

IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE ABOUT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Making sense of The Other

As we have seen, meeting of Old and New Worlds was cultural and ideological as well as material: crucial how people thought, spoke, and wrote about each other

Discover and conquest in Americas opened up European intellectual horizons tremendously: knowledge of how great the world was and the variety of people in it

Some expansion as contact with Africa and indirectly with Asia, then tremendous change after 1492

Indigenous Americans became prime examples of The Other, people seen as radically different. Alterity or radical otherness.

Colonists had to make sense of the people they saw, to understand them.

Not necessarily, dispassionate, objective, or disinterested

Elaborated ideologies or discourses to justify conquest and domination, often denigrated subjects.

Also developed ideas of selves as British or French or Spanish in distinction, by contrast with Indians. Sometimes Indians mere foil, stick figure for ideas that really about self

Some theorists see such ideas as almost always being implicated in or as rationalizations for domination

Most famous work, by Edward Said, Orientalism, study of European discourses about Middle East, about distorted and systematic set of ideas about Arabs etc.. A discourse of this sort is stronger and more coherent than simple stereotype. Found throughout literary and historical works about region. By extension, all writings about others.

But study of such discourses tricky. Problem of sampling: if range of ideas and opinions, depends what take as typical of rest. Also whether prove or just assume that always motivated by desire to dominate. Colley (in recommended reading) suggests that many of orientalist ideas about Middle East developed before European domination and expansion, in large part as reaction to feeling threatened by Barbary pirates and others.

Also, question of whether always made up ideas out of whole cloth, totally imposed them, or whether interpretation of what encountered, construction rather than complete fabrication

Transferring established stereotypes

Just as conquerors and colonists transferred established patterns of action, also used well established ideas about others, many from antiquity or Middle Ages

1. Monsters. Thought that much of world beyond horizon populated by people with one eye, two heads, etc. Early travel writings full of them. Part of emphasis on wonders of other worlds.

This why Columbus, in first reports, mentioned that no monsters seen.

One specific kind, hairy man of forest, thought esp. likely. Kind of wild, natural man

Soon learned that Indians esp. hairless, but continued interest in two themes: Indians as natural, elemental. Could be good or bad.

Also continued reading of essential nature from external form, as with wicked witch who hideous as well as bad. Continuing interest in reading Indian bodies, deciphering meaning

2. Another, from classical antiquity, Barbarians, so-called by Greeks and Romans

3. Specific European enemies, especially Moors for Spanish. Dramas of conquest of Moors that metaphorically about Indians. Paraguayan Indians just called Moros.

Also some positive transfers:

1. Garden of Eden. Earthly paradise. Notion that would find somewhere, still on earth. Nakedness of Indians often taken as sign. Even when later not taken literally, dominant metaphor, used over and over.

One variant, lost European king of East, Prester John.

2. from antiquity, not Barbarians, but equivalent of Greeks and Romans. We saw how Las Casas used.

3. Also other, more specific European associations: Lost Tribes of Israel; St. Thomas wandering early missionary, Irish, Welsh etc. Very persistent.

Many of these older ideas were soon discarded in terms of expectation that would literally find, e.g. Eden, but persisted as metaphors and implicit ideas

Often, in specific cases, complex construction, mix of ideas.

We have seen with N. England Puritans:

Saw selves as chosen people, Equivalent of ancient Israelites. In wilderness,

as had happened with Israelites, surrounded by awful peoples,
Chosen people but also tested and punished by God. Indians their specific
scourge. Like plague, locusts, etc. in Old Testament
Indians as Satan's representatives.
With captivities like Rowlandson's, Biblical captivities invoked

But also, has have seen, Indian men like Cavaliers, enemies in English Civil
War, aristocratic, hunting, leisured, etc.

Also, as have seen in Cronon, applying standards of English economy: neat,
fenced, gardens. Sedentary, not roaming. Improving not just living off land.
Etc. Indians of course failed standards.

Much later, Mormons developed elaborate understanding of Indians on assumption
that they descended from Lost Tribes of Israel. Have even sponsored
archaeology to prove.

Persistent metaphors and images

Also set of pervasive ideas used to understand and denigrate colonized peoples,
also found in colonization of other continents. Comparing native peoples to:

1. Animals. Sometimes specific animals. Puritans big on wolves and
rattlesnakes. Hated and dangerous.
2. more generally, with everything natural/wild/uncivilized. Good humans are
controlled/domesticated/ civilized. For Puritans and others, nature and
wilderness did not have positive associations now given. The word savage
summed up these negative ideas.
3. Children. Often to suggest that subordinate peoples not capable of governing selves.
4. Women. Indigenous men often feminized, treated as if not fully masculine.
Exploration and conquest often metaphorized as penetration. Also in practice:
colonizing men with access to native women, but not vice-versa.

How could Indians be both savage and feminine? Savage and children? Obviously
not consistent. Sometimes one metaphor dominant, often messy mix.

The "Noble Savage"

Not always entirely negative.

Often complex mix of positive and negative.

Some times interested reasons for positive: Many Europeans believed in
environmental determinism. Thus explorers and colonists eager to show that
natives at least partially good or redeemable, otherwise would suggest
Europeans would be degraded. Or to show that reasonable chance of success with
Christian missions.

Also genuinely impressed by native peoples, or mixed impressions.

Also a persistent strain of idealizing Indians, esp. by some commentators in Europe, less often among those actually in contact. Summed up by phrase “Noble Savage”, though those words not used that often. Seldom dominant among those commenting on natives, but sometimes there as alternative, counter-current. Esp. by those who believed or argued that all humans naturally good, only corrupted by society.

Indians portrayed as simple, close to nature, uncorrupted, generous, sharing.

Often real concern was with Europe, selves. Indians as foils. Famous essay by Montaigne on Cannibals. Thrust was, Ok, they are cannibals, but in many ways they are better than us.

Almost always, image of noble savage was way of working through contradictions, moral conflicts in European life. Things about which Europeans felt ambivalent. 1. wealth, property, advancement vs. simplicity, asceticism, sharing, altruism. 2. the city vs. the country. 3. hierarchy vs. equality 4. goodness or evil of human nature 5. simplicity vs. complexity 6. the natural vs. the artificial 7. ultimately, nature vs. culture.

Some way over on one end, e.g. Rousseau, Samuel Johnson, but many conflicted.

In 19th century, the noble savage was transformed by the romantic movement. Emphasis on feeling and passion. Also focused on individual Indians, famous chiefs and warriors.

In our century very strong. Environmentalist Indians, sharing, not greedy, spiritual and magical, noble losers. Seemingly very positive, many Indians accept, but ultimately condescending.

Since 1920s, wider appeal of primitivity. Magic, dark secrets, sexuality, wisdom. Embrace other others, Africa, Asia, as well as Indians

Few who really knew indigenous peoples embraced most simplistic views. Some who lived with learned complexity but still admired. Those who came in conflict with them or wanted to exploit, however, had no difficulty in imposing most negative, demeaning stereotypes.

Violence and Atrocities

One of most persistent issues in ideology about Indians is question of violence and savagery.

From very early, notion that Indians were cannibals.

As mentioned beginning of term, Columbus claimed that some of Indians that first encountered ate humans. Linguistic roots of cannibal, Carib, Caribbean,

Caliban

Ever since, persistent part of stereotypes about the other---missionary in the pot

Specifically used to justify enslaving of “Caribs”

Considerable doubt about whether Indians of Antilles really were cannibals.

More recently, refute claims more generally about cannibals.

Anthropologist, William Arens, said cannibalism has never existed as a general practice anywhere, as opposed to incidents that occur when starving or as individual deviation

Said that always either slander by one native people about enemies and/or European slander

Many who are sympathetic to indigenous peoples have embraced this view.

Certainly imputations of cannibalism have formed part of racist ideology about “the natives”

But in fact reality of cannibalism as cultural practice has been proved.

Indians of Brazil of early colonial period, Tupinamba, very detailed Jesuit accounts.

Also verified for Aztec and for Iroquois in 16th century (though not later) and other cases.

But still very touchy: huge uproar over anthropologists discussing Aztec case.

Part of more general problem of violence and brutality in colonial encounters. Similar efforts to deny concerning Indians. Claim that never scalped or took other trophies before taught by whites. Historian Axtell (see recommended readings) has refuted.

Saw in movie “Wilderness”—minimized Indian violence or treated as justified reaction to white brutality.

Much like Las Casas, who also knew better.

Fact is that during colonial wars, there was great violence, atrocities by both sides.

Cycle of violence, each side saw selves reacting to other.

Of course, colonists were the fundamental aggressors, and the colonial wars were almost certainly more brutal and ferocious than precolonial wars.

But ultimately foolish to follow Las Casas in portraying Indians as mild-mannered and peaceful. Not necessary in order to see European conquest as the fundamental wrong.

Torture of prisoners by Iroquois, human sacrifice by Aztecs not taught them by Europeans

Problem of frontier violence perpetual subject in westerns and novels.

Fundamental legacy and problem of American past.

Obvious answer is to recognize violence on both sides

The kinds of brutality and mass slaughter characteristic of Europe meant they in no position to point fingers, still less American settlers
But victimology ultimately weak position for understanding the past

Appropriation of Indianness

Long history of white Americans manipulating symbols of Indianness, ultimately appropriating symbols of Indian identity or essence

Esp. so for those who romanticize or idealize Indians in our century, but goes much further back.

Even for those who not trying to claim that have become Indians or taken on Indianness, Indians still symbol of America and American identity. As White Americans have taken the land, so manipulate symbols of people most closely associated with land

Book by Philip Deloria shows such identification went through several stages.

As early symbols of rebellion, freedom, reaction to control.
Boston Tea Party.

In 19th century, many fraternal orders. Male societies, met frequently, fancy costumes, secret rituals. Shriners and Masons and few others still in 20th century, but much bigger in 19th. One was Improved Order of Red Men. Took Indian titles, names, costumes.

First great American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, first founded Indian club, wanted authenticity, so started to consult Iroquois, ended up writing works on Iroquois and “primitive” society in general.

Then at turn of 20th century, many doubts about industrialization, urbanization.

Felt American youth becoming effete, cut off from nature. Boy scouts, summer camps, as reaction. Many with highly elaborate Indian themes and costumes and practices. Settler theme in open conflict with Indianness in scouting.
Continues today.

In 20th century, hobbyists who obsessively dressed up as Indians, tremendous attention to authenticity and detail.

Symbolically appropriating Indian identity, as Indians disappear.
Theme in many novels, westerns. White hero who becomes more Indian than the Indians. Endless obsessive reworking of small set of themes and ideas.

New age, renewed idealization. Claim to practice Indian spiritual practices---shamanism, sweat lodges, etc.

Not confined to North America. Very important in Germany and Eastern Europe.

Indians very mixed feelings. Some exploit, professional Indians, impart “wisdom”. Others understandably resent, see religion and customs not as ethnically specific, not something that non-Indian can appropriate.

No sign that obsession, appropriation, or controversy ending any time soon.