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Transformation of American Indian identity by the United States Government and early settlers

Introduction

The problem of identity as national consciousness is relatively a new concept in historiography. However, through centuries the idea of identity has gradually evolved, as in the past it was more of a philosophical nature attributed only to a human psyche.¹ In the 19th century the term started to develop in a more national way², owing to the fact that national consciousness of early settlers was filled with promises of possessing land. Even though it seems to be of great importance for every country, for the countries of the New World it is even a more crucial one. Through two hundred years the United States Government has tried to unite people from different walks of life, yet researchers still refer to American society as a 'salad bowl' or 'melting pot'. How complex and difficult a process it is, is shown by the mentioned ambiguity created over two hundred years. As every society is divided into groups, which interlock with each other, remain separate or simply wish to change nothing, the indigenous people of America wished to be left alone.

Still the white man tried to create a clear dividing line between the pre-Columbian history to deny the heritage of the Native Americans prior to 1492. Adding other aspects of civilization, it is inevitable to elaborate on the Native American art, which thanks to trade with other tribes became rich, full of depth and diversity, and later slowed down significantly through the contact with the Whites. "The advent of the Europeans was the most challenging to existing Aboriginal concepts and styles of art."³

The 19th and 20th centuries in particular vividly showed the evolution of identities, from individual, family, tribal, national, to more general, like racial or even supranational and many more. Since the very beginning when the white men set foot on the North American continent, they unexpectedly initiated the process

¹ For further information see: <http://www.diametros.iphils.uj.edu.pl/pdf/diam-7bremer.pdf> [accessed: 18.02.2012].

² For further information see: <http://fds.oup.com/www.oup.co.uk/pdf/0-19-829898-6.pdf> [accessed:18.02.2012].

³ Berlo, Catherine; Phillips,Ruth. *Native North American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 1.

of building tribal consciousness, as to stand in the contrary to what the American system aimed at – eliminating traditional points of reference among the American Indians. Being an invisible process at first, it later resulted in hostile actions and reactions on both sides until the government attempted to homogenize diversity. To achieve this, one side had to surrender, whilst the other proceeded with the necessary plans. Two hundred years of Indian collaboration with the White man present the evolution of their identity during different stages of history.

The clash

There is no doubt that settlers and later the New Republic had some destructive influences on the native population.⁴ The early policy of land acquisition was based on the ‘right of discovery’, a very violent process which could easily be described as conquest: “those who came upon and conquered other lands had the right of possession – of the land and riches. The conquered people could go somewhere else, be assimilated into the conquering population, or go extinct – it mattered little [...]”⁵ The intentional portrayal of Indians as savage people helped the Whites in the illegal acquisition of their land – an excuse, so called ‘Manifest Destiny’⁶ – as without such an understanding, bringing civilization would not be necessary. From the moment of the early co-existence the world of Native Americans started to change. Separated groups scattered throughout the American continent step by step and more and more of them began to open for a new civilization. Since that moment early identity started to shape, as during the pre-Columbian era different tribes had different names in their local languages. They did not have the consciousness of a racial group connected geographically and spiritually in the eyes of non-Native people. For this reason the white people were initially treated as another distant group, simply someone they did not have a chance to meet yet. On the contrary Indians, the name given to them by the white man simply because of physical appearance, were believed to be one group. At that time the Native Americans did not perceive themselves as people of common historical experience. Their racial identity was still about to be shaped.

The children

Across the continent there were many different tribes and groups whose existence for generations had been inseparably connected with the American land. Despite no formal transactions, thousands of settlers had moved west, particularly to the Northwest Territory, an area of land located between the thirteen states and the Mississippi River. For this reason, during the mid 1780s, the Confederation Congress began to enter into political treaties with Indians, as without these, peace

⁴ Waldman, Carl. *Atlas of the North American Indian*. New York, U.S.A.: First Choice Books, Inc., 1985, p. 29.

⁵ Jake, Page. *In the Hands of the Great Spirit - the 20,000-Year History of American Indians*. New York: Free Press Simon & Schuster Inc., 2003, p. 109.

⁶ For further information see: <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/joshua/manifest.html> *America the New Israel* [accessed: 18.02.2012].

could not be achieved. In the Speech to a Delegation of Indian Chiefs, Jefferson assured them that the White man was coming in peace: "I take you by the hand of friendship and give you a hearty welcome to the seat of the govt. of the U.S.."⁷, whereas later he found Indians as 'children' who were incapable of taking care of themselves. For this reason he did not treat them as equals, which would have been in agreement with the Christian spirit and the Declaration of Independence, which stated that all people are created equal. The new definition of societies was created, from high-grade civilization to low-grade savagery. All that was created to impose a proper policy on the Native people, or 'children,' who were incapable of taking care of themselves. According to the early Republic's officials they wanted only to help, by bringing in the civilization, and did not want anything in return.⁸

Changing the way of life

Establishing trade with different tribes, to be more precise the fur trade, more than anything else led to extensive contacts between the Whites and Indians. The aim behind establishing any trade with the Indian people was simply to create unbreakable ties and to allow white settlers to acquire new lands. Indian chiefs became aware of this, and in response to Jefferson, they complained that more and more settlers were coming and taking their land by force, "you tell us that your children of this site of the Mississippi hear your word, you are mistaken, since every day they rise their tomahawks over our hands [...] we hope you will protect us from the wicked, you will punish them who won't hear your word, open their ears, and lead them in the good path."⁹ But though the officials knew what was going on, they remained silent, as they were aware of the ever increasing need for acquiring land by advancing frontiers. "The English, who had plenty of goods, wanted Indian land, while Indians, who had plenty of land wanted English goods."¹⁰ As there were many tribes in America there were also many reasons for selling/losing land, some communities generously granted land to the Whites so that they might have them as allies in wars with their neighbors.

There is also another aspect to the Indians 'selling' of lands, which would perhaps explain Indian motivations for selling. The differences between the two worlds were so huge that transactions themselves were understood differently. What the Whites understood as buying rights to certain areas of land, Indians understood in a very different way; they saw it as a sharing of resources with English purchasers.¹¹

⁷ Jackson, Donald Dean. *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents, 1783-1854*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978, p. 280.

⁸ The Constitution ignored them [the Indians], stating only that Congress had the power „to regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes". (Johnson, Paul, *A History of the American People*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1998, s. 269.

⁹ Jackson, Donald Dean. *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents, 1783-1854*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978.

¹⁰ Banner, Stuart. *How the Indians Lost Their Land*. President and Fellows of the Harvard College, 2005, p. 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Moreover, the Indians, who could neither read nor write, did not understand what was written, and therefore were unable to make sure that they were selling only a small area of their land. Trickery was common not only among settlers, but also with the federal government. Settlers and the government would promise anything in order to get more land.

The irony lies in the fact that Americans wanted to expel from the desired land people whom they defined as civilized. The vast majority of Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaw, and Choctaw were perceived as extraordinary civilized in comparison to other tribes. They cultivated corn and cotton, wore what was considered as European clothing, and some were Christian, while others possessed slaves. They even created a form of written language based on syllables, and many of them were literate in two languages. The Cherokee possessed more features of a 'civilized society' than the white American frontier at that time: "In 1827, the Cherokees restructured their tribal government into a constitutional republic modeled after that of the United States".¹²

The entire process influenced the way of the Native Americans thought about what was the most valuable thing—land. They started to perceive it as their heritage, an almost sacred entity that their lives depend on. Both in their oral tradition and written literature the earth is of major importance along with animals, specifically buffalo. "The man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization."¹³ What surely had a major influence on aboriginal people's perseverance was the changing reality, when old people could not understand the young and vice versa - modernity clashed with tradition. All this contributed to the growing tension among the older and younger members of the tribe. The loss of significant territory had undermined the prestige and respect of the older chiefs.

The lost generation

The United States government could destroy Indian tribes, assimilate them into the American society, or protect them from the Whites. None of these solutions seemed to be suitable in the first half of the 19th century. As an answer to the 'Indian problem', the government decided to move them to more distant lands. The government agreed on removing Indians but also decided to change their lives so that such vast tracts of land would no longer be necessary. Benjamin Hawkins, the United States agent to Indians tried to do so by totally changing the American Indian way of life, in an "attempt to impose a social revolution on Indian country, organize Indian economic life around intensive agriculture, and redefine gender roles in Indian families."¹⁴ This was because, for centuries, Indian life was dependent on land – they needed land in order to survive. The federal government wanted the Indians

¹² Calloway, Colin G. *First Peoples A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004, p. 211.

¹³ McLuhan, T.C. *Touch The Earth A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence*. New York: Promontory Press, 1971, p. 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

to stop hunting and start farming, a role that for generations Indians had ascribed to women. The idea behind this was simple. As soon as Indians abandoned the role of hunting in their lives, they would need less land and would be more willing to cede it. Jefferson wrote in 1803: "they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from time to time in exchange for necessities for their farms and families."¹⁵

The era of removal started in the 1820s and lasted until the 1840s. During this period the eastern Indians were forced to migrate from the east to the west, in order to leave the abandoned land available for white settlement. Some of the tribes decided to migrate voluntarily as they saw in this their last chance for survival and a peaceful life. In 1830 the Congress passed the Indian Removal Act¹⁶; it was obvious that, sooner or later, pressure was going to be exerted on all the tribes living east of the Mississippi River. Consequently the Cherokee decided to fight Georgia, but this time in the Supreme Court. In *Worcester v. Georgia* the court declared that the Cherokees were "a distinct community, occupying its own territory in which the laws of Georgia can have no force."¹⁷ This unprecedented verdict established a legal foundation for Indian sovereignty, which was going to change Indian lands and their people, and bring hope into Indian lives. But as Georgia itself ignored the ruling of the Supreme Court, the last chance for the Cherokees, the tribe was forced to gather what they could and leave Georgia to reach their new home.¹⁸

Removal did not make the so called 'Indian problem' disappear. If one thinks that once Indians were forced to live on reservation they were left alone in peace, then one is wrong. Again, when gold was discovered in California, a wave of new settlers crossing the Mississippi River increased. Again, the Indians were losing their lands. The determination of the United States was so great that it cut off all the food supplies to the reservation, supplies that were guaranteed as a result of previous land reductions.¹⁹ By forcefully taking the massive amount of land the U.S. government destroyed and surely diminished part of Indian identity as they had to adjust to the new situation. However, the indigenous people of America received a new weapon, this time a peaceful one, recognition as a sovereign nation which began a long process of legal acknowledgment. "We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work alike on all men. If an Indian breaks the law, punish him by the law. If a white man breaks the law, punish him also".²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁶ For further information see: www.studyworld.com/indian_removal_act_of_1830.htm [accessed: 14.02.2012].

¹⁷ Calloway, Colin G. *First Peoples A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004, p. 214.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁹ Crazy Horse-Sioux, for further information see: www.ilhawaii.net/~stony/quotes.html [accessed: 14.02.2012].

²⁰ McLuhan, T.C. *Touch The Earth A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence*. New York: Promontory Press, 1971, p. 124.

The quest

Imprisoned on the reservation, Indians grew bitter and the hardship was visible. For almost two hundred years, the federal government dominated the life of the Indians. At first, during the beginning of the reservation period, dissatisfied tribes, among them the Nez Perce band, the Comanche, the Cheyenne, and the Ponca tried to escape up north to Canada, as they could not imagine their lives under American control. Frustrated and dissatisfied Indians turned to religious practices, led by Paiute prophet Wovoka. In 1888, he announced that the Great Spirit had spoken to him, and had asked him to announce that performing the Ghost Dance would bring renewal of the earth, the return of the buffalo and most importantly, as Wovoka preached, peace. The Ghost Dances were spiritual ceremonies, through which Indians wanted to rebuild their heritage, as they felt stripped of their identity by the white man; "the Ghost Dance rituals were to hasten the return of aboriginal times in which, presumably, the tribes themselves were again to become supreme, thus neatly combining tribalism and Pan-Indianism."²¹ For this reason they were eager to do everything to defend their rights to perform the dances. The Indian people did not see any positive changes and as they were about to lose their hope, people turned their eyes to religious practices. Thanks to religion aboriginal people tied to find their identity by uniting themselves with the ancestors.

Kill the Indian, save the man

The U.S. officials felt that Indian imprisonment on reservation was not changing anything, the problem was still there because the Indians lacked the very thing the Whites possessed – civilization. Soon, the policymakers started thinking of a new future for Savage Indians. In search of a resolution to the so called 'Indian problem', reformers believed that boarding schools, especially those off-reservations, would accomplish the process of eliminating the Indian ways of life. "As the theory went, Indian children, once removed from the savage surroundings of the Indian camp and placed in the purified environment of an all-encompassing institution, would slowly learn to look, act, and eventually think like their white counterparts."²²

The idea of boarding schools for Indians was created to 'detrribalize' Indian children by the government of the United States. Children were taken from their homes and cut off from their native culture and language. Everything that was connected with their past was seen as improper and by using military style drills American officials wanted to create successful citizens of the United States. They claimed that Indian heritage was a purely savage one, and therefore had to be changed for good.

On the contrary, boarding schools created people who were rejected by both Western and Indian societies. As poor but happy people, the government of the U.S. stripped them of their rich culture and exchanged it for nothing except alcohol and

²¹ Hertzberg, Hazel W. *The search for an American Indian identity: modern Pan-Indian movements*. Hazel W. Hertzberg, 1971, p. 10.

²² Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction*. University Press of Kansas, 1995, p. 335.

a lack of identity – the feeling of isolation grew after the last school was closed. We can only imagine how somebody whose life was wholly connected with the boarding school, could feel after graduating from the institution that used to be their entire life. We also have to bear in mind that some of the pupils were 7-year-olds and could not remember any other life before the one in school - everything that they knew was linked to the Western society.

The American Policy towards Native Americans was filled with broken promises and lies. Only on paper did the American officials recognize the Indian entity as a sovereign nation; in practice it was never authorized to govern itself without the help of the white fathers. Official recognition of Native American autonomy fluctuated according to the interests of the Whites. For this reason Indian identity was changing as it was no longer bound to the land; as soon as their way of life changed, their identity evolved to adjust to the newly created reality; “they had to detribalize themselves to fit into the American system.”²³ Surprisingly, there are facts that show positive impacts on the students’ integrity. One can say that schools helped Indians to unite beyond the tribal system and to find their identity, once lost. “Boarding-school narratives—especially stories of surviving the genocidal aims of the schools—are shared texts that act as markers of understanding and solidarity among contemporary Indian people.”²⁴ Obviously it is difficult to focus only on the positive aspect of all the pain and suffering the aboriginal people of America had to experience. However, such a complex and complicated heritage does account for the unification of all the tribes in what they fight for and what they would like to achieve in the future. So called Pan-Indianism, a philosophy and a movement promoting unity among different tribes regardless of local or tribal affiliations helped in developing Indian identity.

The Art

Obviously, such stereotypical portrayal of the American Indians was also well established by the Wild West Show, traveling performances in the United States and Europe. The White West Show was present in Europe in 1889-1890. Three tours created an opportunity for many Europeans to see authentic cowboys, wild horses, bison, but predominantly Indians. For a vast number of Europeans this was their first chance not only to relate on many stories about American frontier which were present in Europe due to the high migration to America, but also because of the tour, “Wild West shows were continuing to depict the Indians as ‘savage’ warriors.”²⁵ Different European nations, where The Wild West Show was present, had never heard about cowboys and Indians, and even if they did hear about ‘savage people’ they did not seem to believe. Others, like English, French, German and Polish were exposed to different stories through dime novels and lectures brought to them by people

²³ Johnson, Paul, *A History of the American People*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1998, s. 270.

²⁴ Katanski, Amelia V. *Learning to write "Indian": the boarding-school experience and American Indian Literature*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2005, p. 169.

²⁵ Maddra, Sam. *Hostiles? The Lakota ghost dance and Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 2006, p. 64.

like Karl May²⁶, Balduin Mollhausen, Gustave Aymard, and Mayne Reid, people who never saw Indians, though were writing about them – except Henryk Sienkiewicz, who visited the United States and wrote *Sachem*²⁷, the story which sounded very realistic and may serve as an example of relations between the white settlers and the Native Americans. The Wild West Show with the person of Buffalo Bill (William Cody) brought, for the first time, opportunity for Europeans to match their visions with reality. The popularity of the show was strengthened by the fact that even Her Majesty Queen Victoria made an appearance there during the celebrations of her Jubilee. Acceptance varied among different countries, but the reactions were always positive and the impressions long-lasting. Later, Hollywood also adapted this vision to its films; as a result this portrayal became common among Europeans.

As a result of gaining political recognition in the 20th century, the Native American theme became very popular. However, the portrayal of aboriginal people in the beginning of the cinema seemed to be no different from the policy toward them. The Native American culture was represented stereotypically. Aboriginal people were presented in the *western* genre films as blood thirsty savages attacking white settlers, which represents only one side of a very complicated picture. Rarely were they portrayed as proud, independent, honorable people with love for nature. What is more, the movie industry tended to ignore the historical perspective of the Native American culture. It hardly ever offered well-grounded understanding of Indian identity. But for Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962, filmed by Miloš Forman in 1975), narrated by the half-Native American inmate 'Chief', whose life acted as a symbol of the White-Native relations, "his white mother emasculated his Indian-chief father—made him 'too little to fight—and since from childhood people have treated him as if he were deaf and dumb, he's so depressed he acts the part."²⁸, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *The Last of The Mohicans* (1992), they might have disappeared completely. Perhaps, however, produced as late as in 2007, the film version of Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (a novel published in 1970) has been the most impressive picture of Indians' fate.

Also, thanks to the Native American artists both trained in their communities and in professional art schools, who have offered a wide range of styles, traditional and modern, awareness is raised in the society. To achieve the desired effect, some of them shock to receive recognition, like James Luna, an artist from southern California, who transformed himself into a living artifact to protest against the portrayal of Native arts and cultures by Western museums.²⁹ There are also non-Native artists who seem to appreciate Native themes, as Charles Marion Russell, who scarified his entire life for the Old American West by creating paintings of cowboys, Indians, and landscapes set in the Western United States.

²⁶ For further information see: <http://www.karl-may-stiftung.de/museum/engl/may.html> [accessed: 19.02.2012].

²⁷ For further information see: <http://literat.ug.edu.pl/hsnowel/002.htm> [accessed: 19.02.2012].

²⁸ Kael, Pauline, *When the Lights Go Down*, New York 1980, p. 84.

²⁹ Berlo, Catherine; Phillips, Ruth, *Native North American Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 1.

The question of identity

The Native American Identity changed, from indigenous socially-culturally-territorially-based to legal and race-based definitions.³⁰ After the aboriginal people received federal recognition and protection, they also faced more problems, as government subsidies are granted only to federally recognized tribes. Again, it seems as if the U.S. government was holding exclusive rights to 'Indianness', as the question who is the American Indian was regulated during programs in the 1950s and 1960s.³¹ Such situation caused a division between Indians themselves. For this reason, the new approach to identity was created. Nowadays, it is not only based on tribal affiliations but also on the genetic criterion and bureaucracy. All those who wish to become Indians already have to be members of a federally recognized tribe or prove it through blood quantum. Still, for many not recognized Indians it is a matter of marginalization, a so-called personal issue, based on the way one feels about oneself.³² However, there is another aspect of raising national awareness among Native Americans, as they lack the common land (*ius soli*), which seems to be an indispensable component of national identity. Obviously the concept of blood bonds (*ius sanguinis*) might become helpful in the process of American Indian unification.

Ewolucja tożsamości Indian Ameryki Północnej w kontekście działań rządu Stanów Zjednoczonych i pierwszych osadników

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje kwestię wpływu działań rządu amerykańskiego na przestrzeni lat na tożsamość rdzennych mieszkańców Ameryki. Autor analizuje poszczególne działania kolonialistów, a następnie reakcje rządu federalnego, w procesie mającym na celu supremację białego człowieka wobec Indian. Autor opisuje szczególnie ważne w historiografii indiańskiej wydarzenia związane z ekspansją terytorialną, które wywarły wpływ na kształtowanie się tożsamości wśród plemion autochtonicznych – okres przesiedleń, głodu, tworzenia rezerwatów, wysyłania dzieci indiańskich do szkół z internatem. Wymienione strategie podejmowane na przestrzeni lat przez rząd amerykański, których celem była likwidacja tzw. indiańskiego problemu, doprowadziły w późniejszym czasie do ukształtowania się ruchu, mającego na celu doprowadzenie do jedności tych grup etnicznych oraz na nowo stworzenia ich tożsamości.

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³⁰ Schmidt, Ryan W., *American Indian Identity and Blood Quantum in the 21st Century: A Critical Review*, "Journal of Anthropology", (2011).

³¹ Brownell, Margo S., *Who is an Indian? Searching for an Answer to the Question at the Core of Federal Indian Law*, "Michigan Journal of Law Reform", (2001), p. 299.

³² Horse, Perry G., *Native American identity*, "New Directions for Student Services", vol. 2005, Issue 109, p. 65.