

Will our Indian wars never end?

RACISM is not cut and dry. It's not as if only those who don hoods and burn crosses or raise Nazi salutes are racists. "Enlightened" or "modern" racism is much more complicated. Today's typical racist rhetorically abhors racism. And they usually believe themselves to be anti-racist because of this. Racism, in today's American society, is, quite frankly, out of vogue. Modern racism divides oppressed peoples into "good ones" and "bad ones."

The good ones are the ones who, against the odds of a gamed system, have prospered. For the enlightened racist, their success serves as further proof that the bad ones have only failed due to their own shortcomings. Absent in this simplistic analysis is any reference to systemic racism that condemns historically disadvantaged peoples to poor schools, poor housing and poor health. And of course there is no recognition of the fact that so many members of the dominant culture were born into privilege. This privilege includes being born into a family with college educated parents, going to well funded schools, being networked with people who can help you find jobs, or even living in a community where there are jobs to be had.

Race, it turns out, is not biological. It's a political construct. Hence, racism is about power. It constructs and supports privilege – and of course, where there is privilege there is oppression since nobody can enjoy privilege without someone else suffering a lack of privilege. With racism, one group gains and maintains power over another group.

The United States was built on a foundation of racism. This is an ugly reality we need to face up to. Across the Americas, European invaders slaughtered or assimilated native

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peoples based on the racist notion of the supposed superiority of European culture and religions over what we now know were more sustainable native cultures. Employing words like "savage" and "primitive," so called "modern" and "civilized" cultures unleashed a historically unprecedented holocaust upon the hemisphere. This racism was continued as modern America was built with enslaved African labor and indentured workers, primarily from China and Ireland.

Cayuga: Just a name

Locally, the map of Central and Western New York was drawn by racists who, after the American Revolution, sent the U.S. Army into Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) territory to annihilate native populations. Cayuga Lake, for example, is circled by historic markers denoting Cayuga villages and orchards burned during the Sullivan Campaign of 1779. Then there are the markers commemorating the first homes built by "White" men, right in the wake of that campaign. This racism was about power and political advantage. In short, it was a land grab – with mass murder as its tool.

This status quo lasted for over 200 years, with New York State's native population kept mostly in poverty, and with enlightened racists blaming Indians for that poverty. But then something happened. It turns out that while the Haudenosaunee were driven from much of their land, they were never actually defeated, and their government was never crushed. And their expulsion from much of their land was never up to legal muster. Hence, over the past two decades, the disempowered have begun to regain lost power, struggling to exercise their rights as sovereign nations, living on a radically decimated land base surrounded by the United States and Canada.

By regaining control over small tracts of their land, Haudenosaunee people are regaining political power. For some people, call them what you will, this is unacceptable. Indians can live under U.S. domination, but not as sovereign equals maintaining their own culture and laws. Hence, in the villages of Union Springs and Cayuga, New York, on the shores of Cayuga Lake, in Cayuga County, we now have an all-white group of people, the "Upstate Citizens for Equality," who have formed to oppose a sovereign Cayuga presence. In essence, what UCE is doing, is struggling to maintain their own political advantage over the people who historically controlled the land UCE members now claim as their own.

Modern times

Recently, UCE branched out to form a Western New York (Buffalo) chapter to join forces with anti-casino activists – in effect attempting to co-opt the anti-gaming forces into the

anti-sovereignty movement. A month ago I wrote a column for Buffalo's weekly ArtVoice, "Anti-Casino or Anti-Indian," to ask the question, "when do well intentioned activists cross the line to racism?" Last week, Joel Rose, a leader of Buffalo's anti-casino movement, responded to that column, writing a letter arguing, "We are not racists: I have never uttered a racist word or expression." Rose went on to defend UCE, arguing, "UCE has based its position on the distinctly non-racist notion that we should all be playing by the same rules."

The problem with this argument is that the rules UCE argues we all have to play by aren't mutually agreed upon – they are the rules that White society imposed on the Haudenosaunee during the Sullivan Campaign. In his letter, Rose goes on to describe Haudenosaunee territory as "islands of sovereignty in the middle of a modern nation." Now, while Rose isn't donning a hood or shouting epithets, he is arguing the notion that Indians who live in the here and now are somehow not part of the modern world, and that hence, they have to play by rules that a so-called modern nation imposes upon them. This is the same rhetorical argument white society used to justify genocide and ethnocide against supposed "savage," "primitive" or "uncivilized" Indian nations in the 17th and 18th centuries.

What UCE and Rose are arguing for is not equality – it's the maintenance of a power dynamic that privileges non-natives at the cost of disempowering native nations. And of course, Rose's statement begs the question, if Indians are not a modern nation, then what exactly is Rose saying they are? And if this assumption justifies their disempowerment, then is it racist?

In his letter, Rose also stated that UCE is not affiliated with the anti-casino Coalition Against Gaming in New York (CAGNY). While this might be semantically accurate, the two groups tie together through their leadership, with Daniel Warren serving as Chair of the WNY Chapter of UCE and as a Director of CAGNY. In a letter to ArtVoice (published online), Warren also identifies UCE as a member organization of CAGNY.

The final [re]solution

What is interesting here is that while UCE is anti-sovereignty, and hence, one could argue, anti-Indian, since native identity and political power are entwined with sovereignty, UCE is not against gaming. And interestingly enough neither is CAGNY chair Daniel Warren. He's just against Indians controlling casinos. In a letter to ArtVoice, Warren wrote that he supports "either the rescission or full legalization of gambling, but not the granting of a monopoly [to Indians]."

Hmmm? So if Warren, a director of the anti-casino group CAGNY, is not against casinos,

then what exactly is he against? According to Warren, UCE supports "an expeditious and final resolution of all Indian land claims." Now, call me sensitive if you will, but I get queasy over people calling for "final resolutions" over any ethnic conflict, since history has shown that such final solutions are, and this is a gross understatement, never mutually equitable. UCE's idea of a final solution is the ultimate negation of native sovereignty – a sovereignty that has until now survived hundreds of years of oppression. Without sovereignty, Indian nations would cease to exist.

It's also interesting to point out that Indian nations don't have a monopoly on gambling in this region of the world as Warren argues. New York is now replete with racinos, OTB parlors, Keno, lotto and lotteries, Bingo etc., not to mention casinos in neighboring states and provinces. In his letter, Rose answered my question as to why his group focuses just on Indian-run casinos, writing, for example, "Bingo generally involves low stakes and has low potential for addiction." Bingo also, however, often involves low-income gamblers, for whom losing low stakes can be as economically disastrous as a middle-class person losing high stakes at a casino. By focusing on Indian gaming and not gambling in general, by joining forces with UCE, and by admitting leadership that is not opposed to gambling, CAGNY may be crossing the line from being an anti-gaming group to an anti-Indian group.

Finally, Rose echoes an argument made by many anti-casino activists, suggesting that "most Indian people" are opposed to gambling. I've never seen any study or survey that backs this claim up, nor have I seen one that negates it. What I do know, however, is that most Haudenosaunee people I've spoken with who were anti-gaming have since become silent on the issue or have become pro-gaming after realizing, as they put it, that the anti-casino movement was becoming racist. Traditional Haudenosaunee oppose gambling, but they would never compromise sovereignty, hence they too have gone silent on the gaming issue when anti-gaming forces started challenging sovereignty. If the anti-gaming movement is to survive with any credibility, it needs to bath itself of its racist aura and return to focusing on gambling – and divorce itself from UCE's fight against native rights and political power.