The Native American Entrepreneur and the Mohawk Civil War

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The Mohawk Body Politic and the Source of the Law

The Ritual of Condolence is the ritual performed by the Iroquois Confederacy or Rotinohshonni to install a new hereditary chief when the predecessor has passed away. This funeral ritual originated in the cultural context of the mourning wars and developed as an important part of the Kainerekowa, the Great Law of Peace, Power and Righteousness. The Condolence ceremony was so foundational for the Iroquois, that it became the ritual model for diplomatic relations.

The ritual, with its special metaphors, has its heart in the so called Requickening, «with the rhetorical gestures that we call the “rare words”: wiping the eyes, cleansing the throat, and unblocking the ears. These are symbolic gestures to pacify grieving people, or the former adversary in a treaty process.

The ancient founders of the Iroquois Confederacy, and neotraditional nationalists conceptualize Iroquois society in general, and Mohawk communities in particular, according to the analogy of the body politic. This analogy is the perception and elaboration of correspondences between society or the state and the individual human body.
Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Demosthenes, and Socrates, among the others, used the analogy, as well as Aesopus in his famous *fable of the belly and the members*. The fable became explicitly political in Roman times, and later it was applied to Christian doctrine by St. Paul. In the Middle Ages the analogy of the body was developed substantially.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the analogy persisted and, in many cases, it became a vehicle for social criticism. Increasing general scepticism, however, together with the widespread materialism and the success of the idea of the *social contract*, destroyed this traditional analogy.

The organic analogy is widely used in Iroquois cosmology, from the notion of Turtle Island to the genesis of this world from the body of the Woman Fallen From the Sky. It also pervades the imagery of the Kainerekowa, the Great Law or Great Tidings of Peace and Power: the Onondaga wizard, Adodarhoh, has the body «distorted by seven crooks and his long tangled locks were adorned by writhing living serpents» (Parker 1916:17), that identify him as an «evil-minded man». Dekanawida rubs his body to straighten him and make his mind healthy.
The spatial analogy of the Confederacy as a Longhouse, with its Axis Mundi represented by the Great Tree planted in Onondaga by the Peacemaker, combines with the organic analogy in wampum 60, which describes the Hiawatha Belt: two white squares on each side are connected with the heart in the middle, which represents Onondaga, «and also means the heart of the Five Nations» (Parker 1916:47).

As Oren Lyons puts it: «We are a government that is intertwined with spiritual guidance ... So you can see the separation of spiritual, religious ways from political ways does not exist within the structure of the Haudenasaunee» (1980:172).
Using Tönnies’ distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, Venables stresses the similarity between medieval Europe and the Iroquois Confederacy: «both the Europeans and the Iroquois buttressed their claims with medieval concepts, that is with ideas which preceded the current systems of political order» (1980:97).

The European settlers were moving to the extreme of the Gesellschaft end of the continuum from the 18th century onward, filling the words “treaty”, “nation”, and “sovereignty” with a Gesellschaft stance (Venables 1980). The Iroquois that followed them, Christian converts and refugees in the pro-French Mohawk-ized multiethnic villages in Quebec, Anglican modernizers such as Joseph Brant and reverend Williams, even religious reformers like Handsome Lake, accompanied the Mohawks along the path from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft.
A set of both religious prescriptions and legalistic provisions, the Great Law, like the Koran and the Torah, today is subject to modernizing interpretations.

Indeed, the Great Law is equalized to a Constitution by the traditionalists (and by the tribal/band managers who wink to traditional ideology), and considered at the origin of the American Constitution by the supporters of the thesis of the influence (cfr. Johansen 1982, Swamp and Schaaf 2004).

Today in reserves/reservations where there are at least three competitive sources of legality, legitimacy and political power, although intermingled and occasionally clashing. The entrenchment of the Great Law within the tradition, actually at the birth, of the American Constitution, indeed interprets the relationship between the Confederacy and the US federal government as that of the Older Brother (the Mohawks) and the Younger Brother (the USA), that is a relationship of reciprocity and shared responsibilities.
There is no contradiction between the political myth of the Iroquois origin of the American Constitution and the other foundational myth of modern Mohawk nationalism: the Two Rows Wampum. According to it Guswenta or Two Rows Wampum represents the original treaty. The Guswenta symbolizes the ideology of “equal but separate”, which both the Warriors and the Antis advocate, more often than not opportunistically backed by the tribal/band Grand Chiefs.

Guswenta is also a weapon against the tribal/band councillors and the Christian factions, who try “the impossible”, and who are considered by George-Kanentiio, as “ethnic Mohawks”, not as “true Mohawks”, lumped together with “renegade” Warrior entrepreneurs.
Today in most Mohawk reserves there are three competitive sources of legality, legitimacy, and political power: the tribal/band council, whose source of legality and power rests on the Euro-American tradition. Theoretically, at least, this is a democratic system based on the social contract between elected governors and governed voters. The source of power is therefore the people, an immanent non religious abstraction. The second option, on the other hand, is bifurcated: in fact, a more fundamentalist point of view, whose origin can be traced in Louis Hall’s writings, and that we can call the Warriors’ Great Law has been opposed to the Handsome Lake Longhouse (or “old” Confederacy) ’s interpretation of the Great Law since the 1980s. Both the Handsome Lake Longhouse’s and the Warriors’ interpretations of the Kainerekowa, however, are based on a transcendent source of power, the Great Law as it was dictated by the Creator. The divine origin of legitimacy permeates the community as a body politic: hence, the rhetoric of consensus in the decisional process, because it is obvious that the members of the body cannot decide according to a majority rule in order to make the organism work smoothly.
Although theoretically Mohawk ideologues may connect Guswenta to the colonial and American/Canadian treaties and agreements, by no means they can tailor the story of the Iroquois origin of the new state's Constitution also for Canada, whose constitutional origin is firmly moored in Medieval England.

During the last two decades, however, tribal/band managers have more and more adopted an ethnonationalist, neotraditionalist slant, eroding classic traditionalist political pool. This fact has caused protests from those who base legitimate power on the Great Law: an editorial on the Eastern Door (18 April 2003) contested the right of the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (MCK) to appeal to treaty rights, wampums and other traditionalist terms as a grab of traditional power structures.
Rata’s (1999, 2000, 2004) concept of “neotribal capitalism” may be usefully applied to Mohawk country (as well as to Indian country at large). While this is true that tribal members are descendants of traditional kin groups, and therefore some form of continuity exists between the traditional tribe and the “neotribe”, what has changed in a fundamental way is the meaning of relations among persons and between persons and things in a gift economy as opposite to a commodity economy.

In Canada and in the United States, however, there are two competitive bodies claiming inheritance rights to traditional tribes: the elective/band council and the revitalized “traditional” Confederacy Council, now split into the Warrior and “old” Confederacy parallel political structures.
Since the 1980s, the adoption of a neotraditional ideology, which has brought to support, and win, substantial land claims, has reinforced the elective tribal/band councils’ position within the community. Furthermore, the re-positioning of factional alliances during the 1989-91 crisis with pro and anti gaming supporters and cigarette smuggling in both elective and “traditional” sides, has given the elective chiefs the legitimation of “tradition” they lacked before. One cannot doubt that the most experienced politicians – and ultimate winners – in the 1989-91 crisis have been Kahnawake Grand Chief Joseph Norton and Akwesasne Band Grand Chief (Canadian side) Mike Mitchell.

At present in Kahnawake and Akwesasne, an interested, uneasy marriage has been consumed between the elective elite and the Longhouse “Ancient Regime” members together with sectors of the moderate Warriors. The elective leaders control considerable economic resources and an all pervading patronage system within the reservation; their brokerage role, enhanced by the concepts of government-to-government relationship and sovereignty, has promoted socially many new professional Mohawks.
Diversification of Income

Although a substantial number of Mohawks, especially, but not only, women are employed by the tribal/band councils, many men work in the nearby factories, such as Alcoa, Reynolds and General Motors, and as ironworkers around the continent. This means that many people do not depend completely on tribal bosses’ favour and can rely on an alternative source of income outside the reserve. Another, important source of wealth comes from the so called border economy, ranging from cross-border shopping, to gambling and smuggling in a continuum which goes from an end felt as legal by most Mohawks to crime to the other end.
Following the American Revolution, in 1794 the United States and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, known as Jay Treaty from the name of the American negotiator. In particular, it stated that Indians retained the “free passage right”, that is they could move freely back and forth across the border. This provision has survived in both American and Canadian law, albeit differently. In the last ten years Canadian courts have appeared to undermine Indian free passage rights, connecting them to a cultural or historical nexus to specific Canadian geographical areas.

While the border is a source of inconvenience and contributes to the fervent ethnonationalist ideology currently prevailing in Mohawk country, it is also an important source of internal prosperity.
As a matter of fact, factions clash more on the means than on the ends of border economy and cross-border rights. As Jamieson (1999) puts it, local involvement in “free trade” or buttlegging has been pervasive in Akwesasne, Kahnawake and Kanesatake, as well as Six Nations/Grand River at least since 1950s, but liquor smuggling was also flourishing in the Prohibition era. The scale of the activity ranges from the spur of the moment to a well organized enterprise (Hornung 1991:22).

Not everybody in Mohawk land consider smuggling in different “commodities” the same thing. «People make their own choices about what is morally appropriate … Some will do cigarettes, but not drugs» (Harold Tarbell, former Akwesasne elective chief, 1996,). Indeed, an important source of factional conflict lies in the struggle over markets as well as over what goods and services can be traded under the rubric of the sovereignty of the Mohawk Nation (Jamieson 1999:167).
In a grim picture of out-migration in search of education and employment, as well as in-reservation political patronage with its class, gender and power contests, participation in smuggling economy is rewarding in monetary terms and politically justified in terms of native activism. «You also have to recognize that many in Akwesasne consider smuggling the exercise of their sovereignty» says Chief Angela Barnes, with the Akwesasne Band Council (CBC 2005). Notwithstanding factional conflicts, in fact, «there are remarkable consistencies among Mohawk citizens, concerning sovereignty and aboriginal rights» (Dickson-Gilmore 2002:14)
The peculiar political situation in Mohawk country has led to parallel sources of income: that coming from the tribal/band system and that originating from illegal activities, both of them with their systems of patronage, and appealing to different sources of power and legality. In the models of Mediterranean patronage developed in anthropological literature, according to Gilmore (1982) three ingredients stand out. First, patron-client ties are always characterized by clear-cut asymmetry in terms of wealth and power. Secondly, there is some element of reciprocity, because the patron needs something from the client, usually labour or votes in exchange of favours and protection. Thirdly, there is an element of informality, a “lopsided friendship” (Pitt-Rivers 1971:140), but also a strong element of deference or “submission” (Davis 1977:132). Patronage relations, therefore, «provide a consistent ideological support for social inequality and dependency» (Gilmore 1982:193).
Actually, in many cases, there is a coincidence or, at least, a relation between what I call a “public system of patronage and business”, that is the corporate tribe and the private system of patronage and business.

In the 1908s high stakes bingo halls and casinos were proliferating in the Mohawk country as well as Iroquoia at large, together with smoke shops and speakeasies. Those who succeeded in the gambling and smoke business were known as Silk-shirts, and their relationship with the Warrior militias has been contradictory since then, in that they have used Warrior military might, but their business sometimes suffered from Warrior proclivity to get in a flap, and therefore the Silk-shirts have tried, when it was advantageous, to come to terms with the tribal/band councils. Cigarette business is so lucrative that even the Antis have been involved in it.
In 1993-94 Six Nations reserve had 85 smoke shops, Akwesasne about 70; trailers and plywood shacks mushroomed all over the Mohawk country. The 1993-94 period was also crucial for the tribal/band councils control over the cigarette trade. In the aftermath of the Oka crisis the various Warrior Societies were very weak, frayed by internal bickering and troubles with the law. Tribal electorate, in the meanwhile, tired of years of strife, elected moderate strong men, who promised to bring some order to their reserves.

The chiefs have been helped by the changes in the market, however. The Mohawks found also a loophole to continue with the tobacco business: they began to manufacture native cigarettes.
Grand River Enterprises (GRE) was founded by Ken Hillard and Jerry Montour, Six Nations Mohawks, and it is the largest private business on the reserve, employing over 200 people. In 1997 GRE got a federal licence to manufacture cigarettes. The plant occupies 200,000 square metres, and produces 17 million cigarettes a day, of which Seneca and Opal brands are the most known. In order to get the licence GRE accepted to pay the federal tax, made a deal with the Band Council to have the political flank covered against Ontario, and deposited 2 million dollars as financial warrant. Since GRE accepted to play according to the rules, its budget has soared more and more. GRE has probably become the fourth biggest tobacco industry in Canada.

GRE has recently expanded operations to a tribally owned plant located in the Omaha reservation in the USA, of which Jerry Montour is the general manager, is expanding to Germany, and is planning to establish a plant in South Africa.
Six Nations Reserve and the Montagnais are the largest, but there are other Indian manufacturers: at Kahnawake, for example, Ottawa granted nine permits to manufacture cigarettes, mostly in 2004. According to a survey made by a Canadian TV there are about 150 smoke shops and 600 Mohawk workers in the industry there. However, attempts to regulate tobacco trade in Kahnawake have not succeeded completely yet.
In Akwesasne three cigarette companies have sprung up on the US side of the community, producing known local brands such as Native, Mohawk Blend, and DK’s. Two of the plants are licensed by the St. Regis Mohawk Tribal Council: Native Trading, owned by Stewart White, which produces Native brand, and King Enterprises, owned by Wendell King, which produces the DK’s brand. The two plants are licensed by the Tribal Council to sell their products in Akwesasne and the US market only and the permits are exclusive of Canada; the operations are monitored by the St. Regis licensing compliance office. Yet, you can buy DK’s, Native and other Akwesasne brands as far as Toronto and beyond.
It appears that Chief Steve Williams, as well as Tribal/Band Council Chiefs in Kahnawake and Akwesasne succeeded in the governance of the smoke business. Now Chief Williams is also the president of Grand River Enterprises. Only Chief Gabriel in Kanesatake has failed so far. Kenneth Deer of the *Eastern Door* said «you talk to James Gabriel and he says this is about law enforcement and drugs, and you talk to the other side and they say that it is not about that, it's about a power play by James Gabriel to control the local trade in [Mohawk made] cigarettes» (*The Eastern Door*, Feb.4, 2005).
Employment in the tobacco industry may be responsible of acute and chronic respiratory symptoms, such as wheezing, shortness of breath, dyspnoea, allergic rhinitis, contact dermatitis, bronchial asthma, acute bronchitis, increased eye irritation as well as irritation of lips and upper airways, work-related headaches, nausea and vomiting. «Finally, our long experience with respiratory findings in tobacco workers shows that harmless tobacco dust does not exist» (Yanev 2004).

«These results suggest that chronic exposure to tobacco dust results in harmful changes in the serum lipid profile, which could increase the incidence of cardiovascular diseases» (Adam et al. 1999). «Finally, since smoking is clearly an additional risk factor affecting the respiratory system in this setting tobacco workers should be strongly discouraged from smoking» (Mustajbegovic et al. 2003).
Gaming legislation and sin-taxes have favoured the hoarding of important wealth resources, privately owned by Mohawk maverick entrepreneurs, who have abandoned their working class status to join the capitalist middle class. I think that Mohawk country is currently undergoing a “classic” Industrial Revolution, due to the outsourcing of cigarette manufacturing into the reservations/reserves. Until recently, the Mohawks were members of a generic Canadian/American working class, mostly thanks to their ironworking as well as other factory jobs outside the reservations/reserves. In-reservation social stratification was made up of the new middle class technocrats and a mostly white collar working class employed in tribal services. With the investment of profits from private casinos and bingo halls as well as smuggling, from cigarettes to illegal aliens, into the tobacco sweatshops, I see the birth of a local working class.
The current situation in Mohawk country stimulates discussion on at least two issues: class struggle and industrial “monoculture”. Although it is still unstable, a pattern of a double system of clientelism is currently perceivable: the “public”, tribal/band council patronage, and the private entrepreneurial one. The two systems, however, tend to intermingle, because, after the “Wild West” beginnings, many private, maverick entrepreneurs are finding advantageous to respect some rules under the protective political umbrella of the Councils, which push as far as they can sovereignty notions. The neotraditionalist stance of most tribal/band Mohawk officials has also helped to rely on political personnel who finds the source of legitimate power not on social contract style institutions, but on a Great Law of heavenly origin. 

Local class and gender relations are both legitimimized and clouded through a discourse of “tradition”.
While it is possible that class struggle episodes will outburst in the future, as they did in the past, I do think they will speak neither the language of the Left nor that of democracy, the thesis of the influence notwithstanding; indeed, they will still use the language of religion and ethnicity, and factional rivalry will remain within the patronage system rail tracks.

Although cigarette manufacturing and/or smuggling offer a differentiated source of income, I do not think it will last for long. The industry is in decline in the Western world, and even Grand River Enterprises is looking for an even lower wage location in South Africa.

The Mohawks are basing their Industrial Revolution on a low tech cigarette “monoculture”, which elsewhere in the West is being outsourced to the Third World.
As a matter of fact, there is a great difference between the Mohawk working class, which is member of the top layer of the unionized American/Canadian working class, and the Mohawk reservation working class. The latter, in fact, works in old, non unionized sweatshops, manufacturing cigarettes or doing some tobacco processing as a cottage industry. The working conditions and bargaining power of this reservation working class are similar to those of the Mexican maquiladoras, if not to those of the Chinese and other illegal immigrants.

Although the peculiar borderland situation in the Mohawk country created economic opportunities, allowed by the (both legal and illegal) underground economy, those who are not still stuck to the illegal or criminal underclass, are not numerous enough or aware of their role to coalesce into a real industrial middle class.