

Justifying Colonization and Land Dispossession:

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The Native Americans' Tragedy

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قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

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Abstract :

The European colonization of the North American continent was mainly driven by the thirst for land. That colonization could not have been possible without getting rid of the original inhabitants. Thus, White territorial expansion in what is nowadays called the United States of America was coupled with the dispossession of the Natives' lands and their displacement. The present paper does not intend to re-narrate or recount that page of American history; historians have fully explored that area. Rather, it attempts to shed light on the different justifications the European colonizer (essentially from English origins) gave for his behaviour vis-à-vis the original inhabitants. The paper thus probes the recurrent moral, ideological and security pretexts, and the colonial discourse used to dispossess the Native Americans of the lands where they had lived for immemorial ages. Those alleged reasons were to form the myths founding the American nation we now today.

ملخص:

لقد كان الدافع الأساسي للاستعمار الأوروبي وأمريكا الشمالية هو الاستيلاء على الأرض، لكن ما كان لهذا الاستعمار أن يتحقق بدون إزاحة السكان الأصليين. لذا التوسع القطري للرجل الأبيض في الأرض التي تدعى حاليا بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية كان يساير سلب الأراضي للسكان الأصليين وتهجيرهم.

هذا المقال يعالج مختلف مبررات المستوطن الأوروبي و خاصة الانجليزي لسلوكياته تجاه السكان الأصليين، حيث يفحص تلك المبررات الأخلاقية والإيديولوجية والأمنية و الخطاب الاستعماري المستعمل لأجل سلب الأرض من أصحابها الأصليين. و كل هذه الذرائع تمثل التصورات المؤسسة للأمة الأمريكية الحالية.

1. Introduction

Chief Justice John Marshall once noted that “the condition of the Indians in relation with the United States is perhaps unlike that of any other two people in existence ...marked by peculiar and cardinal distinctions which exist nowhere else.”² Undeniably, the Native Americans’ relations with the white colonizer may illustrate one of darkest pages in American History. Mainstream media are nowadays paying much attention to twentieth century mass crimes against humanity such as the “Armenian Genocide” or the “Jewish Holocaust.” However, the systematic and ethnically based – or even religiously based – oppression and land dispossession of other populations have little echo. Is it because some people are more ‘human’ than others are? Is it because the victors usually write History? Or is it simply because – in a world in which might is right – the strongest and so called most civilized is better heard than the weakest? For the Native Americans, Europeans sealed their fate at the very moment of the ‘discovery’ of their continent. It also seems that the former did not realize that the land they were living in – and that they did not possess since, according to their beliefs, land like water or air could not be possessed, sold, and bought³ – had been ‘promised’ and ‘manifestly destined’ to the latter.

What were the different justifications for different policies – organized or not– that aimed at settling the North American continent, securing the newcomers, expanding settlements, and ultimately getting rid of the original inhabitants? It is the story of the manipulation⁴, dispossession, deportation, and, to some extent, extermination of the Native Americans by the so-called civilized and civilizing European colonizer. It is also the cruel but real example of how people – not as individuals but as collective or official entities – can perpetrate irreparable criminal deeds in the name of liberty or religious beliefs, progress or security. The present paper does not intend to list countless episodes of this tragic chapter of American history, nor does it aim at detailing the different White undertaken

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policies. Historians have written much on this subject. The paper rather attempts to probe the alleged reasons the English settlers – and later, the different successive United States' authorities – put forwards to justify settlement, territorial expansion, and land acquisition at the expense of the Natives' basic rights of life, liberty, and security.

It has always been the same story with recurrent justifications: a body of ideological constructs aiming at explaining colonization and land dispossession. First, the vision of an empty land, a virgin land that is commonly associated with the idea that God promised it to His Elect People. There was also the divine mission to convert poor souls or the altruist will to help and civilize the aboriginal inhabitants. Then, the necessity to provide security to colonists or frontier settlers' families living there against what they called savages was another pretext to deport and exterminate them. Finally, deceitful attempts to integrate the few remaining ones in a society conformed by cultures and values that had never been theirs. Each time, the White Man introduced specific reasons to justify his quest and thirst for land. All these alleged reasons goaded cruel behaviour towards the original inhabitants for nearly three centuries.

2. The Myths of the Undressed and Promised Land

The myth of the empty land has always been a justification for taking other people's country. It has been the case in some other part of the world, and it was such in seventeenth century America. Many motives initiated early English settlements in the New World and fostered the subsequent migrations: the search for economic prosperity, religious freedom or simply hopes for a better future. Those early migrations to what Europeans called the New World were theorized and legalized by some doctrines of dispossession. Indeed, According to Erica Irene Daes, Chairperson of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, the "Laws of Discovery" and "Terra Nullius" lawfully authorized the overthrow of the American Indians of their continent.⁵ Migrants were driven by the Eurocentric belief that it was "lawful...to take a land which none used and make use of it."⁶ According to them, even if there were people,

these were few and did not have the capability and the “faculty” to use these fertile lands since they were living like “wild beasts.”⁷

Another justification that aimed at dispossessing and displacing the Natives was under cover of religious rights. This is why Promised Land imagery inspired and shaped English colonization in the New World. In the seventeenth century, America was seen as a New Israel, immigration there was seen as being guided by God and settlers were identifying themselves with the ancient Hebrews.⁸ The colonists’ perception of themselves directed their attitudes and relations towards the aborigines. This was expressed by the Puritan ‘patriarch’ John Winthrop (1588-1649): “This savage people ruled over many lands without title or property ... and why not may Christians have liberties to dwell amongst them...?”⁹ Another fellow of John Winthrop, clergyman John Cotton (1584-1652) provided ideological and theological grounds for Puritan emigration to and possession of the New World.¹⁰ This vision was not only perceived by the Puritans but also by more secular economic entrepreneurs, the founders of Virginia Colony. John Rolfe, for example, stipulated that settlers had been “marked and chosen by the finger of God.”¹¹ Despite some Christian voices, such as those of John Wesley and William Penn, who unveiled and denounced the English settlers’ behaviour,¹² the Promised Land theory justified settlements, expansion and the atrocious crimes perpetrated against the original inhabitants (a pretext unfortunately still fashionable nowadays). As an example, a certain Captain John Underhill who took part in the Pequot War of 1637 cited the Bible to justify the slaughter of some four hundred men, women and children.¹³ French American colonial writer Hector St John de Crèvecoeur tried to restrict the crimes committed against the natives to a few number of settlers;¹⁴ but how to explain the exactions orchestrated on a people throughout three hundred years? The religious notion that God had selected the new American people to inhabit the land promised to them remained persistent for the following two centuries.

In the 19th century, the hunger for land had not been sated and the justification re-emerged in 1845 to support the annexation of Texas, to pave the way for further westward movement and

consequently the dispossession and deportation of American Indians that had been taking place. Again, according to opinion maker John Louis O'Sullivan, it was the "Manifest Destiny" for white Americans to expand and possess the entire continent.¹⁵ Manifest Destiny ideal displayed the pinnacle of American self-conceived superiority: their visceral belief that they had the right to possess any land they wanted.¹⁶ Obviously, in this zealous eagerness for more territories, the United States' leaders viewed the Red Man as an obstacle, and the result was a series of wars in which the latter was the loser. The appalling deportation of the Cherokees in the 1830s ("The Trail of Tears" of 1838) and the removal of Navajo tribes in 1864 ("The Long Walk") are but few examples of the white man's thirst for land.

3. The Civilizing Mission

Since colonists were driven by the sense of a mission, another pretext to migrate and settle America was the sacred duty to convert "these poor blind infidels;"¹⁷ Of course, the only way was to go to them. In the 17th century, Puritans succeeded to some extent in converting some Natives, but repetitive encroachments on Indian lands corrupted their blessed mission. According to historian and writer Hans Koning, when a new convert broke the rules of the Puritan community in Massachusetts Bay Colony, he had to pay the fine by giving up a portion of land. New settlers could acquire large areas of land thanks to Christian Indians' offences.¹⁸ Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the mission to convert the Natives left the place to another mission in the air at that time: to civilize.

Indeed, the purpose of civilizing the Natives was for the early colonists a noble justification to settle America. This motive had taken its origins from the conception of the inescapable fate of Europeans to transmit their civilization westward,¹⁹ the "translatio imperii" and "translatio studii" theories. This belief was widespread in the 16th and 17th centuries, and its advocates, like the English geographer and member of the London Company, Richard Hakluyt, were promoters of English migration to America.²⁰ Some even denied the intention of first migrants to deprive Native Americans of their ancestral

properties but “to instruct them the arts of civilization.”²¹

However, this pretext was contradictorily associated with the belief that the aborigines were unable to live with the whites as well as to show any sign of progress. This stereotype remained predominant all over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, President James Monroe’s policy was to undertake several measures “...to break [Indians’] habits, and civilize them.”²² Famous southern political leader and Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun expressed the same views when arguing that the United States’ government should take the Natives under its responsibility, and not pay attention to their claims, for their own good and happiness.²³ Thus, one may wonder if the systematic removal of the aborigines in North America was a paternalistic measure to civilize them, or if it was due to the belief they were seen as a barrier to progress and they did not deserve any decent status. What is certain is that the successive United States’ governments in the 19th century assumed the deliberate policy of displacing Native Americans and relocating them in specific lands called Indian Territories.²⁴ The sole period between 1830 and 1850 witnessed the removal of about 100,000 Natives from the East and Southeast regions to the West. The main justification was that American Indians could not live amidst new settlers. Moreover, President Andrew Jackson’s Indian policy embodied in the Indian Removal Act of 1830 had no ambiguity and marked the beginning of the end for aboriginal inhabitants. His words were crystal clear at that time:

That those tribes can not exist surrounded by our settlements and in continual contact with our citizens is certain. They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement, which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race, and without appreciating the causes of their inferiority or seeking to control

them, they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear.²⁵

Thus, by mid-19th century, American officials even thought that Natives were the antithetical symbol of the American civilization; their displacement was thus a necessity to unleash westward expansion towards prosperity and happiness.²⁶ The White Man did not even spare the Indians' stuff of life – the buffalo – since he considered it as a danger menacing the civilizing extension of the railroad. The extermination of herds of buffalo carried out by the successive United States' governments in the 1870s and 1880s led fatefully to the displacement of the Plains Indians and the disintegration of their traditional life. Indeed, the number of buffaloes fell from 75 million in 1800, to only 800 in 1890.²⁷ By the end of the 19th century, the Natives became almost economically dependent on the White Man's 'enlightening' goodwill.

4. The Security Pretext

The security pretext has also been widely raised throughout history by people who want to dispossess natives of their country. In the 17th century, early colonists were the first to allege that Indians constituted a peril. Settlers depicted them as "pricks in [their] ears, and thorns in [their] sides," and as "boar of the woods to waste [them], and the wild beast of the field to devour [them]."²⁸ This image of the Natives more as savage beasts than human beings fuelled the first wars against the original inhabitants. Then, by the second half the 19th century, United States officials started to speak about an "Indian problem," and it was common to point out the natives as a menace for the families of settlers who were moving to occupy western regions. Even removed and confined in reservations, Native Americans were considered by some military men as a threat. As a matter of fact, General Nelson A. Miles asked for a strict control of "these wild savages" under the US Army supervision so that – according to him – it would be impossible for them to harm frontier settlers who "would

be freed from their terrifying and devastating presence.”²⁹

5. Dispossession through Assimilation

The last but not least justification to deprive American Indians of their land was on the pretext of incorporating them in United States’ society. The change in policy from displacement and segregation (with which Native Americans were confined in reservations) to assimilation started in the last quarter of 19th century and was made official with the Dawes Act of 1887, also known as the General Allotment Act. This legislation was intended to integrate Natives into the White social order. However, by breaking up Indian reservations and the bit of land they have left, the United States’ authorities not only reduced Indian territories from 138 million acres in 1886 to 48 million acres by 1934,³⁰ but also destroyed the tribal and cultural foundations of Natives’ traditional life. To quote President Theodore Roosevelt, the Dawes Act was a “mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass.”³¹ The White had not only dispossessed the Red of his land but also of his identity.

Despite, the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, the Meriam Report and its contribution to unveil the calamitous consequences of 19th century United States’ Indian policy, “...early chapters [that] contain little of which the country may be proud,”³² and in spite of some measures as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1938 and the Indian Claims Commission of 1946, Natives’ situation remained precarious all over the second half of the twentieth century.

6. Conclusion

How could American Indians fall in such a misfortune and suffer such a tragedy? Was it because they welcomed and helped the white man at the very beginning (and did not systematically exterminate the first settlements)? Was it due to their dissensions, internal fights, and their disunion against colonizers? Was it because they did not constitute a compact unified civilization? Or was it due to the dramatic course of History? What we can assert is that Europeans – and mainly the English – who settled America did not only inhabit and populate that vast country but they did not even want to share it

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with those who had been living there for immemorial ages. Statistics speak for themselves: from 10 to 12 million by the 15th century, the number of Natives in North America drastically fell to 300,000 by 1890.³³ A range of justifications was there to cover a conduct that can be unquestionably defined nowadays as ethnic cleansing.

From the idea of the undressed land, came that of one inhabited by few uncivilized beings. Then, these beings proved to be inept to progress, to finish as dangerous bloodthirsty savages. Not only those pretexts were recurrent and helped to design the ideological construct of the European colonizer from a Eurocentric and Christian-centric perspective, but also they constituted the driving force behind Western colonization of the rest of the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

To sum up, we may assert that the idealistic American Dream proved to be a nightmare of about three centuries for the original inhabitants. Moreover, a similar nightmare is taking place nowadays in some other part of the world for other original inhabitants under exactly the same pretexts.

As far as the American people are concerned, they are paradoxically proud of some aspects of their History, but they often forget its hidden gloomy pages. Their leaders are even trying to sit in judgement on other people and to teach them human right .

References and Endnotes

- ¹. This paper is a modified version of the author's presentation at the *First National Colloquium on Multiculturalism in Post-Colonial Contexts* held at the University of Guelma (Algeria) in April 2009.
- ². John Marshall quoted in Francis Paul Prucha, *American-Indian Treaties: the History of a Political Anomaly* (University of California Press, 1997): 1.
- ³. Native Shawnee Tecumseh: "Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the clouds, and the Great Sea?" as quoted in Hugh Brogan. *A Penguin History of the United States of America*, (London: Longman, 1990): 65-66. Also, Chief Seattle to the US Government: "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us." as quoted in Brahim Harouni, "Chief Seattle's Speech: the expression of the Difference in Native American's and European Colonists' Relationship to Nature", *Expression 6* (Constantine: OPU - Université Mentouri, 1999): 134.
- ⁴. Natives were greatly needed during early settlements. White settlers' survival, then trade relied much on friendly Indians relationships. Later, alliances with various Indian tribes were considered as a winning card in conflicts opposing France and England in North America.
- ⁵. Erica Irene Daes as quoted in "Doctrines of Dispossession' - Racism against Indigenous peoples," World Conference Against Racism, Durban, 2001, United Nations Organization web site. www.un.org/WCAR, (accessed on 25 March, 2004).
- ⁶. Robert Cushing. "Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into the Parts of America," (1622) in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Second Series*, Vol. IX, (Boston, 1832) : 67-71.

7. Ibid. Note here the term 'faculty' was used as if the incapacity for the Indians to use land was not only material but also intellectual, thus denying centuries of pre-Columbian civilizations.
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14. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer, Letter III – What is an American?" in J.A. Leo Lemay, *An Early American Reader*, (Washington, D.C: United States Information Agency, 1992): 125.
15. John L. O'Sullivan, *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17:1 (July-August 1845): 5-10.
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17. Cushing, "Reasons and Considerations."
18. Hans Koning, *The Conquest of America: How the Indian Nations Lost Their Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993) : 14.
19. The everlasting value judgement and relative belief that Western values were the only valid ones.
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21. Philip A. Bruce. *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century: An Inquiry into the Material Condition of the People, Based on Original and Contemporaneous Records*, Chapter VIII, (New York: Mac

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23. Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Treaties* : 6.
24. The implementation of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 proved to be catastrophic for the Seminole and Cherokee tribes.
25. Andrew Jackson. "Fifth Annual Message to Congress," (December, 3, 1833), in www.synaptic.bc.ca/ejournal, (accessed on 10, March 2004). Note, in this excerpt, the denial of the high degree of civilization reached by the civilized tribes, the main victims of Jackson's removal policy.
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33. "Doctrines of Dispossession' - Racism against Indigenous peoples."