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Retribalization in Urban Indian Communities

TERRY STRAUS AND DEBRA VALENTINO

In the 1970s, the late Bob Thomas (Cherokee) of the University of Arizona warned that Indian people were becoming "ethnic Indians" with no tribal knowledge or connection, especially in the intertribal, interethnic urban environment. "There is now a whole generation of Indians," he argued, "who have been born, raised and socialized in the city.... A great many city raised Indians are not distinctively Indian in the way that they behave or the way that they think about things";¹ and later, "I'm not so sure in my mind if Indians can exist as city people. The city really cuts one off from the 'natural' world. Can the Indian's sacred world continue in a world of concrete and automobiles?"² Social relations of Indians in cities, moreover, take place primarily with non-Indians: "American Indians do not live in old-style, bounded, ethnic neighborhoods as did earlier immigrants, but are scattered throughout the population,"³ which means that "There is very little of an Indian community in most cities. There are Indians living in cities and there are Indian centers in cities ... and you see some Indians involved with Indian centers. But they are a minority of the Indians who live in cities."⁴

Among Indians in cities, tribal knowledge, identity, and connection were being displaced by pan-Indianism, which,

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along with its associated urban residence, were major threats to Indian people in his view. Pan-Indianism is an artificial foil invented to facilitate interaction with the federal government, but pan-Indian stereotypes, internal and external, are gradually and insidiously becoming accepted by Indian people as their own identity. On the one hand, Thomas "get[s] the uneasy feeling that we have come to believe the slogans that we present to the non-Indian public."⁵ On the other hand, Indian people have increasingly accepted dominant definitions of themselves as an "ethnic group" and a "racial minority," "along with all of the emotional problems that come with viewing one's self and group as a racial minority of a larger society, rank considerations, negative definitions, social acceptance, subtle discrimination, etc."⁶ This assumption of dominant society definitions is a central aspect of what Thomas calls the "internal colonialism" which has become a serious "impediment to analysis" by Indian people.

Thomas warns against urban residence and generic, intertribal pan-Indianism. Like much of what he wrote, these warnings were intended for Indians, presented in Indian gatherings, and were rarely published. Like most of what Bob Thomas wrote, it was insightful, sincere, and straightforward.⁷ Here, as elsewhere, he demonstrates an understanding of the interplay of internal and external stereotypes and of essentialized and fluid constructs in the process of identity creation which other anthropologists are only just now, a quarter of a century later, beginning to apprehend and acknowledge. He spoke, however, to Indian people, not to anthropologists, warning against the external imposition and internal invention of intertribal "Indian" identity. In his view, the extent to which Indian people accepted their Indianness and participated in pan-Indian culture and communities, especially *urban* Indian communities, was the extent to which tribal identity culture and self-determination would be lost. Many came to agree with this perspective.

Twenty-five years later and with the advantage of hindsight, we suggest here that the process Bob Thomas and many others recognized and resisted has taken an unexpected turn, especially in urban Indian communities. To develop the argument, however, we need to clarify its conceptual base, specifying what we mean by "urban," "tribe," and "Indian."

"Urban" is not a *kind* of Indian. It is a kind of experience, one that most Indian people today have had. There are urban

areas on or closely bordering many reservations; there is a lot of movement between urban and reservation communities; and in today's world, telephones, television, and the internet expose every reservation to the problems and perks of urban life. The rift between urban and reservation Indian people is artificial and imposed. It derives in large part from the federal policy which excluded off-reservation Indians from tribal treaty rights, as clearly acknowledged in Title 8 (Urban and Rural Non-Reservation Indians) of the American Indian Policy Review Committee.

"Tribe" must also be understood in the context of federal policy. "Tribe" was neither a Native concept nor a Native political reality. "Peoplehood" is often used to name the sense of commonality and relationship among those who speak the same language, share the same lands and lifeways, and participate in common ceremonies and celebrations. "Tribes" began, if we accept Cornell,⁸ in the conflict and negotiation with non-Indian governments. Political units and political leaders were established for the purpose of treaty negotiations; those political units became associated with specific, defined territories and special legal and political status within the federal government. Federal policy also required the counting of Indians as tribal members and the establishment of membership criteria.⁹ "Tribalism" was fostered by the Indian Reorganization Act, which established reservation political units as corporate groups eligible for federal loan programs and democratic republics that were to be the basis of Indian "self-government." Reservation lands, original or assigned, once considered temporary halfway houses for assimilation, became redefined as tribal homelands, critical features of tribal identity. While some recognized the ill fit between "tribe" and their own sociopolitical reality and resisted "tribalization," "tribe" became the recognized political unit in Indian country. It is also the unit of ethnic identity and enumeration.

"Indian" is taken here to mean pan-Indian or intertribal: an identity likewise derived from the interplay of external and internal definitions. While it is popular, politically correct, and in many ways important to note that Indian people did not think of themselves as Indians until they were so identified by others, it must be simultaneously asserted that intertribal exchange of items, ideas, and individuals occurred long before European presence in the New World. Today, Native peoples on reservations as well as in urban areas identify as Indian and

as members or affiliates of a particular tribe or tribes. These variant identities are situationally determined and differ at different points in the life cycle.

When Bob Thomas predicted that Indian people in urban areas would become generic "Indians," he intended to sound the alarm against what he called detribalization. Urban Indians, inventing community in the urban setting, necessarily engaged in the project of acknowledging and creating common ground, common culture, common identity. In Chicago, for example, the first organizations bore names such as Indian Council Fire and All Tribes American Indian Center, affirming awareness of the project implied in the creation of community in the city.

But Chicago has been a meeting ground for Indian people since before the fur trade. The Illini and Miami people, the earliest known historic residents of the area, were not tribes but confederations of Algonquian-speaking communities. Many of these people left the area when Potawatomi, Chippewa, and Odawa moved in under fur trade pressure: Those who did not leave joined the new Indian communities. (The fur trade founders of early Chicago, men such as Beaubien, Robinson, Mirandeu, Caldwell, and LaFramboise, were mostly half-breed Potawatomis whose mothers were full-blood tribal people and whose fathers were white traders and trappers.) Sixty years after the Treaty of Chicago by which the Potawatomis relinquished their claim to the land, the World's Columbian Exposition was held there, bringing yet other Indian people into a much changed city. The Dawes Act was in full swing and boarding schools, extolled in one exhibit, were underway: "Indianness" was already well established. World War I caused some movement of Indian people, including movement into cities. The first intertribal Indian organization in Chicago, the Indian Council Fire, established in 1923, incorporated those new "urban Indians." When the city population grew significantly in response to World War II and the postwar relocation program, generations of Indian people had already imagined and worked towards the development of an urban Indian community.

Federal relocation "terminated" individual Indians, distinguishing Indians in cities from those on reservations. Tribal programs and privileges focused on reservation residents; tribal elections excluded off-reservation voters; tribal culture was intricately bound up with tribal land; tribal language could remain vital only in tribal communities. Lame Deer and others

proclaimed, "The city is not a good place for a ceremony,"¹⁰ while Thomas worried that "You can't have any personal spiritual power or medicine if you live in the city,"¹¹ and tribal traditions that could not be practiced or taught there would disappear in the concrete jungle. Those who believed with Thomas that they should return often and for long periods of time to their reservations were often thwarted: Transportation was difficult and phones expensive. Intertribal marriage became more and more common in urban areas and the offspring of those unions frequently did not qualify for enrollment in either (any) tribe. *This* is what Bob Thomas meant when he predicted the decline of tribal cultures and identities in the city, a decline he considered to be hastened by the growth of pan-Indian culture and institutions.

Indian activism, from Alcatraz on, found its origins in and served to strengthen urban, intertribal communities. From Thomas' perspective, it therefore catalyzed the loss of tribal identity and integrity. Many of the young people who provided the founding energy for the American Indian Movement and other Red Power groups had scant or distant tribal/reservation experience: "The American Indian Movement was founded in Minneapolis in 1968, with chapters quickly established in several U.S. cities (Cleveland, Denver, Milwaukee). AIM's membership was drawn mainly from urban Indian communities, and its leadership and membership tended to be drawn from the younger, more progressive ranks of the urban Indian population."¹² In part because of this social profile, the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties "magnified strains between urban and reservation Indians,"¹³ as well as between older and younger generations.

Despite their urban origins, activist efforts soon became reservation-centered. "Red Power protest activity shifted after the 1972 BIA occupation from mainly symbolic, short-term actions to longer, more violent events, often on or near reservations. Thus, what was initially an urban Indian movement, eventually returned to its reservation roots."¹⁴ Apparently, the rift between urban and reservation Indians was not unbridgeable. The result of urban-initiated, intertribal political action in the era of the Great Society was increased funding, expanded programming, and enhanced self-determination for tribes and reservations.

Great Society/Office of Economic Opportunity programs had a different effect in urban Indian communities themselves.

Indian and other monies that did filter into urban communities supported intertribal programs and organizations: Indian Health Services and Indian alternative schools, for example. In Chicago, this was a period of organization growth and vitality which saw the development of American Indian Health Services, the Native American Committee, several important educational projects (O-wai-Ya-Wa Elementary School, Little Big Horn High School, Native American Educational Services College), Indians for Indians (CETA), the American Indian Business Association, and the Indian Child Welfare Program at Saint Augustine's Center. Each of these organizations served Indian people of all tribes residing in the Chicago area; each faced the challenge of negotiating common ground among intertribal staff and clientele. The leadership in these new programs and organizations came predominantly from second-generation urban residents, individuals who had been raised and even born in the city, although they had reservation experience as well.

One result of increased federal funding and related organizational growth in urban areas is that urban Indian communities became conscious of themselves as such. Opportunities for interacting with other Indians increased, and, while as Thomas had noted, bounded "ghettos" did not develop, Indian *communities* did. In Chicago, it was at this time that community members began to refer to themselves facetiously as "Chicagojos." *Community* came, in some sense, to replace *tribe* in individual orientation and motivation: "The Community" became personified and spoken of as if it had thoughts and desires, likes and dislikes, preferences and sensitivities. As awareness of community grew and impinged on the consciousness of its members, a conference was held in 1981 (the Chicago American Indian Community Organizations Conference) which sought to define the community and articulate common goals within it. Tribal enrollment was irrelevant to community membership, and indeed many in the community were not enrolled and/or had not enrolled their children. Tribal affiliation was assumed and understood to enhance the urban community, but common history, culture, and concerns were emphasized.

While fiscally empowered tribal self-determination proceeded on reservations, urban Indian communities were indeed "detrribalized" in the sense that they focused on "Indian" rather than "tribal" identities. The federal wedge between urban and reservation communities became

entrenched: Even the Red Power shift to reservation issues “seemed to increase tensions between urban and reservation individuals and groups.”¹⁵ Indians in urban areas were negatively stereotyped by reservation people as “fallen” or diminished Indians, “sell-outs” who abandoned tribal homeland, practice, politics and problems for the good life in the city. Such stereotypes affected communication between members of urban and reservation communities and made it difficult for urban residents to return to their home reservations. John, the “Indian Killer” in Sherman Alexie’s novel by that title, represents the confusion and despair commonly associated with the internal oppression of the urban Indian experience. Not surprisingly, the literature on urban Indians in the 1970s and 1980s reads like a social work manual, overwhelmingly detailing social, medical, and psychological problems.

Bob Thomas was right. Indian identity, born in the fur trade, defined by federal policy, and nurtured in boarding schools and military service, found fruition in urban communities. But that is only part of the story. Politically, economically, and organizationally, urban Indian communities are now experiencing retribalization,¹⁶ and Indian people in cities are reconnecting with their tribes.

Politically, with the majority of Indian people now living in cities, tribal governments have been forced to become more sensitive to their urban membership, and have begun to establish offices in cities where they have significant membership. The first such office in Chicago is the Ho-Chunk Nation office headed by Dmitri Abangan. The Ho-Chunk Nation also maintains an office in Milwaukee, as does the Oneida tribe of Wisconsin. Recently, a delegation of Oneidas from Chicago attended a tribal budget committee hearing in Milwaukee; separate hearings on the revision of the Oneida tribal constitution were held in Chicago at the American Indian Center. Such offices activate and symbolize the connection between tribe and city.¹⁷

Demographic shifts that have located an increasing percentage of the Indian population in cities compel a shift in campaign strategies as well as in political representation. Tribal members residing in Chicago and other urban areas are potential voters. In most cases, enrolled members must return to the reservation to register their votes, but for members of neighboring tribes, it is only a few hours’ drive to do so. Recently, moreover, absentee ballots have been developed and accepted

by a number of tribes, facilitating voting by off-reservation members. Tribal members campaigning for political office campaign in Chicago and Milwaukee as well as on the reservations; tribal politicians lobbying for a particular vote on a specific program or issue lobby in Milwaukee and Chicago as well as on the reservation.

More than sixty different tribes have been represented in Chicago: Clearly, not all tribal members are close enough to their reservations to run home to vote, and not all tribal governments schedule meetings in the city. In regard to the topic at hand, however, the political retribalization of urban residents of neighboring tribes establishes the expectation of political representation and consideration by other tribes of their off-reservation urban membership. This is a new development.

The downside might seem to be that off-reservation residents are uninformed voters and non-invested decision-makers. Some might question the wisdom of their political incorporation by the tribe. But this is the 1990s: Communication is easy and continuous; visiting is frequent if not necessarily as extended as it was fifty years ago; and tribal newspapers circulate throughout the country, providing a common source of political education for all tribal members. The broad circulation of tribal newspapers is fairly new and, interestingly, seems to have followed in the aftermath of the success of intertribal presses (*The Warrior* from the AICC, *Wasaja*, and *Akwesasne Notes*). Off-reservation tribal members and others look to their tribal newspapers as a source of tribal news and personal connection, but also as the primary resource for announcements of upcoming conferences, celebrations, powwows, and so on, which they may plan to attend.

Demographic changes and the associated political changes are only part of the retribalization in urban Indian communities. Tribal economic development has recently reached out into urban areas as well. Gaming is probably the best illustration of this trend, but it is not the only possibility. Seeking markets for casino gambling, tribes have purchased land and established Indian country in urban areas. The success of this effort has led to a new concept of urban communities. As Chicago considers the possibility of casino gambling on land as well as in the rivers, city officials have already contacted the Sault Sainte Marie Chippewa in regard to developing the industry. Other recent tribal economic development proposals include the development of tourism. Two years ago, when Defense

Department cuts caused the closing of the Glenview Naval Air Station north of the city, Ron Bowan, as director of the Chicago American Indian Center, researched and proposed the return of this land to the Prairie Potawatomi tribe from whom it had originally been taken, with a view towards establishing a museum and cultural center there. Subsequently, as Mayor Daley and Governor Edgar argued over the small lakefront airport called Meigs Field, the spirit of Simon Pokagon shone on as Chicago residents reconsidered his claim that really the Potawatomi people owned that land. The Treaty of Chicago outlined a specific and well-defined cession of land; land not specified for cession, in this case, land created after the treaty by build-up along the lakeshore, was not ceded and was thus reserved for the Potawatomi. In these and other endeavors, Chicago Indians have looked towards the Milwaukee model, where recently purchased Potawatomi tribal land in the city includes a school, a gym, a temporary residence, a ceremonial lodge, two sweat lodges, and powwow grounds on the old campus of Concordia College. Is this the new colonialism: reservation colonies in urban areas?

The other side of tribal development in cities is tribal economic support for urban Indian communities' members and organizations. The Ho-Chunk Nation has supported the American Indian Center in Chicago, and the Oneida tribe of Wisconsin and Menominee tribe also have provided grants to Chicago Indian organizations for the first time ever within the past three years. Tribal educational support for off-reservation residents has increased significantly as tribal revenues and management have increased. Off-reservation residents used to receive only the leftovers, if there were any, from education funds distributed to reservation residents.¹⁸ Today, tribal support of urban residents is well established: Tribal investment in its own members, wherever they may reside, is presumed to encourage tribal development generally.

Over the years, every Indian organization in the Chicago community has assisted eligible community members to become enrolled and to enroll their children in the tribe. Enrollment certainly encourages interest in tribal histories and cultures and involvement in tribal affairs: It is not all about per capita payments, as we so often hear; it is mostly about family and identity. The Indian community organizations serve members of all tribes, recognized or not, whether they are enrolled or not, but they work with and through tribal organizations as well.

In addition to the communitywide organizations in Chicago, tribal clubs and less formal tribal groups have also experienced something of a rejuvenation in recent years. Chicago has seen a recent revitalization of the Oneida, Menominee, Winnebago, and Lakota tribal clubs, which have experienced greater interest, greater attendance at meetings, and greater support. These clubs originated quite early on, became quiescent, and are now experiencing rejuvenation. At first, perhaps, they served as support in the transition to pan-Indian community. Today, however, they serve to sustain and enhance tribal affiliation and identity for urban Indian people. Tribal club activities and celebrations are commonly shared within the community, but the sponsorship and the work are provided by the clubs. Each of these clubs has sponsored tribal language programs. Interest in tribal languages is high throughout the community, and those who are fluent in their tribal language are respected for their knowledge.

There is ample political, economic, and organizational evidence of retribalization in Chicago and other urban Indian communities. The most compelling evidence, however, is found in personal stories. Considering her connection to the Chicago Indian community and to the Oneida tribe, Debra Valentino reconstructs her own identity process in a story that moves past the void Bob Thomas predicted. A founding director of one of the newest organizations in the Chicago Indian community and head of the revitalized Oneida Club, Mrs. Valentino points out that, when growing up in Chicago, she did not connect significantly with the Indian community or with her own Indian identity: "Since I was a child, I knew I belonged to a wonderful family, but outside that immediate family and its protection, there was no real connection to anything or anyone else. This is a sad state for an Indian person especially when it still exists today. I know, because I can see the existence in some of the people I work with and talk to on a daily basis."

She had family, but she also had a sense of disconnection, *anomie*; she was Indian, but with little understanding of what that meant in her life. She lived in the community and "every day ... encountered lots of people who knew their culture and their language," while she did not. These were people she could have asked, people she could have known, but she avoided contact. She "often found [herself] wanting to shrink up in a corner whenever anyone wanted to know about her." Alcohol, already part of her environment, became a part of her

life, exaggerating her isolation from culture and community. As a mother, she began to work towards her own recovery and to develop important new relationships with other Indian people.

Like many others in the Chicago community, her initial, positive involvement in the community came through the American Indian Center, where she volunteered and participated in a variety of activities, always including her family. As a responsible, recovering person, community members began to rely on her for various things and involve her more and more. Accepting increasing responsibility, she came gradually to identify with the community and to reinvent herself as Indian. She included her husband and four daughters in that process. In the next few years, as a student of Dr. Lola Hill (Chippewa) at NAES College, she began to use writing as a way to work through a lot of remaining family and personal issues. She wrote poetry and was encouraged by other Indian poets to share her work in community and other gatherings. She also became involved in the Women's Leadership Group and in the Indian Parent Committee for Audubon School, a public receiving school for Indian children, which her own children attended. In the space of just a few years, she moved from anomie to positive Indian identity and community involvement. As it turned out, this was a step towards, not away from, tribal identity.

An enrolled member of the Oneida tribe of Wisconsin, married to another enrolled Oneida, Debra had lots of family on the reservation: She visited occasionally and especially enjoyed the July 4 powwow, but she had been raised primarily in the city and had little consistent experience of Oneida culture or community. As she became seriously engaged in the pan-Indian community in the city, she became noticed by other tribal members in the city and on the reservation. Today, as coordinator of the Oneida group in Chicago and recipient of Oneida education funding and of a significant tribal grant to her organization, she serves informally as a representative from Chicago to the Oneida tribal council. Last winter, she, her husband, and their daughters traveled to Oneida by invitation to participate in the mid-winter longhouse ceremonies for the first time. They returned to Chicago with Oneida names to signify their new status, new paths in life, and their new engagement in the tribal as well as Indian community.

Mrs. Valentino has moved from anomie through recovery and community involvement to "Indianness" and from a

strong Indian base to a reconnection with her tribe. For her, as for Jeanne LaTraille, another Chicago Oneida, forty years her senior, Indian identity was the necessary antecedent to, not the death knell of, tribal identity and involvement. Ms. LaTraille, a self-described "born again Indian," married a non-Indian and lived much of her adult life away from other Indian people. Returning to Chicago from Florida after several decades of absence, she visited the American Indian Center, which encouraged her connection to the Indian community and her interest in Indian activities and issues. She became, in fact, the oldest person to represent the Chicago Indian community in demonstrations on the boat landings in the conflict over Lake Superior Chippewa fishing rights several years ago. From her newly formed Indian base and Indian identity, Ms. LaTraille has also reconnected with the Oneida tribe, subscribing to the tribal newspaper, attending Oneida language classes, studying Oneida history and traditions, and visiting the reservation often. Mrs. Valentino describes this as "many good things ... coming full circle." The creation of identity is a process, not an event: It is dynamic and different at different points in the life cycle. For these Oneida women, Indian and tribal identities were and are sequentially and positively related, allowing for the possibility of "good things coming full circle."

The path from anomie to community and from community to tribe is a common one in urban Indian communities. It is also relatively new. Earlier generations of Indian people who lived for extended periods of time in urban areas faced the daunting task of creating common community and identity, a task which presupposed the backgrounding of tribal differences. By what is now the third and even fourth generation of urban residence, the context is different. Now, Indian people growing up in a city, always aware and respectful of tribal affiliation, may look first to a positive Indian identity, supported by connection with Indian organizations and community, and, from that base, move forward to a real connection with tribe, often selecting among the several which comprise their heritage. Certainly, Indian and tribal identities are jointly conceived and represented by all Indian people today. What seems particularly interesting in the urban Indian context is that strong community involvement and related Indian identity may anticipate and serve as a foundation for a reinvented tribal identity.

Unfortunately, Bob Thomas did not live long enough to see this begin to happen.

NOTES

1. Robert K. Thomas, "New Sacred Nationalism," unpublished paper held in Native American Educational Services, College Archives, 3; also see "The Sacred Nationalism," *Proceedings of the Conference on Indian Issues of the Eighties* (Claremore College, Oklahoma, 1980).

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 22.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. Robert K. Thomas, "Impediments to Analysis," unpublished paper held in archives at NAES College, Chicago, Illinois (1966), 4. Subsequently printed in *Americans Before Columbus* 13:3 (Albuquerque, NM: National Indian Youth Council, 1985).

6. *Ibid.*, 6.

7. For an extended discussion of the life and work of Bob Thomas, see Steve Pavlik, ed., *A Good Cherokee, A Good Anthropologist: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Thomas* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies, 1998).

8. Stephen Cornell, *Return of the Native* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

9. For a detailed discussion of the history of blood quantum, see Paul Spruhan, *Quantum of Power: Historical Origins of Blood Identification in U.S. Indian Policy*, M.A. thesis (University of Chicago, 1996).

10. John Fire Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 133.

11. Robert K. Thomas, "Cherokee Prophecy," manuscript held in Archives of NAES College (Chicago, Illinois, n.d.), 267.

12. Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 166.

13. *Ibid.*, 168.

14. *Ibid.*, 170.

15. *Ibid.*, 170.

16. I am indebted to Don Fixico for loaning me this term. He says he borrowed it, too, but is not sure from where.

17. The Ho-Chunk example is particularly interesting, since the 1961 American Indian Chicago Conference was the major impetus for the former Wisconsin Winnebagos' push for federal recognition. We are used to thinking about the importance of reservation communities to urban Indian life, but seldom consider the impact of urban communities on tribal affairs.

18. Personal interview May 1996, Tim Murphy, financial aid officer at NAES College: May, 1996.