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Manuel González

Our Indians

1904

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## Our Indians

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Editor's note: *Manuel Gonzalez Prada (1848–1919) was a Peruvian poet, writer and intellectual who moved toward an anarchist position around 1902. He was familiar with the major anarchist writers, and shared with Kropotkin an admiration for the French moral philosopher, Jean Marie Guyau (1854–1888), and opposition to Social Darwinism (Selection 54). He was one of the first Latin American writers to discuss the issue of indigenous peoples. The following excerpts are taken from his 1904 essay, “Our Indians,” translated here by Paul Sharkey. A collection of Gonzalez Prada’s writings, translated by F. H. Fornoff, including a good selection from his anarchist period, has recently been published as **Free Pages and Other Essays: Anarchist Musings** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).*

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WHAT A HANDY INVENTION ETHNOLOGY is in the hands of some! Once one has accepted that Mankind is divided into superior races and inferior races and acknowledged the white man's superiority and thus his right to sole governance of the Planet, there cannot be anything more natural than

suppression of the black man in Africa, the redskin in the United States, the Tagalog in the Philippines and the Indian in Peru.

Just as the supreme law of existence works itself out by selecting or eliminating the weak on the basis of their failure to adapt, so the violent eliminators or suppressors are merely accelerating Nature's slow and sluggish trend, abandoning the tortoise's slow gait for the gallop of the horse. Many do not spell it out but let it be read between the lines, like Pearson when he speaks of the fellowship between civilized men of European stock in the face of Nature and human barbarism. For human barbarism read un-white men.

But not only is the suppression of the black and yellow peoples decreed: within the white race itself peoples are sorted into those destined for greatness and survival and peoples doomed to degeneration and extinction ... Some pessimists, thinking themselves the Deucalions of the coming flood and even Nietzschean supermen, weigh up the disappearance of their race as if they were talking about pre-historic creatures or events on the Moon. It has not yet been formulated but the maxim stands: the crimes and vices of the English or Americans are inherent in the human race and not symptomatic of the decadence of a people; on the other hand, the crimes and vices of Frenchmen or Italians are freakish and symptomatic of racial degeneracy

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Is the suffering of the Indian less under the Republic than under Spanish rule? The *corregidores* and *encomiendas* may have gone, but the forced labour and impressment endure. The suffering we put him through is enough to bring the execration of humane persons down upon our heads. We keep him in ignorance and servitude, debase him in the barracks, brutalize him with alcohol and dispatch him to self-destruction in civil wars and, from time to time, orchestrate man-hunts and slaughters

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holding university degrees, the Indian problem would still not have been resolved: a proletariat of ignoramuses would give way to one of BAs and PhDs. The most civilized nations are awash with doctors without patients, lawyers without clients, engineers without projects, writers without public, artists without patrons and teachers without students and they make up a countless army of enlightened brains and empty stomachs. But where haciendas along the coast occupy four or five thousand acres and where ranches in the sierras measure thirty or even fifty leagues, a nation must be split into lords and serfs ...

There are two ways in which the Indian's circumstances might be improved; either the hearts of his oppressors soften to the extent that they concede the rights of the oppressed; or enough manliness is injected into the minds of the oppressed to chasten the oppressors. If the Indian were to spend on rifles and cartridges all of the money that he fritters away on drink and fiestas, if he were to hide a weapon in some corner of his hovel or some hollow in the rocks, his circumstances would alter and he would command respect for his property and his life. He would answer violence with violence, teaching a lesson to the master that rustles his sheep, the trooper that press-gangs him in the Government's name, the bully who carries off his livestock and draught animals.

Preach not humility and resignation to the Indian: rather pride and rebelliousness. What has he gained from three or four hundred years of forbearance and patience? The fewer the authorities he tolerates, the greater the number of harms he avoids. There is one telling fact: greater well-being is to be found in the districts furthest removed from the great haciendas, and there is more order and tranquility in the towns that are least visited by the authorities.

In short: the Indian will be redeemed through his own exertions, not through the humanization of his oppressors. Every white man, pretty much, is a Pizarro, a Valverde or an Areche.

Unwritten it may be, but the axiom according to which the Indian has no rights, only obligations, is honoured. Where he is concerned, the complaint of an individual is regarded as insubordination, collective claims as conspiracy to revolt. The Spanish royalists used to butcher the Indian when he tried to shrug off the yoke of the conquerors, but we nationalist republicans exterminate him when he takes exception to onerous taxation, or wearies of silently enduring the iniquities of some satrap. Our form of government boils down to a big lie, because a state where two or three million individuals live outside the law does not deserve to be called a democratic republic. Whereas along the coast there is an inkling of guarantees under a sham republic, in the interior the violation of every right under a blatant feudal regime is palpable. The writ of Codes does not run there, nor do courts of justice carry any weight, because hacienda owners and lordliness settle every quarrel by claiming the roles of judge and bailiff for themselves. Far from supporting the weak and the poor, the political authorities nearly always abet the rich and strong. There are regions where justices of the peace and governors are counted as part of the hacienda's slave force. What governor, what sub-prefect, let alone prefect, would dare face down a hacienda owner?

A hacienda comes about through the amassing of tiny plots wrested from their lawful owners and the lord wields the authority of a Norman baron over his peons. Not only has he a say in the appointment of governors, mayors and justices of the peace, but he conducts weddings, appoints heirs, disposes of inheritances and has the sons submit to a slavery that normally lasts their life-time just to clear the debts of the father. He enforces fearful punishments like the foot-stocks, flogging, the pillory and death; or as droll as head-shaving or cold water enemas. It would be a miracle if someone with no regard for life or property were to have any regard for female honour; every Indian woman, single or married, may find herself the target of the master's brutish lusts. Abduction, violation and

rape do not mean much when the belief is that Indian women are there to be taken by force. And for all that, the Indian never addresses his master without kneeling before him and kissing his hand. Let it not be said that the lords of the land act that way out of ignorance or for want of education; the children of some hacienda owners are shipped off to Europe in their child hood, educated in France or England and return to Peru with all of the appearances of civilized folk; but once they are back on their haciendas, the European veneer comes off and they act even more inhumanely and violently than their fathers; haciendas are tantamount to kingships in the heart of the Republic and the hacienda owners act like autocrats in the bosom of democracy ...

In order to excuse the dereliction of Government and the inhumanity of the exploiters, some ... pessimists place the mark of shame upon the Indian's forehead: they charge that he shies away from civilization. Anyone would think that splendid schools teeming with very well-paid erudite teachers had been thrown up in all our townships only to find their classrooms empty because the children, under instructions from their parents, refuse to attend for education. One would also think that the Indians are refusing to follow the morally edifying example set by the ruling classes or have no scruples about nailing to a cross all who peddle high-minded and unselfish notions. The Indian gets what he is given: fanaticism and fire-water.

So, what do we mean by civilization? Morality illumines industry and art, learning and science like a beacon at the top of a great pyramid. Not theological morality, which looks for some posthumous sanction, but rather human morality which looks for no sanction and would look no further than the Earth. The greatest accomplishment of morality, for individuals and societies alike, consists of its having turned man's strife with his neighbour into a mutual agreement to live. Where there is no justice, mercy nor goodwill, civilization is nowhere to be

found; where the "struggle for existence" is enunciated as the rule of society, barbarism rules. What is the point of amassing the learning of an Aristotle when one is a tiger at heart? What matter the artistic gifts of a Michelangelo when one has the heart of a swine? Rather than going around the world spreading the light of art or science, better to go around dispensing the milk of human kindness. Societies where doing good has graduated from being an obligation to being a habit and where the act of kindness has turned into an instinctive impulse deserve the description highly civilized. Have Peru's rulers attained that degree of morality? Are they entitled to look upon the Indian as a creature incapable of civilization?

... As long as the Indian attends lessons in school or is educated through simply rubbing shoulders with civilized folk, he acquires the same level of morality and culture as the descendant of the Spaniard. We are forever rubbing shoulders with yellow-skinned folk who dress, eat, live and think just like soft-spoken gentlemen from Lima. We see Indians in parliaments, town councils, on the bench, in the universities and athenaeums, where they seem to be no more venal and no more ignorant than folk from other races. In the hurly-burly of national politics there is no way of sorting out the blame and being able to state what damage was done by the mestizos, the mulatos and the whites. There is such a mish-mash of blood and colouring, every individual represents so many licit or illicit dalliances, that when faced by many a Peruvian we would be baffled as to the contribution of the black man or yellow man to their make-up: none deserves the description of pure-bred white man, even if he has blue eyes and blond hair...

Some educationists (competing with the snake-oil salesmen) imagine that if a man can name the tributaries of the Amazon and the average temperature in Berlin, half the job of resolving all society's ills is done and dusted. If, through some super human effort, the illiterate of this nation were to wake up tomorrow morning not just knowing how to read and write but