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**Beyond the 'Mere Property Career:'**

**Changing Attitudes Toward the American Indian In the United States**

**And the Prospects for a New Commons**

I Introduction

The farmers, the lawyers, the merchants and the mothers, the visionaries, the land speculators, and the occasional scoundrels who founded the United States believed that the natural world is meant to be subjugated, that private property is the foundation of civilization, and that the broad diffusion of property is required for both individual and social fulfillment. Filled with optimism, they rooted the new nation in the promise of an unprecedented diffusion of property that would ensure the liberal promise of individual opportunity and the republican promise of virtuous self-government.

The American Indian stood against the cultural landscape as the antithesis of this victorious civilization. From the white perspective, Indians lived in the natural world instead of establishing a civilization of their own. Unlike the conquering whites, traditional American Indian peoples did not treat land and labor as commodities to be bought and sold in the market, and money did not exist among them.<sup>1</sup> Native societies were built around communal kinship systems. Clans held property in common, and handed it down through themselves instead of through differentiated private families. Such social conditions led to what was perhaps most strange to whites: fathers did not have the incentive to accumulate property for their children. To put it another way, what was, in white society, a crucial motivating force behind the accumulation of property, simply did not exist among traditional Indians. Members of each clan worked to improve the common stock and their fortunes rose and fell together. The

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<sup>1</sup> This is Karl Polanyi's definition of the market economy that emerged in the nineteenth-century. See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, foreword by Robert M. MacIver, Boston: Beacon Press, 1957. According to the historian William Cronon, "more than anything else, it was the treatment of land and property as commodities traded at market that distinguished English [and American] conceptions of ownership from Indian ones." William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, p. 75.

anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan expressed the common nineteenth-century sentiment when he wrote that the "singular trait in the character of the red man" was that he "never felt the 'power of gain'" which, according to him, "is one of the earliest manifestations of the progressive mind." As Morgan put it, "this great passion of civilized man, in its use and abuse his blessing and his curse, never roused the Indian mind."<sup>2</sup>

Immersed in classical images of the simple life, white Americans often expressed deep admiration for the Indian, who represented to them the image of the "Noble Savage." At the same time, they considered the Indian "savage," "wild" and "rude" with an inability to subdue the natural environment in the Euro-American manner that disqualified them from ownership of land in any real sense and therefore justified dispossession.<sup>3</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha* followed the setting sun. James Fenimore Cooper's *Natty Bumppo* cleared the way for the better groomed settlers who followed in his tracks. Throughout this period, and well into the twentieth-century, Federal Indian policy was consistent: it was based on Indians exchanging their old ways for Christianity, private property, white agricultural practices, white material culture, and what was becoming the respectable white vision of gender and family relationships.<sup>4</sup> Because of their relative strength, white Americans were able to impose their vision of property relationships secure in their optimistic faith that history was on their side.

This original optimism has faded. Faith in the liberal and republican promises have struggled against a world in which property is being constantly redefined and reorganized. The world-view that sustained the Founders is increasingly estranged from reality. Undercurrents of discontent with private property as a supreme value have always existed; with the consolidation of new and more amorphous forms of property, with the growing inequalities and with the outburst of environmental concerns, these undercurrents have increasingly come to the surface. That the broad outlines of Indian policy have been drastically altered is but one indication of the cultural transformations in the attitudes toward "private" and "common" property. It is an indication of the extent to which Americans are changing their relationship to the natural world, perhaps even learning from the original inhabitants of the continent.

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, *The League of the Iroquois*, North Dighton, Mass: JG Press, 1995 (1851] p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> As one Peter Heylyn wrote as far back as 1636, "we have done them no injury by settling amongst them; we rather than they being the prime occupants, and they only Sojourners in the land." Cited in Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian From Columbus to the Present*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979 p. 131. This is one of my most important sources for the image of the American Indian in the broader culture.

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview of American Indian policy see Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indian*, abridged edition, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

By the end of this paper, the fact that each of us is here attending a conference about common property will appear in the full glory of its historical peculiarity and significance.

## II Civilization Triumphant

From the first contact between Europeans and the aborigines of what became known as the North American continent, the image of the Indian as the savage enemy coexisted in the white imagination alongside the image of the Indian as the “Noble Savage” who embodied the primitive virtues celebrated by a long tradition of European thought. Educated white Americans saw the Indian through the prism of a classical vision of a Golden Age where individuals lived simply and following “nature unspoiled.” The Roman philosopher Seneca explained that human beings in such a state possessed the knowledge that the good life is the “natural” life, and enjoyed a liberty and equality, and a level of communal sharing and hospitality unheard of among the civilized. “What race of men could be luckier? the wealthy and powerful Roman asked. “Share and share alike they enjoyed nature. She saw to each and every man’s requirements for survival like a parent. What it all amounted to was undisturbed possession of resources owned by the community.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet no matter how alluring this image might have been for respectable white Americans, they knew that the United States was built on entirely different principles. Whites justified the civilizing process, the appropriation of Indian lands, and the organization of these lands along the principles of private property by calling upon a modern Lockean understanding of the state of nature and its relationship between common and private property. Locke and those who followed in his wake agreed with the ancients that individuals in a state of nature possess “in common” the right to the fruit of the trees and the fish of the seas and to all of the plentiful bounty of the earth; the Lockean “state of nature” is reminiscent of the classical vision of a Golden Age.<sup>6</sup> To those who doubted the reality of a state of nature, the American Indian assumed the rhetorical role that had once been Adam’s. As Locke put it, “in the beginning all the world was America.”<sup>7</sup> Like Locke, Americans agreed with the ancients that it was acquisitiveness--the desire and ability to accumulate private property--that motivated human beings to leave the state of nature and establish civil society.

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<sup>5</sup> Seneca, *Letters From a Stoic*, selected and translated with an introduction by Rubin Cambell, London: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, edited, with an introduction by Thomas P. Peardon, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1979, pp. 4-11 and 16-30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

But here Locke and the Americans parted company with the ancients; instead of mourning the loss of the Golden Age, they celebrated the accumulation of private property as the great progressive force of history. Land, in particular, was meant to be mapped out and fenced; in the Lockean conception of property, the one who mixed his labor with a particular section of land made the land his own. As Locke put it, when God gave "the world to men in common," he instructed them to "subdue" and "cultivate" the earth and use it "for their benefit and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it."<sup>8</sup>

The Lockean expectation that the riches of the earth would go to "the industrious and rational" assumed the intensive use of land divided into private hands and was an argument against hunting as a mode of subsistence.<sup>9</sup> This, in turn provided the justification for the British, and later for the American settlement of North America. For instance, when Locke noted with approval that "a king of a large and fruitful territory there [in America] feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day-laborer in England," he was clearly arguing for the exportation of a British mode of land use.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, where the classical philosophers and other primitivists saw misery in private property, Locke and the other Enlightenment theorists who provided the philosophical foundation for the United States envisioned awe-inspiring benefits. Their argument was straightforward: while primitive freedom diminishes with the evolution of society and the development of civil institutions--which emerge with private property--another kind of freedom expands. Along with this freedom and the increasing complexity of society comes a more complex self--and a self-mastery--also only possible within the confines of civilization. Although the Indian, like a being hatched from Seneca's imagination, enjoyed the natural life, he did not enjoy the more refined benefits of civilization. As a Mrs. Mary Eastman put it in 1850, "the Indian, delighting in war and in glorious deeds, is yet ignorant of the greatest victory of which man is capable--the conquering of the self."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 25. "In the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America," Locke explained, on p. 23, "without any improvement, tillage, or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated."

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965, p. 118. This is the other important source for the image of the Indian in the broader culture.

Anybody witnessing the extreme composure of an American Indian warrior tortured and killed in the traditional manner would forever banish the idea that they lacked self-control. But whites like Eastman had a particular conception of self-control in mind. It was the self-control of an individualistic, economically rational actor attempting to succeed in a market civilization. The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville coined the term “individualism” in 1835 to describe the collective temper of the United States. “A novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth,” he explained.<sup>12</sup>

Even with its slavery and racism, the United States exemplified the ascendant “liberal order. Monarchies and “privileged classes” in Europe, by definition, concentrated property, power and opportunity in the hands of a few. Primogeniture, Entailment of Estates and Feudal Tenures were the time-worn legal restrictions imposed upon the exchange of land in order to maintain power in the hands of the oppressing classes. The United States, in contrast, was based on the diffusion of property and power. It lived most closely to the liberal principles of liberty, equality, and to the principle upon which these two depended, the free exchange of private property.

In the eighteenth-century, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur expressed the idealistic intensity with which Americans approached private property. “The instant I enter my own land,” he wrote, “the bright idea of property, of exclusive rights of independence exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself; by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder. What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil?” The fervor of Crevecoeur’s celebration grew from his awareness of the uniqueness of the American experiment. As he put it, “no wonder that so many Europeans who have never been able to say that such portion of land was theirs, cross the Atlantic to realize that happiness.”<sup>13</sup>

Crevecoeur embodied the American conceptions of land and private property and their place in the good society. When he described how “this formerly rude soil” had been subdued for human benefit, he was embracing the Lockean attitude toward the natural world, to human labor, and to private property: As he explains, his father, like countless other Americans, took an untamed piece of land and tamed it with his labor, thus making it his own. The diffusion of this kind of ownership was the foundation of the good society, a republic of active self-governing

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<sup>12</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary Of Culture and Society*, revised edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 98-99. The original source is J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, “Americans on the Land.”

citizens who were also free to pursue their liberal aspirations. The self-sufficiency of a freeholder, he explained, “established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance of inhabitants of such a district.”<sup>14</sup> This, in essence was the original American dream.

Americans put faith in this dream because they believed in the strength of American political institutions, in the supremacy of a market unrestrained by feudal restrictions, and in the abundance of cheap land that maintained an unparalleled diffusion of property. Americans believed that the diffusion of property meant that wage labor was only a stage of life and not a permanent condition; they had thus avoided the inequalities of wealth and the class antagonisms of Europe. Unlike anywhere else in the world, each (white) man in the United States with ambition was able to establish a “competency” for himself--to become an independent proprietor in his own right. White Americans were free to strive for the republican virtues, to enjoy the liberal freedoms, to compete fairly in the market and “make something” of themselves. It was Tocqueville’s experience with this set of expectations that caused him to coin the word “individualism” in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

During a European tour in the early 1870s, the pioneering anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan expressed the common American idea that “a radical transformation of the European land system” was necessary if Europeans were to ever enjoy the benefits of liberty and prosperity that Americans enjoyed.<sup>16</sup> He believed that “the example of our country, its rapidly augmenting wealth, its amazing prosperity and progress are doing more to teach mankind than any other instrumentality. It will be impossible to maintain the present order of things another century in the face of our example and great success.”<sup>17</sup> Decades earlier, in 1852, Morgan set forth this image of the United States as a beacon to the world. The youthful republic, he wrote--based on the principle of the diffusion of property--is “in the day-spring of its existence; full of life, energy and hope; full of great aspirations, of glowing patriotism, of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent discussion of the assumptions of this American faith, see Eric Foner, *Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, “L.H. Morgan’s European Journal,” edited by Leslie White, *The Rochester Historical Society Publications, XVI*, Rochester, New York; Published by the Historical Society, 1937, p. 325. He speaks in several other places about family life in Europe, which he compares unfavorably to the United States.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 324-325

gorgeous projects; the home of the oppressed, the refuge of the exile, the sanctuary of liberty, and the final victor over the powers of despotism.”<sup>18</sup>

### III The Doomed Indian

The very success of the American experiment sealed the fate of the American Indian. As whites rolled across the continent, Indian nations were forced to relinquish lands to the far more numerous strangers. By the 1830s, there were only scattered pockets of Indians left on the eastern seaboard. The Mexican War brought vast new lands under the control of the United States, and by 1860 even Indians in the westernmost regions of the continent were feeling the full brunt of American power. In the decades following the Civil War, the Federal government forced even the most rebellious Indians onto reservations, thus “solving” the “Indian Problem.”

Not surprisingly, whites moving into territories with ‘unpacified’ Indians were the most vehemently against the original inhabitants. Yet in contrast to the overwhelmingly exclusionary attitude of whites towards blacks, a general respect for American Indians existed in the United States that grew as one went farther eastward to the more settled regions of the country. A rough consensus existed in policy-making circles that the narrow scope of the Indian life was a result of circumstances, not capacity. Throughout the nineteenth-century, whites debated “reform” and “removal.” Land speculators and crooked Federal agents grew rich; settlers and Indians sometimes clashed and sometimes lived harmoniously; as they watched their societies being uprooted, defeated Indians suffered and tried to adapt to reservation life; well-meaning missionaries and policy-makers tried to protect them, while teaching them the rudiments of Christianity and civilization. Yet even Lewis Cass, Andrew Jackson’s Secretary of War and one of the primary architects of Indian removal--which was denounced by humanitarians and idealists--made his case based on the argument that removal would best further the ultimate goal of civilizing Indians.<sup>19</sup>

The way policy-makers viewed the matter, the communal organization of American Indians discouraged the civilizing process--which required the growth of an individualistic ethos.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, *The Two Antagonistic Principles of Civil Government*, Rochester: D.M. Dewey, 1852.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Long Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Marcel Mauss describes this lack of an individualistic ethos among “primitive” peoples in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W.D. Halls, foreword by Mary Douglas, New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, p. 32.

Across the political spectrum, they agreed the individual ethos had to be instilled in Indian societies. In a perfect marriage of high and low motives, they argued that Indians possessed too much land for their own good: the vast territories enabled Indians to rely on hunting and their old communal traditions instead of succumbing to the civilizing process. Excess land, therefore, had to be appropriated, the communal structures had to be dismantled, communal lands had to be broken up, and these lands had to be parceled out to individual families so that the men could farm, trade, or practice a profession, while the women could maintain the home as the center for a newly formed private family. Once these policies were established, it would become easier to assimilate Indians into the dominant civilization. As the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan put it, Indians would one day be incorporated into the American republic, free to exercise "those rights of property, and rights of citizenship, which are common to ourselves."<sup>21</sup>

Morgan's relationship to American Indians, however, was more complex than this statement suggests. He harbored a nostalgia for the primitive life embodied for him by American Indians--and he resolved his ambivalence in a manner that was emblematic of the age. As an unemployed lawyer in Aurora, New York, during the 1840s, he became the driving force behind a ritualistic fraternity, "The Grand Order of the Iroquois," whose "warriors" claimed in their songs to "scorn the white man's law." From 1844, when, at the age of twenty six, he settled in Rochester, New York, until his death in 1881, he married, settled down, and grew wealthy from investments in railroads and iron mines. In the photographs of him that remain, Morgan is clothed in the dark suit and bow-tie appropriate to his social station, member of Rochester's business establishment, state legislator, member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Yet underneath the costume of the most respectable nineteenth century fashion, a man can dream about savages in the forest.

"It would be difficult to describe any political society," he wrote in his first book, about the Iroquois, "in which there was less of oppression and discontent, more of individual independence and boundless freedom."<sup>22</sup> Throughout his life, he maintained an admiring attitude toward the Indian. It was obvious to him that civilized people did not have the same kind of independence and "boundless freedom." He celebrated the primitive

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<sup>21</sup> Morgan, *The League*, Volume II, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 130-131.

“hospitality” that he saw among Indians and contrasted it to the cold logic of the market. And he approached the natural world with the same romantic spirit that had attracted him to the Indian in the first place.<sup>23</sup>

Morgan’s attraction to the Indian, in fact, was linked to an environmental ethos that led him to resist the idea that animals and the rest of the natural world were merely resources for the use of man: he wrote that “when we claim that the bear was made for man’s food, we forget that man was just as much made to be food for the bear; and that our right to eat the bear rests upon no higher sanction, than his co-equal right to feast upon our flesh if he overcomes in battle.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time that Morgan was involved in two intrusive industries, railroads and mining, he worried about the effect that the imposition of American civilization was having upon the natural world. Looking to the future, he argued that “an arrest of the progress of the human race can alone prevent the dismemberment and destruction of a large portion of the animal kingdom.”<sup>25</sup>

These last words, however, must be placed besides the vast bulk of Morgan’s writing, which is an unabashed celebration of progress. Throughout his life, Morgan considered himself a friend of Native peoples--but he was also one of the most important advocate of civilizing and assimilating them. This meant that he wanted them to discard what he called their “communism in living,” and accept the liberal and republican principles upon which the United States was built.

To see how this attitude worked in practice, one can turn to Morgan’s response in the 1840s to the Iroquois Indians of up-state New York when they resisted the imposition of white social models in the name of the Religion of Handsome Lake, a movement that attempted to maintain uniquely Iroquois identity and values. According to the wisdom of the Prophet Handsome Lake: “The Great Spirit, when he made the earth, never intended that it should be

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<sup>23</sup> Celebrating “unspoiled nature,” he looked back nostalgically to the time when Indians and animals had lived in harmony. Imagining what his own region, central New York, had been like, he wrote that “The stupendous forest scenery which then overspread these fair regions, and the spirit which then reigned through these solitudes we can only but faintly conceive--but feebly appreciate. See “An Address on the Indian Trails of New York With Some Observations on the Joint Occupation of the Country [?] of the White Race with the Red by Skenandoah, read August 12, 1846 before the Council of the Delegates of the Iroquois Confederacy,” Box 21, Morgan MSS.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, *The American Beaver*, with a new introduction by Robert J. Naiman, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986 [1868], p. 283.

<sup>25</sup> Morgan, *The American Beaver*. For a discussion of the debate among the philosophers who Morgan read about the place of animals and their relationship with human beings see Michael Bradie, “the Moral Status of Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy,” *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, edited by Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 32-51. This article shows how much beyond these philosophers Morgan was willing to go in considering the moral standing of animals.

made merchandise; but he willed that all his creatures should enjoy it equally. Your chiefs have violated and betrayed your trust by selling lands. Nothing is now left of our once large possessions, save a few small reservations. Chiefs and aged men--you, as men, have no lands to sell. You occupy and possess a tract in trust for your children. You should hold that trust sacred, lest your children are driven from their homes by your unsafe conduct. Whoever sells lands offends the Great Spirit, and must expect a great punishment after death."<sup>26</sup>

The Religion of Handsome Lake, of course, was a direct contradiction of both liberal and republican principles: it tied land together with the larger collectivity and attempted to instill a relationship between the people and the land that can be described as "spiritual." It was a good example of what Marcel Mauss meant when he wrote that, in "archaic," (primitive" societies) "souls are mixed with things; things with souls."<sup>27</sup> Morgan admired the quality of Handsome Lake's overall message and understood the spiritual content of the property relationships, the way in which the Prophet's defense of traditional land use was intimately related to what he considered the primitive world of equality, hospitality, and "boundless freedom." Yet, as a faithful liberal republican, he believed that the benefits of progress far outweighed the costs: Handsome Lake's attitude to land ownership was an obstruction to progress and had to be dismantled. Although imbued with a respect for these primitivist virtues, Morgan believed that the gains of civilization outweighed the losses. He believed that it was the task of humanitarian whites like himself to impose on the Indians the definition of land and labor as commodities--for this was crucial to the liberal republican experiment that was itself spiritual in nature.

Morgan repeatedly sought and failed to obtain the supreme office that formulated Indian policy, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. But this failure stemmed from his lack of the proper connections, not from his views on Indian policy which, in their broad contours, placed him in the mainstream of what was considered enlightened nineteenth-century opinion. His scholarly work, in fact, provided a systematic explanation for why American Indian society was doomed to extinction and why the United States was triumphant.

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, *The League of the Iroquois*, North Dighton, Mass: JG Press, 1995 (1851] pp. 229-230.

<sup>27</sup> Mauss, p. 20.

Dividing the human experience into three “ethnic periods,” “savagery,” “barbarism,” and “civilization,” he placed the confrontation between “civilized” whites and Indian “barbarians” within an ambitious theory of social evolution based on technological innovation, and the definition and organization of property and the family. From his perspective, the emergence of civilization--which he also called “the mere property career”--was linked to the growth of private property. As he put it, “when field agriculture had demonstrated that the whole surface of the earth could be made the subject of property owned by individuals in severalty, and it was found that the head of the family became the natural center of accumulation, the new property career of mankind was inaugurated.”<sup>28</sup> His theory fit all history into a universal and inevitable pattern, from small kinship based tribes, with rudimentary technology and communal property, to large industrialized states based on clearly marked external borders, individual property rights, and the exchange of commodities in an increasingly impersonal market.

Although Morgan felt nostalgic for Indians and worried about the extinction of animals in the wake of progress, he made a name for himself by providing the intellectual explanation--and justification--for the progress of civilization. “There is something grandly impressive,” he wrote, “in a principle which has wrought out civilization by assiduous application from small beginnings.”<sup>29</sup> His theory of social evolution was the high-brow enunciation of the common discourse that steered American policy makers whose underlying idea was to “elevate” Indians by encouraging their social evolution. The General Allotment Law (Dawes Act) of 1887, which guided American Indian policy for decades afterward, shared the same assumptions as Morgan’s esoteric texts of social theory.<sup>30</sup> The purpose of the Act was to break up tribal organization and to encourage private property--ownership “in severalty”--among Indians, which would then eventually lead to their full citizenship in the republic. As historian Francis Paul Prucha puts it, the Act was pushed through Congress “by eastern humanitarians who deeply believed that communal land-holding was an obstacle to the civilization they wanted the Indians to acquire and who were convinced that they had the history of human experience on their side.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, edited by Leslie A. White, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 461.

<sup>29</sup> The quotation continues: “. . . from the arrow head which expresses the thought in the brain of a savage, to the smelting of iron ore, which represents the higher intelligence of the barbarian, and, finally, to the railway train in motion, which may be called the triumph of civilization.” Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 562.

<sup>30</sup>For an excellent overview see Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indian*, Abridged Edition, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, pp. 224-241.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid*, p. 227.

Senator Dawe's reactions to his visit with the Five Civilized Tribes embodies the logic of the legislation that bares his name. A chief explained to the senator that the Indians did not own their own homes, that there were no paupers and that the nation had no debt, and that they built their own hospitals and schools. After digesting these facts, the senator wrote that "the defect of the system was apparent. They have got as far as they can go, because they own their land in common." Tapping into a rich deposit of intellectual assumptions about the role that the desire for private property plays in progress, he explained that among the Indians: "there is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization. Till this people will consent to give up their lands, and divide them among their citizens so that each one can own the land he cultivates, they will not make much more progress."<sup>32</sup>

From the perspective of many whites, allotment seemed to work; at least Indian lands that had been held in common passed under the reign of private property. In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt approvingly described the Dawes Act as "a mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass."<sup>33</sup> In a remarkably short period, Americans subdued, tamed, and organized their portion of the North American continent according to the principles of private property.

#### IV Civilization In Question

The currents of progress, however, flowed in unanticipated directions. In the years after the Civil War, Americans confronted a society escalating in scale as the scope of the interconnections between individuals, corporations, and the various layers of government were enlarged and organized according to a rational and impersonal logic. The prices of agricultural commodities dropped, forcing farms out of business. Meanwhile, corporations expanded into all aspects of life, connecting Americans to an increasingly elaborate market economy that corroded old customs and habits. The machinery of industrial capitalism transformed family, work, and community relationships. It invented new forms of property and established new distributions of power. That blue-blooded social critic Henry Adams described aptly how the "new power was disintegrating society, and setting independent centres of force to work, until money had all it could to hold the machine together."<sup>34</sup> With his

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<sup>32</sup> Cited in Ronald L. Trosper, "Land Tenure and Ecosystem Management in Indian Country," *Who Owns America: Social Conflict Over Property Rights*, edited by Harvey M. Jacobs, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, pp. 209-210.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918, p. 419.

customary sting, Adams explained that the corporations and trusts "were revolutionary, troubling all the old conventions and values, as the screws of ocean steamers must trouble a school of herrings. They tore society to pieces and trampled it under foot."<sup>35</sup>

The emergence of an industrial American in final third of the nineteenth-century was accompanied by economic depressions, social tumult, labor strikes and violence. During this time the historian Frederick Jackson Turner articulated his famous Frontier Thesis, the idea that the inexpensive and "unsettled" land of the frontier--the diffusion of landed property--molded American character; he also argued that these vast reserves of inexpensive land were now settled and that the Frontier had closed. It became increasingly clear that many Americans would never be independent proprietors and would instead support themselves through wage-labor. As the American republic "outgrew" the frontier, it adjusted to its new conditions: tremendous and increasing wealth; status as a world power; the decline of the independent proprietor; the growth of corporations and of permanent wage-earning classes; centralization, and massive formations of property. Americans experienced an awe-inspiring amount of economic expansion, technological innovation, social mobility, and material abundance. At the same time, many worried that the youthful dreams of an exceptional American republic were withering from exposure to the elements of time and greed. Even a perennial optimist such as Walt Whitman began to have his doubts: "if the United States, like the countries of the Old World, are also to grow vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations, such as we see looming upon us of late years--steadily, even if slowly, eating into them like a cancer of lungs or stomach--then our republican experiment, notwithstanding all its surface-successes, is at heart an unhealthy failure."<sup>36</sup>

In the first decades of the twentieth-century, Americans continued to find solace in visions of the future--which were often based upon nostalgic visions of the past. As historian David Shi puts it, an "innovative nostalgia" was part of a "persistent thread running through much of progressive culture."<sup>37</sup> Instead of emphasizing individualism and the market, however, the most influential thinkers carried a torch for a new kind of community. Fearful that an excessive focus on pecuniary pursuits was sapping humanity of its vital juices, these Progressives

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p. 501.

<sup>36</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 187

sought to revive and strengthen democracy in the midst of the growing industrial order and mass society.

Progressives such as Mary Parker Follett emphasized the "group" idea, and the "community." In her words, "it is the conviction of separateness which has to be conquered before civilization can proceed. Community must be the foundation of the state."<sup>38</sup>

Still, for all of the discontent with the status quo, the faith in progress remained intact. No matter how disgruntled with the current state of society, many were still able to envision a peaceful transition to a new world that would nurture their fondest ideals. Those who followed, however, drank a more bitter drought.

During the twentieth-century, the liberal civilizing project has confronted a series of almost insurmountable obstacles that has corroded the once optimistic faith in an inevitable and benevolent progress toward the liberal vision of the good society. Assigning dates in cultural history is notoriously difficult; individuals and nations rarely change world-views over night. When it comes to the belief in progress, however, the lines between epochs is unusually distinct: the First World War runs like a fault line through history. As the psychologist Erich Fromm wrote, "it is difficult for the generations born after 1914 to appreciate to what extent this war shattered the foundations of Western civilization."<sup>39</sup> After Britain declared war in 1914, Henry James expressed the sentiments of many when he wrote that "the plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness. . . is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words."<sup>40</sup>

For the nineteenth-century celebrants of progress--including those who formulated Indian policy--the liberal principles seemed self-evident; they therefore felt secure in their knowledge of how to build the good society. The Victorian optimists looked to the next century with a sublime hope. But reality dashed this hope. The rise of extremist movements, a world-wide economic depression, and the Second World War, challenged liberalism across the globe, shaking the solidity of had once seemed self-evident principles, and making the future far more uncertain.

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Parker Follett, *The New State: Group Organization, The Solution of Popular Government*, New York: Longmans, Green, 1918, p. 359.

<sup>39</sup> Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, New York: A Trident Press Book, Simon and Schuster, 1962, p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986, p. 28.

“It was in Hitler’s rise to power,” writes the historian Howard Brick, “that the liberal theory of evolutionism met its greatest crisis.”<sup>41</sup>

The United States emerged from World War II wealthier and more powerful than ever before. But to many, the nineteenth-century faith in progress seemed grossly absurd in the shadow of the destruction wrought by the nations allegedly on the vanguard of progress. Meanwhile, Americans continued to leave farms for cities while corporations grew even more dominant. Government by experts increasingly replaced the self-government of an independent citizenry. And American rhetoric took on an increasingly conservative cast after Soviet Communism claimed the mantle of the future. In the twentieth-century, the political spectrum has mutated: those who had been considered “liberals” in the nineteenth-century because they advocated individualism, equality under the law and a market system, are now called “conservatives.” Meanwhile, those who are called “liberals” attempt to use new tools and techniques to adapt the original liberal promise of individual fulfillment to the changing circumstances. One indication of the loss of the reflexive faith in progress and “civilization” is that anthropologists, who had once proclaimed the universal march of all peoples toward the standard set by the West, now became the champions of relativism, the predominant creed of an understandably skeptical age.

Notwithstanding the tremendous achievements of the United States, at the end of the twentieth-century the success of the original American experiment had become uncertain. The statistics did not, by any stretch of the imagination, depict a nation of yeoman farmers secure in their independence and exercising their republican virtue. In 1993, half of one per cent of landowners, including corporations, owned forty per cent of the private land in the United States; the top five per cent owned three quarters of the land, while the bottom seventy eight per cent owned only three per cent.<sup>42</sup> With the rise of large corporations, private property has become more concentrated and more dispersed, more accountable to the larger public and yet much more difficult to pin down. As the anthropologist C.M. Hann explains, “the private property component of the liberal model looks increasingly suspect throughout the capitalist world, as ownership of large enterprises continues to shift away from persons to institutions, and is increasingly detached from issues of control and management.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Brick, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Geisler, “Ownership: An Overview,” *Rural Sociology*, 1993, pp. 532-546.

<sup>43</sup> C.M. Hann, “Introduction: The embeddedness of property,” *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*, edited by C.M. Hann, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 2.

During much of this time when property relationships were being transformed, American Indian policy-makers continued to pursue a static vision of what the appropriate property arrangements should be for their “wards.” Whites with the most humane motives dreamed about welcoming Indians into the republic as independent proprietors. Yet all the while, whites were inviting them into a dream that was fading away.

#### VI The Indian Reemerges

Meanwhile, the image of the Indian as the “Noble Savage” has persisted as a reminder of how different things might be. For instance, Euro-Americans in the nineteenth-century, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau, had looked to the Indian as an inspiration for the “possibility of noble civilized men.”<sup>44</sup> As part of his search for such integrity, Thoreau wrote 2,800 pages of notes on American Indians in the last ten years of his life, most of it notes copied from books--including Morgan’s first book--in preparation for his own study of the Algonquin peoples. According to some sources, one of Thoreau’s last words before he died was “Indians.”<sup>45</sup> Less eccentric Americans, carefully dressed in civilized garb, would have agreed with Margaret Fuller’s description of the civilizing process. “As yet,” she wrote, the civilized man “loses in harmony of being what he gains in height and extension; the civilized man is a larger mind but a more imperfect nature than the savage.”<sup>46</sup>

When progress seemed self-evident, those like Lewis Henry Morgan who possessed deep admiration for the Indian were able to project their primitivist longings into the future. Progress was inevitable, they knew, and there were losses as well as gains; but things would take care of themselves. Morgan’s mature scholarly work, in fact, promised to resolve the anxieties and ambivalence that his fellow countrymen harbored about progress. The laws of social evolution that he claimed to have uncovered promised a revolution, in the older sense of the word: “re” means back and “volvere” means to roll. In his most famous lines, he wrote that “a mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past.” Because of his long immersion in study of prehistory, he was able to convincingly argue that “the time which has passed away since civilization began is but a fragment of the ages yet to come,” and that the future would be different from the present.

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<sup>44</sup> According to historian Roy Harvey Pearce, many of these American primitivist critiques were flawed by a naive nostalgia, a “simplistic fantasy” that “confused and corrupted” their “radicalism.” See Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, pp. 146-151.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150. Pearce cites Albert Keiser, *The Indian in American Literature*, pp. 209-232 about Thoreau’s final words.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148. This is originally from Fuller’s posthumous *At Home and Abroad*. Pearce cites Margaret Fuller, *Writings*, edited by Mason Wade, pp. 57-58, 60-62, 74-92.

“The dissolution of society,” he wrote, “bids fair to become the termination of a career in which property is the end and the aim: because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence, and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in higher form of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient gentes [what we now usually call “clans”].<sup>47</sup>

In short, by projecting his primitivist nostalgia into the future Morgan made progress itself into its own remedy. According to his wishful forecast based upon laws of social evolution, the future promised a synthesis of civilization with its antithesis. Secure in this faith, hopes for a revived primitivism remained compatible with the images of the doomed Indian depicted in Cooper’s novels about the frontier, and in Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*. It was also, of course, completely compatible with the policy of civilizing the Indians: they had to reach the stage of stage of civilization exemplified by the United States before they could move, with their fellow Americans, to the next, even higher stage.

It became increasingly difficult, however, to uphold this faith that history was going in the right direction, and Americans began to spend more time in the past. As historian T.J. Jackson Lears puts it, anti-modernism--rooted in a “feeling of over civilization,” a “dissatisfaction with modern culture,” a “crisis of moral authority,” and a “yearning for ‘real life--’” was a growing phenomenon in the late nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> According to Lears, “the anti-modern impulse stemmed from revulsion against the process of rationalization first described by Max Weber--the systematic organization of economic life for the maximum personal achievement; the drive for efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare; the reduction of the world to a disenchanted object to be manipulated by rational technology.”<sup>49</sup> Although at first timid, this kind of anti-modernism gathered strength throughout the twentieth-century, questioning the Lockean consensus about the human relationship to the natural world, and exploring new solutions to the appropriate definition and management of property.

The image of the Indian in the white imagination had, of course, always stood as the antithesis of this “systematic organization of economic life.” In the environment of growing anti-modernism, this image grew in

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, edited by Leslie White, p. 467.

<sup>48</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

prominence. Where the older literature had justified the passing of the primitive life, even if it mourned this passing, the emerging literature looked to the Indian as a protector of primitive virtues in a coldly efficient modern world. For instance, in Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, what's left of hope exists along with unstandardized humanity--on an Indian reservation in the American South-West.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in Huxley's hands, the fondest hopes of Lewis Henry Morgan and others like him for a future revival of primitive "liberty, equality, and fraternity" were contracted into the confines of Indian reservations that nominally survived outside the boundaries of the future "civilized" order.

It is true that when *Brave New World* was published--and for decades afterwards--the most prominent image of the Indian in popular culture remained that of the retreating savage: with its assumption of an inevitable and ultimately beneficial progress, this stock cliché of countless westerns would have been familiar to Cooper and Longfellow. But, gradually, the skepticism about progress permeated popular culture; and, in an age less secure about the future, the image of the Indian as the protector of primitive virtues took on a new significance. As Huxley himself had predicted, "with every advance of industrial civilization, the savage past will be more and more appreciated, and the cult of D.H. Lawrence's Dark God may be expected to spread through an ever-widening circle of worshippers."<sup>51</sup>

Lawrence's hope was that the white man's spirit "can cease to be the opposite and the negative of the red man's spirit. It can open out a great new area of consciousness, in which there is room for the red spirit."<sup>52</sup> Taking a long view of the twentieth-century, one can clearly see the growth of this new "area of consciousness." One can see it in *Dances With Wolves* and countless other films and books which discard the old frontier myths of progress in favor of depicting Indians in their own right. One can see it in New Age movements where "civilized" men and women try to reconnect with their "primitive" selves. One can see it in a broad retreat from the certainties and hierarchies of civilization and a "rebarbarization" or informalization of society.<sup>53</sup> Most important in the context of

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<sup>50</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1932.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Peter Edgerly Firchow, *The End of Utopia: A Study of Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World,"* Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1984.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Drinnon, p. 252. The original source is D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> As Theodore Roszak wrote about the sixties counter-culture--which has since seeped into all aspects of the cultural mainstream--"they give us back the image of the paleolithic band" who lived in "rude equality." See Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (1969), p. 190.

this paper, one can see it in the growing environmental ethos, in the changing attitudes toward property, and in Federal Indian policy.

Within the last century, Americans of all backgrounds have drastically altered their attitude to the natural world. Aldo Leopold, the great environmental prophet argued for this transformation when he wrote that we must “quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem.”<sup>54</sup> In saying this, he was advocating nothing less than a rejection of the Lockean attitude toward the natural world. Since Leopold wrote in the first half of the twentieth-century, the idea has spread that land is more than a commodity, and that the natural world, including the numerous non-human creatures who inhabit it, exists in its own sake. This environmental awareness has come from a new understanding of limits; but much of it also reflects a genuine spiritual transformation, one that often looks to the Indian for inspiration.<sup>55</sup>

Although it would be virtually impossible to discern this from the rhetoric on the right end of the political spectrum, Americans have also lost faith in another original tenet of the republic: they have, by and large, adjusted to the fact that theirs is not a republic of independent proprietors. The government remains, in theory, a government by and for the people. According to John Locke, “the great and chief end” for which people establish government “is the preservation of their property.”<sup>56</sup> The central question that has confronted the American people throughout the twentieth-century--and which will continue to confront them--is how to redefine property to fit the new conditions, how to redistribute private property, how to set standards for what an individual can and cannot do on or to private property, and how best to manage common property for the public good.

It should come as no surprise that as the old certainties upon which the nation was founded have been uprooted, American Indian policy has been transformed. The Federal Government, in fact, now actively encourages the communal property arrangements that it once tried so hard to demolish. John Collier, Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933 until 1945 embodies the new consciousness. When he assumed office, Indian

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<sup>54</sup> Cited in Donald Worster, p. 108.

<sup>55</sup> As Gary Snyder has written about Deep Ecology, “there is a movement toward creating a 'culture of the wilderness' from within contemporary civilization” that looks to “primary people” as “our teachers in these values. Snyder uses the term “primary people” as a designation for Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and others who were once been called “primitive.” In the same book, he also urges Americans of all backgrounds to root themselves in their region, to take care of their common environment--and to see themselves as “Native Americans.” See Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, New York: North Point Press, 1990.

<sup>56</sup> Locke, p. 71.

lands had been decimated: Between 1887 and 1934, common Indian lands diminished from one hundred and thirty eight million acres to fifty two million acres.<sup>57</sup> As the historian Francis Paul Prucha argues, from the Indian perspective, the allotment policy had “failed miserably.”<sup>58</sup> In the midst of the world-wide economic depression--which seemed proof of the failure of what Morgan had called the “mere property career”--Collier sought to reconstitute American Indian societies along more organic, communal lines.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 turned Federal Indian policy on its head. Where the former objectives--from before the Revolutionary War--had been to break up common tribal lands and the communal social structures, the new objectives were to enlarge and recreate common tribal lands, to strengthen, and even to create communal structures. As enunciated in official government reports, the new policy was meant “to help the Indian build back his landholdings to a point where they will provide an adequate basis for a self-sustaining economy, a self-satisfying social organization.”<sup>59</sup> When Collier described the Bureau’s goal to establish “social action vested in the Indian groups and executed by the groups from their own centers,” he was making it clear that his idea of a “self-satisfying social organization” was a communal one with the power to manage newly constituted common property.<sup>60</sup> For the first time in American history, the Federal Government had called off the jihad it had waged for so long against Indians in the name of individualism and private property.<sup>61</sup>

All holy wars end when their champions lose faith, and this is what happened in the case of Federal Indian policy. It is no accident that the transformation of Indian policy coincided with the general loss of faith in progress, and in the idea that the modern West had the answers. Collier considered his attempt to protect Indians and rebuild their communal structures as part of a larger mission. In saving Indians, he believed that whites would save themselves. Indians, he argued, “had what the world has lost. They have it now. What the world has lost, the world must have again, lest it die. Not many years are left to have or have not, to recapture the lost ingredient.” What is

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<sup>57</sup> Prucha, p. 305.

<sup>58</sup> Prucha, p. 304.

<sup>59</sup> See the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938, Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938, pp. 209-211.

<sup>60</sup> John Collier, *Indians of the Americas: The Long Hope*, slightly abridged, New York: A Mentor Book, 1947, p. 182. As this book makes clear, common property was central to Collier’s vision.

<sup>61</sup> See Prucha. Also see Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 93-195

this lost ingredient? In the aftermath of the World War II, he explained that “it is the ancient, lost reverence and passion for human personality, joined with the ancient, lost reverence and passion for the earth and its web of life.”<sup>62</sup>

Old assumptions and visions do not die easily. Attempts to break up common Indian lands continued in the years after Collier’s “Indian New Deal.” But his tenure marked a decisive shift. And in the 1960s, the attempts of Indians to reestablish common property were combined with a new consciousness of “Red Power.” In the years since then, numerous Indian groups have reestablished communal structures; at the same time, Indians remain as a potent symbol to other Americans who want to protect sustain the national commons.

To sum it up, the changes in American Indian policy reflect broad cultural trends. Where Lewis Henry Morgan was able to advocate the assimilation of Indians into the dominant civilization, secure that the future would take care of itself, John Collier saw himself fighting a rear-guard action to defend the “primitive” virtues from the encroaching modern ugliness. In the years since his stewardship, these “primitive” values have infiltrated a dominant culture that has lost faith in many of the principles upon which American civilization was first established. Americans continue to subdue the natural world for profit, but now they also debate how to live harmoniously with their fellow creatures, how to protect the common air they breath, the common water they drink, and the common land that sustains the common life of the planet. Also, they have stopped viewing the diffusion of landed property as a requirement for the American experiment to succeed; within an emerging sense of limits, they debate new ways to ensure the liberal promise of individual opportunity and the republican promise of virtuous self-government. Meanwhile, the “primitive” values, exemplified by Indians and other “primary” peoples, coexist, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict, with an ascendant global market. In the nineteenth-century, the Indian stood as the anti-thesis of the victorious civilization. Today, images of the Indian--which should not be mistaken for flesh-and-blood Native Americans--inspire people of all backgrounds to reimagine our relationship to the natural world, to rethink what is “private,” and what is “common,” and to reshape the original American vision of the good society to the new spirit and to the changing circumstances.

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<sup>62</sup> John Collier, p. 7.

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