



## MARXISM AND NATIVE AMERICANS

edited by Ward Churchill  
(Boston, South End Press, 1984)

**The** genesis of this work is the editor's personal journey of discovery, a vision quest in native terms, the search for an 'American Radical Vision'. In the late 1960s and early 1970s this quest took him, seemingly, into every radical market where the thoughts of the many-sectored New Left were hawked with the turbulent exuberance which may well mark the spirit of the Vietnam age of American history. Here he found disappointment, for though New Left programs shared his concern for resisting and overthrowing what Winona Laduke characterizes in her preface as the 'synthetic culture' of North America, they had an artificiality of their own born from the fact that they were all imported wares, the product of a European synthesis, normally a Marxist one.

Churchill did, however, make one important discovery in his intellectual and physical wanderings. He discovered Indians and what he places before the reader is his central conviction that even if a unique 'American Radical Vision' must relate to the wisdom of Karl Marx (an assumption Churchill clings to but does not justify) it must begin with original Americans and their struggle to save a cultural identity by preserving a 'natural reality' despite the champions of synthetic culture—government and industrial capitalism.

It is upon this foundation (a quest in its own right), the search for a unique radical vision through the fusion of a native American reality with Marxist synthesis, that the book is created, its form determined. It is Churchill's intention that Marxist contributors to the book relate their theory to the issue of culture and that Indian contributors assess the Marxist paradigm.

For Churchill, and indeed for anyone interested in native revitalization and/or a broader resistance to industrial capitalism, the first round of this dialogue, Section I of the book, composed of two articles of note—one by Russell Means, the other by the Revolutionary Communist Party—is a complete disaster. Means, an AIM leader, rejects Marxism in the most complete and in the rudest fashion. Marxism, he argues, is 'The Same Old Story': it is nothing more than an extension of European thought and thus it is '... as alien to my culture as capitalism and Christianity'. It insists upon rationalizing human existence to industry whether it be in a pre- or post-revolutionary stage. Thus Indian resources and land, the target of capitalist cupidity now, would be equally exploited by future proletarian revolutionaries if then in the name of efficiency and equitable redistribution rather than profit. Means warns his pre-industrial fellow tribesmen that western culture is 'a business which regularly confuses revolution with continuation, which confuses science with religion, which confuses revolt with resis-

tance and has nothing helpful to teach you, has nothing to offer as a way of life'. There is, he explains, a fundamental difference between native and western culture. The difference can be drawn on a distinction between 'being and gaining'. Being is a spiritual exposition, a central ethic of Indian existence which rejects acquisition. Gaining is a material act—the core of western culture and Marxism, as the newest western shoot, is nothing less than the basis of a new European imperialism as Marxist policy toward aboriginal people in Russia, China and Vietnam graphically

the waste of capitalist economies and wonders, perhaps naively, that where there is common ground may there yet be a common ideology? Elizabeth Lloyd, in the most useful Marxist contribution, considers the Russell Means charge that Marxism, having a narrow European base, produced conclusions about culture which are inappropriate to third world applications. She argues, and demonstrates rather convincingly, that though Marxists may well have to plead guilty to ethnocentricism that Marxism does possess the conceptual tools which through proper application of dialectical methodology may lead to the 'articulation of a theory of social relations which includes cultures as its relational units'.

Unfortunately Lloyd's progressive lead, the idea that an evolved Marxism could develop an 'unusually broad conception of a truly universal social/cultural reality' is not taken up by other contributors. The article by Vine Deloria reverts back to stressing cultural distinctions and classes Marxism, as had Means, as the other unacceptable side of an unbreachable native-white wall. Deloria takes as

constructing a social theory that can bridge cultural boundaries hopeless. The RCP is not in search of a new theory. It is satisfied with an increasingly fossilized version of Marxism and thus it has been abandoned by thinking socialists. So too Indians are not represented in this book. What Churchill has discovered, and been captured by, is a rump opinion in his discovery of the American Indian Movement. Both AIM and the RCP are caricatures and thus their mutual condemnation is complete, comic and irrelevant. Churchill, found in Lloyd, Tabb and Robert Sipe socialist thinkers willing to grope their way to a new North American radical reality. He could have introduced us to more and he could have brought forward native leaders who represent the mainstream of Indian opinions. The Six Nations Elder, Ernie Benedict, for example, has rightfully rejected AIM's cultural retreat, writing 'You must camp where you are today not where you were yesterday'. Young natives in northern Saskatchewan communities have used a Marxist analysis of their relation with the south, multi-nationals and the

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demonstrate Means, taking the moral high ground, will have no truck with the materialistic 'idiots' who one day will suffer the cataclysmic wrath of a Mother Earth they (missionary, capitalist, politician and Marxist) have collectively raped.

Fusion seems far from possible. The RCP article, a clamorous rejoinder to Means, agrees on this point at least. Means is (and by association so are all native traditionalists), the communists charge, ironically a product of the very western culture he condemns. He has imbibed the pap of bourgeois anthropologists that natives were noble savages, living in harmony with nature, with justice and liberty for all. Rather, the RCP argues, a clear-headed inspection of the native past reveals the oppression of women, the exploitation of nature and the evil of 'gain' played out in inter-tribal wars to acquire rich hunting territory, new technologies and wealth in all of its forms. The traditionalists call 'to be' is a retreat to a past that never existed and allows to go unchallenged the very oppressors that Means complains about and who are also the target of traditional Marxist condemnation. The way for all people, for we are all on the same path, must be 'overthrow of the existing orders'. Means and native leaders, it would appear, are dupes of the capitalists and thus are incapable of contributing to Churchill's much-sought fusion. They are the enemy.

The second section of the book lowers the temperature of the debate and is, in some cases, more scholarly and thought-provoking but it is no more successful in sketching out what might be a new North American radical path. The Marxists here are less didactic than the communists. Bill Tabb admits that Marx himself was a racist, believing that 'barbaric races' must proceed through the stages of historical evolution that brings them into brotherhood with the proletariat and hence to the socialist valhalla. That aside, however, he does mark out areas of common concern between Indian and White—the environment,

his subject the concept of alienation. Westerners, he notes, have historically devoted considerable effort to isolating the roots of alienation and to creating theoretical and institutional solutions to the problem. It is an essential part of a western cosmology while it is 'a minor phenomenon of short duration in the larger context of a cosmic balance for American Indians'. Marxism cannot therefore be relevant to native Americans for it is a 'western religion dressed in economist clothing... as it accepts uncritically and ahistorically the world view generated by some conceived trauma (the flight from the Garden) that our species is alienated from nature and then offers but another vision of Messianism and a solution to this artificial problem'. For Deloria Marxists are not only singing the same old song but are yet another 'group of cowboys riding around the same old rock'.

With the final native contribution the pretense of a dialogue dissolves again. Black Elk, on the basis of hearsay knowledge of Marxist theory, asserts a basic difference between native spiritualism and Christianity, Marx's opiate. Unable to explain the difference in any intelligent fashion he reverts to assertions promising that the Lakota will, as a superior people, 'assist their neurotically retarded relations to achieve a more adult and wholesome outlook on reality'. It is a relief to find that Marx is not the only racist here.

It would seem fair to conclude that this dialogue of discovery, despite a few bright spots, is a dark failure. It is so, however, not because a fusion is impossible. It is not beyond us to find common ground against a common foe through a revived Marxism that is culturally enriching for native and non-native alike. It is a failure because Churchill brings into the debate participants whose narrow views make

Canadian government as the basis for both the creation of cooperative economic organization and for the beginnings of a process of cultural revitalization.

There is a native voice speaking of advance responding to the challenge of Alberta leader Louis Crier:

**In order to survive in the twentieth century, we must come to grips with the white man's culture. Discover, define the harmonies between the two cultures, between the basic values of the Indian way and those of Western Civilization—and thereby forge a new and strong sense of identity.**

Marxism has a role to play in the process. The dialogue between real native leaders and Marxists is a method to discover the way forward. Unfortunately Churchill's book is a false start.

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