reformatory, what Morris calls “didactic mimesis” (p. 154). Here instruction is seen as instrumental, a way of compelling someone in a subordinate position to take up another’s text (“text” here referring to a lesson, skill, belief, or competency) as a means of demonstrating proficiency to a “superior,” and thereby proving that one is deserving of praise or commendation. In this kind of didactic mimesis, Morris emphasizes, the relationship between teacher and learner effects a peculiar kind of dislocation - a form of mimesis “not so much concerned with nature as with how individuals can be compelled to make themselves functions or refractions of the environment” (p. 154). Such form of mimesis causes displacement of the self, with the refraction consequently serving as a replacement, or a metonymy, as it were, of the self. Didactic mimesis then is transformational mimesis taken to an extreme. It is coercive, manipulative, and therefore a problematic form of transculturation, one that presumes and insists that “a readily available, “superior” alternative identity provided by the dominant society furnishes the only means of escape for those who are ‘trapped’ by their heritage” (p. 155). The deal with this kind of transformative education is that, even when direct strategies of coercion and abuse (involving isolation and denigration or even severe punishment) cease to be overtly exercised it doesn’t mean that the transformative dynamic is necessarily suspended. Morris warns not to “confuse specific tactics with the *process* of transformational mimesis [itself]; for the disappearance of a particular tactic or set of tactics does not signal the disappearance of the process or of motives that sustain the process” (p. 157).

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<sup>14</sup> I would question, for example, if there has ever been an intercultural exchange between groups in the last 500 years that is not always already defined by a relation of some form or other of coercion, subtle manipulation, and/or outright violence.



Herein lies the key to what I want to focus on in Morris' thesis. To extend his analysis, I would argue that critical historiography, critique of colonial discourse, and the unpacking of the violence of domination may, on the one hand, awaken native subjects to the true nature of the civilizing process, thereby unmasking its illegitimacy and criminal character. On the other hand, although awareness of the ideological motive of colonial education may incite the native subject to pinpoint its tactics of deception and even produce counter-narratives of resistance celebrating key virtues of the resident culture, the irony is that, as Morris' thesis contends, the subject is compelled despite herself to recognize "the usefulness of the texts of transformational mimesis, and the necessity of complete assimilation" (p. 159).

Morris uses an illustration that he deems paradigmatic of this kind of transformational mimesis from an essay appearing in the volume, *Talks and Thoughts of the Hampton Indian Students*. The collection is one of the many volumes produced by Indian boarding schools—in large part, no doubt, to prove to administrators and other government officials that acculturation and assimilation were taking place.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I quote extensively from Morris' piece - both in regard to one native subject's articulation of his experience and in regard to Morris' incisive rhetorical analysis of such - if only to establish the kind of subjective condition produced within colonialism's discursive regime that is of interest to this author: the native subject's incapacity to long for that which she or he has lost even in the moment of seeing its true history.

The essay from one Indian boy reads in part:

Centuries ago we undoubtedly had full control over this fair land—this vast domain from east to west. Bodily we were free to roam, but our freedom of thought lay dormant as we slumbered heavily by the camp-fires of prosperity. What did the fertile valleys, the rich plains, the mineral treasures concealed in the hillsides mean to us? They simply told us that there was a good hunting ground, and there a good site for temporary habitation. But when the white man came he put everything into a new light. He saw how everything in nature could render him a service. 'Twas not long before we saw his engines making their way across our domains westward. Mountains were in his way but he climbed them. Rivers were there, but he crossed them. When he was killed by our arrows, he, as it were, sprang up from his own ashes. He brought with him civilization and freedom. These constituted the power which made him a most formidable adversary. Our wanders along his track proved a hindrance to his progress and we were driven away until finally we found ourselves penned on reservations with nothing to do and nothing to expect...Since then we have entered upon a stage of civilization which brings with it problems hard for us to handle. This is our past. (In Morris, p. 159)

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<sup>15</sup> For that matter, identification of particular authors (of said essays) was of less consequence than the "proof" they carry of the efficacy of the boarding school's mission.

Notice, Morris remarks:

There is in such rhetoric a sense of curiosity, even a sense of loss, *but not quite a sense of longing* [emphasis added].... Rather than longing, what we are more likely to encounter, as in this passage, is a sense of quiet embarrassment about what the student has “learned” his people were and are, as well as a desperately hopeful rhetorical gaze into a future that the texts of transformational mimesis promise. For this particular student, as for a great many others, speaking differently, dressing differently, learning differently, eating differently, bathing differently, valuing differently, thinking differently - *being* differently - lead to an inevitable conclusion: “This is our past.” (p. 159)

Morris unpacks masterfully both the rhetorical and psychic dynamic of such expressive performances of the destruction/recreation of the self in transformational mimesis:

Standing beside this pitiful creature, this discarded self, is the assimilated self, the “I” who now speaks to us through the transformed student. In this transformation of the old, discarded self to the assimilated self, the student’s history now is the story of “the white man,” of the people to whom he now believes he belongs. [In effect] his speaking to us thus becomes a celebration of that history, which is itself a mimetic celebration of the assimilated self so that for each “he” in the student’s story we now can read “I”:

I now put everything into a new light.  
 I now see how everything in nature can render me a service.  
 I make the engines that cross the domains westward.  
 I climb unclimbable mountains.  
 I cross uncrossable rivers.  
 I can be killed by arrows but will spring up from my own ashes.  
 I bring civilization and freedom.  
 I am a most formidable adversary.  
 I am progress.  
 I am the future. (pp. 160-161)

I find this observation (of the incapacity to long for that which is lost, even at the moment of seeing it) profoundly disturbing because it is so true to experience, even in myself. I see it, too, in the impatience of those who are wont to say to their fellow Native Americans or African Americans, or even Filipino Americans, who insist on having that horrendous history named, properly accounted for, and acknowledged: “Get over it already; how long will you blame the colonizer for what you’ve become? Surely you’ve now acquired the master’s tools and, if you so choose, you can use them to dismantle the master’s house!” And indeed, many succumb to the reproach and heed the advice to move on already, just like the Indian boy who allows himself to be “translated” from being the subject of the native text, to becoming unwittingly the active and willing subject of the conqueror’s text.

## **Colonial content: Liberalism**

How does such curious mimetic transformation occur? Why does cognitive critique and understanding of civilizational violence not necessarily lead to its rejection but instead to affective capitulation to its colonizing logic? The key I believe lies in what has become the quintessentially normalized (and therefore made invisible) foundational worldview of our modern human civilization: liberalism. My own contention is that liberalism, both in the way it has functioned as a discursive formation and as a system of representation undergirding the way of life of what we call the “civilized” world, has a way of turning every native subjectivity that fails to conform to its normative prescription of human *being* into a type of savagery. Through a rhetoric of doublespeak, it deploys a discourse of egalitarianism and respect for individual rights, at the same time that it hides at its core a patently exclusionary dynamic.

British professor of political theory Bhikhu Parekh (1995) remarks that the contradictions in liberal thought are not a contradiction between theory and practice, as most suppose - between its abstract principles and its actual historical record - but rather a contradiction inherent in liberal thought itself. It is this inherent contradiction that led critical race theorist Charles Mills (1997) to call the idea of the “social contract” in liberal theory in fact a “racial contract,” with its provisions applying only to a particular sort of subject that is invariably raced (White/European), classed (propertied), and gendered (male). In tracing the thought and writings of two of the most well known liberal philosophers, John Locke (1632-1704) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Parekh (1995) uncovers the interconnections between liberalism and colonialism and makes the case for understanding the exclusionary mechanisms in liberalism as not incidental to its otherwise egalitarian “essence” but, in fact, constitutive of its fundamental character. Even today, such dynamic of exclusion is hardly ever spelled out but may be gleaned nonetheless through social and institutional arrangements and policies that clue us in on who’s who and why, based on certain normative measures meant to adjudicate who counts (and who doesn’t) as a human being. These measures or qualifying standards in liberal discourse may be glossed as follows:

1. Possession of reason or rationality - understood exclusively as detachable from, and functioning best when insulated from, feelings, passions and intuition - as a human being’s highest faculty or instrument for knowing and controlling the world.
2. Possession of a natural desire to accumulate wealth, enjoy a life of material comforts, and master nature, based on the biblical understanding that the end of human life is the exercise of mastery and dominion over the earth. Thus, customary ways of life that place no premium on material accumulation or on domination or control of their environment are deemed more akin to animals and not human.
3. Possession of an inherently calculating, utilitarian, result-oriented nature, concerned with maximizing possible advantages from a given unit of human effort - an orientation well enshrined today in the logic of the modern corporation.

4. A capacity for individualism that implies the assumption of abstract, atomized, and presumably autonomous selves not beholden to relationships of interdependency with others and their environment; thus, in effect ruling out more communally-grounded ways of life that have been simply the norm for Indigenous peoples for much of human history prior to modernity's advent five hundred years ago.

5. Finally, a belief in private ownership. In Locke's own words: "God gave the world to man in common, but...it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational" (in Parekh, 1995, p. 84). And since Indigenous peoples were predisposed neither toward material accumulation nor toward private claims of ownership, they certainly did not qualify as human beings and therefore may be dispossessed of their land, territories, and resources with impunity.

For Hardt and Negri (2009), these often-unquestioned norms in the discourse of liberalism, in particular, the belief in private ownership, ultimately define the modern state. They aver, "Each time a European power brings new practices of government to its colonies in the name of reason, efficiency, and the rule of law, the primary 'republican virtue' they establish is the rule of property" (p. 14). In view of such, the authors regard the modern republic - from the great bourgeois revolutions to today - as in essence, "a republic of property" (p. 15).

These liberal requirements for human *being*, together, constitute a convoluted and manipulable logic that gives rise to a monopolistic vision of the good life and what it means to be human. Defining humanity in terms of a rationality characterized by individualism, aggressive pursuit of material wealth, commitment to mastery and control of nature, and a social organization premised on the values of utilitarianism and private ownership, liberalism as a worldview has the effect of casting every other way of life that differs from its vision as "savage," "primitive," or in the least, "immature." The reasoning is that "human life had a purpose, an overarching goal, namely to understand and master the world, and human capacities were a means to that goal's realization" (Parekh, 1995, p. 91). Consequently, in the encounter with American Indians, Europeans read the former as less than human in their seeming incapacity to realize their human purpose and for their lack of appetite for the pursuit of material wealth.

The view of human nature as naturally acquisitive, industrious, and rational led European colonialists to declare the Indian lands they chanced upon as "free," "empty," "vacant," and "wild," i.e., uninhabited, and the natives living on them as merely part of the flora and fauna, and the territories, begging to be tamed and civilized. Where a certain degree of 'development' was found, as in the case of American Indians who enclosed and cultivated the land, a new argument had to be concocted - that they were "not industrious and advanced enough to make *the best possible* use of it and produce as much as the English could and therefore the latter were vastly superior and had a much better claim to the land" (Parekh, 1995, p. 85). Locke (in Parekh, 1995)

noted, “The trouble with the Indians is that they lacked the desire to accumulate wealth, engage in commerce, produce for an international market...and have no interest in exploiting the earth’s potential to the fullest” (p. 85), and therefore the English concluded they had both a right and a duty to replace them.

It is evident from this historical tracking of the more than incidental connection between liberal ideology and colonialism that liberal thought, far from being merely an articulation of abstract universally-valid principles, as claimed, was in fact developed in and through very specific attempts to work out rational justification for why Indigenous territories may be taken over and conquered, why native populations deserved to be conscripted as slave laborers, and why the white European race was destined to be a beacon of light for the world, called to shine its civilizational wisdom on all and sundry (cf. the anchoring myths of “Manifest Destiny,” “Benevolent Assimilation,” and “the White Man’s Burden”). Little wonder then that liberalism’s assertion of “*egalite, liberte, and fraternite*” (as enshrined in the motto of the French Revolution) resulted, historically, not in a utopian world of respect for all by all, but rather in genocidal expeditions, brutal colonial conquests, the ravaging of the planet, and the continuing aggrandizement of those with power at the expense of those without (or with less). I would argue that this is because such egalitarian claims were made - and continue to be made today - within a closed circuit of communication, i.e., a discourse carried on exclusively among a polity of speakers that exemplified the prescribed form of subjectivity (White, European, Christian, bourgeois and male). Outside of that exclusionary “we” (as in “we, the people”) are all the purportedly defective, underdeveloped human beings and 3/5s of citizens who must either be forcibly brought up to full maturity, or otherwise exterminated as obstacles to human progress. In other words, free and equal treatment, as well as respect for territorial integrity, applied only to like societies such as those of the Europeans who had reached so-called “full maturity.” By contrast, all non-European societies were deemed in a state of “nonage” or “infancy,” ‘people without history,’ separate from the development of capital and locked in an immutable present without the capacity for historical innovation’ (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 84). Deemed incapable of self-regeneration, such societies’ possibility of improvement from their savage condition must, of necessity, come from the outside. For Mill, as for Locke, the right to non-intervention only applied to already civilized societies. Being participants in the colonialist ventures into American Indian territories themselves, both Mill and Locke are indicted by Parekh (1995), thus:

Both treat non-European ways of life with contempt, think that they have nothing to learn from a critical dialogue with them, and make no effort to understand them from within. Both use educational metaphors to conceptualize colonial rule, and see it as a pedagogical process. This allows them to assimilate colonial violence: to legitimate chastisement, to conceal its true nature, to blame the victims for provoking it, and to justify it in terms of the latter’s long-term interests as well as those of the human civilization itself. (p. 95)

## Beyond the colonial episteme

Herein then lies the power of liberal ideology. To the extent that liberal discourse, with its extolling of “progress” and non-stop “development,” has managed to convince the majority of the world, including the world’s poor and disenfranchised, to buy into its vision of humanity, it has now effectively become the shared culture of today’s modern humans - traditional differences between “East” and “West” notwithstanding. And its power lies in shaping not only conscious belief but, more importantly, unconscious desire. Whether enshrined in the language of physical structures (e.g., spectacular buildings, soaring skyscrapers, humongous megamalls, monstrous superhighways, super G networks, and other engineering and technological feats<sup>16</sup>) or embedded in institutional discourses (museums, government, church, schools, popular media, etc.) the message is clear: to be deemed worthwhile human beings, you must aspire to live (and consume!) like the rest of the civilized world. Anyone committed to subsistence living (i.e., neither buying nor selling or producing for surplus) is anathema (and useless) to the normalized system of the global capitalist economy. I submit that any form of anticolonial critique that fails to engage this hidden ideological foundation of modern civilization - whether of its Western or Eastern variety - is doomed merely to mirror its logic.

Consider, for example, the case of educated natives (or nativist scholars) dutifully seeking recognition as worthy liberal subjects by disputing the charge of primitivism and claiming that “we also had a civilization of our own prior to the coming of the West (i.e., we had our own religion, our own army, our own form of government, our own technological achievements, etc.)” and the consequent disavowal, “we don’t wear g-strings anymore or live in trees, or eat dog, etc. - see for yourselves our true advancement!”<sup>17</sup> Or the case of more sophisticated thinkers, such as the renowned Filipino writer, Nick Joaquin (1988/2004), who envision more creative ways of responding to the colonial insult by reframing colonial history as merely an acquisition of tools (e.g., new language, new technologies, new social and political organization, new religion, etc.). Joaquin suggests that perhaps one way of taking the sting out of colonialism is to redirect focus away from the insults and impositions of the colonial intruder to the remarkable ways in which Filipinos’ native physique, psyche and personality were forced to undergo revolutionary (and evolutionary) change that otherwise would have been effectively imprisoned in a timeless, unchanging state of fixity. Europe in this discourse is represented as the Hegelian dynamic that propels a languorous, self-content, and “unmotivated” people to fulfill

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Associated Press business reporter Pamela Sampson indicting the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez for wasting the country’s oil money on social programs for the poor (including health care, nutrition, and education) which she calls “meager gains” instead of investing in spectacular construction projects like those spurred by oil riches in Dubai and other Middle Eastern cities. <http://www.fair.org/blog/2013/03/06/ap-chavez-wasted-his-money-on-healthcare-when-he-could-have-built-gigantic-skyscrapers/> (accessed 3/30/13).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the discourse in Jocano (1975) and the video documentary, *Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire 1898-1904* (1995).

their spirit and their destiny. In concrete terms, it means being driven by the colonial impetus to diligence and progress as realized in the mastery of nature, the development of technology, and the ceaseless production and accumulation of material wealth. In Joaquin's reckoning, therefore, thanks to European colonization, the prehistoric Filipino managed to transform himself into a modern rational human being. Through the introduction of the tools of civilization, a ragtag group of tribal folk living in isolation from each other gained identity as a nation, attaining economic transformation "from a subsistence culture to 'the first world economy of modern times'" (p. 14). What more exemplary model of the kind of transformational mimesis that Morris talks about could be found?

Contrast this with Native American writer George Tinker's (in Churchill, 2004) radically different assessment of the colonial project:

While the notion that native people can somehow heal wounds opened up by knives that continue to be twisted in our bowels may be self-evidently grotesque, it is no more so than the premise that our healing might in any sense be contingent upon, much less synonymous with, our "reconciling" with the knife-wielders. The proposition is as disgusting as it is blatantly false. It might be contended with equal merit that "the best thing" for a rape victim, psychologically-speaking, would be to reconcile with her rapist *while* she is being raped. Apart from the moral repugnance of the idea, more practical objections arise. Any such "reconciliation" could, for example, be construed as a form of consent to the rape itself. This introduces an element of ambiguity which makes it arguable that the whole thing was actually a matter of consensual sex, or at least the rapist had reason to believe it was. Thus, the rapist's violation of his victim is recast as an act undertaken, however erroneously, "with the best of intentions," perhaps even in the sincere belief that it was for the victim's "own good." Absolved by appearances of genuine culpability, the perpetrator often displays the magnanimity of extending an "apology," professing that, "in retrospect," he realizes he may have made "a mistake." Ideal for the rapist, the scenario offers the victim *nothing* other than the possibility of "adjusting" - or "reconciling" herself - to her lot. (In Churchill, 2004, p. xxvii)

In effect, the giving of consent to the unrelenting, thoroughgoing assault of our globalized modern culture on the cultures and ways of life of native peoples, for the purpose of theft of their resources and labor, constitutes, in Tinker's analogy, rape of the victim on a routine basis and an acquiescence on the part of all of us modern humans to the arrangement.

Today, there is an emerging body of work loosely termed "anarcho-primitivism" that refers to such rapprochement with modernity's logic as hiding at its core a dynamic of intense hatred for ancient ways of life that thrived on a very different logic than that of modern humans, notably, the way of life of hunter-gatherers. Indeed, for as long as that whole history is relegated to nothing more than "pre-history," it is treated only as a study of the distant past that is effectively gone forever, having absolutely no usefulness for us, not even as the only known record of sustainable human life on the planet. If the millennia of Paleolithic existence of humans

on the planet is only preparatory to the “real deal,” which is the mode of large-scale, settled, mono-crop agriculture that issues inexorably in the hyper-industrial modernity of today, we can, like the anonymous Indian boy, afford to look on all our ancestors’ way of life with a sense of curiosity like some quaint artifact of history, feeling maybe even a sense of romance, loss, or nostalgia for those of us who look long and deeply enough to understand its more humane and life-giving logic, but ultimately without ever any real sense of longing.

It is interesting to note that candid records of European explorers’ description of hunter-gatherer ways of life - despite themselves - paint a radically different picture of that past than much later descriptions. Columbus, for example, said of his encounter with the Taino, the Indigenous folk of Hispaniola:

The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found and seen...are so artless and free with all they possess, that no one would believe it without having seen it. Of anything they have, if you ask them for it, they never say no; rather they invite the person to share it, and show as much love as if they were giving their hearts; and whether the thing be of value or small price, at once they are content with whatever little thing of whatever kind may be given to them. (in Stannard, 1992, p. 63)

Contrast this candid report with the later, by now more familiar, stereotypical rendition of the same native peoples as “creatures of a subhuman, Caliban-like nature who were intended by God ‘to be placed under the authority of civilized and virtuous princes or nations, so that they may learn, from the might, wisdom, and law of their conquerors, to practice better morals, worthier customs and a more civilized way of life’” (Juan Gines de Sepulveda in Stannard, 1992, p. 64). Certainly this is a curious 180-degree revision that raises suspicion as to the motivated character of such a glaring discursive shift.

I can only, in the space I have left, give an intimation of the anarcho-primitivist<sup>18</sup> recuperation of a radically different vision of life, ironically closer to that of the European explorers’ earlier candid narrations. In this alternative body of work (e.g., Gowdy, 1998; Jensen, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Quinn, 1995; Sahlins, 1998; Shepard, 1973/1998, 1982/1998, 1998, 2002; 2003; Wells, 2010; Zerzan, 2005) there is an emerging consensus re-evaluating the hunter-

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<sup>18</sup> Again there is no way to come up with a completely innocuous term for the perspective being put forward here. “Anarcho-primitivism,” however, is a term that has come into use to designate a scholarly turn towards the evidence of pre-civilizational peoples and lifestyles in its bearing for a critique of the violence and unsustainability of modern civilization. Interestingly, any affirming re-evaluation of pre-civilizational lifeways tends to be quickly met with the charge of “romanticism,” thereby precluding any reasoned examination of the evidence pointing to the possibility of its potential desirability; hence, the reason for this essay’s title, on the “impossibility of nativist longing.” It goes without saying that most modern subjects live a hugely inflated romance with industrial civilization notwithstanding its clear destructiveness.



gatherer way of life as perhaps the “original affluent society” (Sahlins, 1998), averaging three to five hours a day of what in our civilized culture we would call “work,” living on a subsistence economy premised on a logic of abundance (versus scarcity) based on renewable “flows” or naturally-occurring (and renewable) resources in nature instead of “fixed assets” (e.g., fossil fuels), and observing an ethic of leisure, gender equality, generosity, limited (not rapacious) competition, and communal interdependence and reciprocity with other beings in nature that allowed pre-modern human beings to survive on the planet for hundreds of thousands of years without endangering its delicate balance. Conversely, the turn to settled agriculture and surplus production<sup>19</sup> that enabled exponential growth in human population, hierarchy, and the accumulation of wealth is now increasingly being seen as perhaps a wrong turn in our human history, producing all kinds of unforeseen consequences. Foremost of these is eventual scarcity,<sup>20</sup> along with the necessity of building complex social organizations that have bred violent hierarchies and competition, wars, famines, and massive ecological disruptions.

Today, we face a crisis of such magnitude that it resists full imagination by any of us in terms of all its fallout and potential consequences. It is said that we are the only creatures on the planet whose singular achievement is that of bringing our species to the brink of extinction (either by a nuclear holocaust or a total ecological collapse). Modern civilization’s romance with the ideals of “progress,” “development,” and limitless extraction and production in service of a globalized economy run amuck is now bumping up against all kinds of limits set from the beginning (if largely ignored) by a finite planet. We are told we need new paradigms that will pull us back from the precipice of self-destruction caused by our addiction to growth and the cult of progress, and by our unbridled expansion and virtual takeover of the planet to the exclusion of all other beings in nature.

In the encounter with primitive peoples, Parekh remarks that Europeans acted toward non-European ways of life with contempt, thinking that they had nothing to learn from a critical dialogue with them, and making no effort to understand them for who they were. This contempt for the lifeways of hunter-gatherer peoples (and, for that matter, for all things wild and free, i.e., undomesticated) continues today not only in state and corporate policy aimed at exterminating or assimilating Indigenous peoples, but also in a massive disinformation campaign in academic and popular discourses aimed at representing their way of life as something no rational human being can ever desire, value, or even remotely long for. But perhaps now, in the emerging crises, we are witnessing a kind of turning of the tables, in which ancestry and environment will once again have their say. The impossibility of going back to hunter-gatherer ways on a global scale is only matched by the evident impossibility of going forward with our modern ways into cataclysm.

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<sup>19</sup> The operative word here is “surplus” production. The epochal break in logic occurs at the point of the shift from subsistence living to production for exchange and accumulation.

<sup>20</sup> Exponential growth in population, made possible initially by surplus food production through totalitarian settled agriculture (in contrast to more nomadic ways of life that naturally regulated birth rate), inevitably brought about competition for more land, food supply, and resources in an ever-escalating vicious cycle.

Caught in a conundrum of our own making, the issue, for those of us who take the task of decolonization seriously, is at least a matter of grasping that we have lived very differently for most of our history and are thus not doomed to destruction, except if we insist stupidly that our deep past and deep ecology have nothing to teach us. If we cannot listen and learn, however, their ancient summons could well become our last word.

I wish to end with a quote from another Morris, William, who, writing in 1885, a banner year for ascendant industrial capitalism, gives us a rare expression of the strange hope possible when nativist longing, far from being foresworn, is cherished:

I have no more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future of "civilization," which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long; what a joy it is to think of! And how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.... I used really to despair because I thought what the idiots of our day call progress would go on perfecting itself: happily I know that all will have a sudden check. (In Zerzan, 2005, p. 151)

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