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## Whiteness and The Great Law of Peace

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### Introduction

Compare the following understandings of the proper reception to be accorded to peoples with whom one has contact. In 1526 Pizarro first came to the lands of the Inca. He read the Requirement which was intended to inform the peoples of the New World that they were subject to the king of Spain and the Roman Catholic church. The Incas were required “to recognize the Church as your mistress and as Governess of the World and Universe, and the High Priest, called the Pope, in Her name, and His Majesty (king of Spain) in Her place, as Ruler and Lord King.” If the Incas did not submit, “with the help of God I shall come mightily against you, and I shall make war on you everywhere and in every way that I can, and I shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and His Majesty, and I shall seize your women and children, and I shall make them slaves, to sell and dispose of as His Majesty commands, and I shall do all the evil and damage to you that I am able. And I insist that the deaths and destruction that result from this will be your fault” (Wright 1993, 65–66). Pizarro was required to read this proclamation so that the death and destruction about to be inflicted upon the Incas would be their responsibility if they failed to submit themselves to the sovereignty of Rome and Spain.

*The Great Law of Peace* also has requirements that spell out how other peoples are to be treated (1973). The Great Law of Peace is the constitutional document which founded the Iroquoian Confederacy. Although its origins are not known conclusively, it is reliably estimated to be 650 years old. The Great Law, which established peaceful, cooperative relations between five Iroquoian nations—Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Onondaga—detailed what Aristotle called “practical wisdom,” that is, how to live well individually and collectively. Relations within the nation and with other peoples were placed in a context of proper living.

Wampum 75<sup>1</sup> states that “when the member of an alien nation comes to the territory of the League, and seeks refuge and permanent residence, the statesmen of the Nation to which he comes shall extend hospitality and make him a member of the nation. Then he shall be accorded equal rights and privileges in all matters except as mentioned here.” Other Wampum spell out the obligation to establish peaceful relations with other peoples, to respect their language and territory, and to include them under the tree of peace. Wampum 2, for example, proclaims the hope that the Great Peace will extend out in all directions. Using the metaphor of the radiating roots of the pine tree,<sup>2</sup> it states that

Roots have spread out from the Tree of Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. These are the Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength.

The contrast between the two attitudes to otherness, that is, the understanding of how peoples should relate found in the Spanish proclamation and the understanding in the Great Law of Peace could not be more profound. Following the path of the former has led European culture (and its branches in what can metaphorically be called the “white” world) to an age of unprecedented excess. The vanity, immoderation, and disrespect for other ways of life have produced almost limitless behavior, instances of which abound. The overwhelming destruction of the Iraqi people, the immense degradation of the environment on a global scale, the relentless depletion of natural resources, enormous wealth and terrible poverty standing side by side, and the transformation of work from a creative to a purely routinized activity are only a few examples.<sup>3</sup>

Our argument is that the crucial difference between aboriginal practice and understanding and that of the West is that aboriginal culture, as expressed in the Great Law of Peace, recognized that proper human living is founded upon a reasoned moderation.<sup>4</sup> Reasoned moderation as the basis for living is the guiding ideal of the Great Law. It is not unique to the Iroquois, however. The ancients as well thought of proper human life as bounded. Plato argued that the critical virtue was *sophrosyne* (moderation). In addition, he argued that moderation could only be achieved through reason. If we live reasonably we will be moderate. This was the message of the *Republic* just as it is the message of the Great Law of Peace. Peculiar to modern Western culture is the perversion of reason into an instrument for immoderation. Modern white life is seemingly without any sense that appropriate behavior takes place within limits. Different cultures have their own notions of what constitutes the reasonable limits of human action.

Mosaic Law is one expression; the Great Law is another. The latter document articulates modes of conduct that are bounded by natural and spiritual constraints. As such, it is the model for the Iroquois of proper living. The white world of the last few centuries is startling for the absence of the sense of reasoned moderation as the guide to conduct. For example, property rights do not obligate the possessor to act with any sense of limits or obligations towards communities or nature. As we will argue, the notion of the place of human being in the ontological order, its instrumental attitude to the environment, and its hostile posture to others emanate from an absence of limits or constraints upon human action.<sup>5</sup>

If we are to pull back from the unbounded, limitless immersion in immoderation which characterizes modern white society, we must be able to uncover its essential elements. It is critical that we identify the features of European civilization, of whiteness, so that what is not white is preserved. One feature of the white world view that is not masked is its universalizing tendency. While many of the essential elements that constitute the white outlook and form of life lie behind the outer husk of appearance, this aspect is on the surface. The postwar period, in particular, marks the era of great expansion of Western, white forms of life to regions of the world that had previously been exempt—areas of the globe that we call “remote” because of their non-integration into white modernity. The culture, taste, economy, politics, technology and so forth of the modern white world, which has been obliterating everything aboriginal in its path since 1492, is close to completing its dissolutionist task.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, this one, phenomenologically transparent feature helps to mask all the remaining essential properties. The engulfing presence of whiteness includes the loss of a sense of its historical constitution, the loss of the ability to recognize its historical contingency and the loss of the capacity to imagine alternative ways of living. As whiteness liquidates all others its hegemonic discursive frames—such as civilization, modernization, progress, or development—fail to move beyond their immuring universalist claims to recognize their own uniqueness and specificity. Its very totality obscures its partiality, its thorough extension hides its selectivity and, in the end, one species of culture pretentiously stands in for the genus humanity. Expressed in terms of the ability to generate critical discourse, the potential of whiteness to develop critical insight into itself fades as countervailing reference points wither. The very ubiquity of whiteness paradoxically shrouds its essential properties.

The Great Law of Peace, perhaps the most systematic and complete extant expression of the aboriginal world view, is an invaluable source for the analysis of the defining features of whiteness. As a standpoint

outside that of the modern, bourgeois, liberal European culture, analysis of the Great Law acts like a stain, drawing out key features of modernity and highlighting them. It is an articulated expression of a way of life that includes 1) an understanding of human being and its place in the order of being; 2) a sense of the natural order of life and our place in the environment; and 3) an understanding of appropriate, respectful relations between different peoples. By examining each of these three instantiations of reasoned moderation found in the Great Law of Peace, a contrast can be established between a traditional, aboriginal world view and that of modern white culture revealing the latter's essential features. Our task is not to explain the causes of modernity's peculiar ontological arrogation. Rather, we wish simply to draw out its features more clearly—to display, as it were, the immensity of its release from traditionally bounding conditions—by juxtaposing it to a form of life that self-consciously held out reasoned moderation and respect for the natural and social orders as the key to proper living. We are identifying a frame of consciousness that has gutted the notion of reasonableness, reduced it to purely instrumental or tactical procedures, to use Horkheimer's language. The frame of consciousness is the defining element of whiteness.

### **Human Being and Its Ontological Place**

The modern Western notion of human being and of our place in the ontological order has a number of aspects. Perhaps most critical is the notion that we are individuals, existing as self-subsisting atoms. From J. S. Mill's methodological individualism to the cult of the rugged individual in American popular culture, from the isolated Hobbesian individual who can "find no pleasure in Company" to the rights-bearing person who figures so prominently in the various Charters of Rights, Western thought ultimately sees the existing entity as the individual person. It is the solitary, autonomous person who is the alpha and omega. To be a person is to be free, and as Hegel argued, European culture sees freedom as the right of atomized individuals to act alone, solely determined by their own conscience and will (1976, 503).

Secondly, Western thought conceptualizes the human being in instrumental terms. Best expressed by the economic notion of the individual as a rational interest-maximizing calculator, the modern vision of human being reduces reason to a mere instrument or means, and similarly conflates the ends of human life with the satisfaction of capricious, free floating impulses.<sup>7</sup> The person is reduced to nothing more than a mere consumer or accumulator—a possessive individual, to borrow C. B. MacPherson's terminology. The good life is widely assumed to be one into which the maximum consumption is crammed.

Finally, modern Western thought sees the individual human being as an autonomous entity existing in a lifeless and disinterested cosmos. Hegel announced the end of history in 1806 with Napoleon's victory at the battle of Jena and the almost simultaneous publication of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For Hegel humankind had achieved its historical goal—the full self-consciousness of our own consciousness as the ground of our being. The divine ground of being had been overcome as we now came to recognize that freedom and autonomy are the very essence of our being. The divine and the natural, as the positive and negative poles that had bound our existence, have themselves been transcended. The limitlessness of modern human being produces both the excesses of vanity and hopelessness as we revel in our mastery of all things and despair of its essential meaninglessness. Moderation not only has ceased to be the guiding virtue of a well-lived life, but the ungroundedness of our ontological place means that we can no longer even tell when we have lived moderately. What is important for us is not, of course, the truth of Hegel's claim but the fact that it could be made at all, and be taken seriously.

What are we to make of these prevailing conceptions of human being? Each of these three aspects of the white notion of human being differ markedly from the parallel understandings found in the Great Law of Peace. Indeed, the full significance of what it means to be white can only be appreciated when contrasted with a richly developed alternative. Instead of seeing the individual person as autonomous, the Great Law of Peace expressed a vision of human life as interconnected, as existing within a network of relationships. Central to this embedding of the individual within a social context was the clan. Each person was by birth a member of the mother's clan (Wampum 44). Although membership in a nation—Mohawk for example—was important, clan membership was one's primary identity (Morgan 1962, 60). The clans as units owned all property, especially rights to the land (Wampum 42). Furthermore, even across nations, clan identity was critical. The Great Law stated that "People of the Five Nations who are members of a certain clan shall recognize every member of the Clan, no matter what Nation, as relatives. Men and Women, therefore, who are members of the same clan are forbidden to marry" (Wampum 43).

Clans were the vehicle through which the individual participated in the economic and political life of their nation. All property was controlled by the clan and within the clan all resources were shared. Travelers, for example, would never go hungry. Being related to all other members of the same clan, they were treated as family wherever they went. The political arrangements established by the Great Law were also clan based. Chiefs, or Sachem, were chosen as representatives

of clans. They articulated the views of their clan at discussions at both the national and Confederation levels. The clan thus constituted the politically important unit. Clan members would discuss issues and problems amongst themselves and come to a decision with which all could live. The chief representing the clan then communicated this decision to the national and Confederation Councils. At these levels action would only be taken if it was unanimously supported (Wampum 12).

To insure that all voices were heard and respected the Great Law instituted a system of radical democracy. Not only, as we have just stated, did national and Confederation decisions have to be affirmed by chiefs representing all the clans of each nation, but to guarantee that the chiefs were representing properly the view of the clan, the clans retained the power to dismiss chiefs. Wampum 18, 19, 20, 52 and 59 all affirm the right of the clan mothers to remove chiefs they have appointed.<sup>8</sup> This right even extended to the point where chiefs who did not follow the decisions taken by the clan would be killed (Wampum 59).

In addition to denying primary ontological status to the individual, the Great Law of Peace also articulates a notion of human being far removed from the modern conception of the self-interest calculating economic “man.”<sup>9</sup> The Great Law expresses a tension between reason and passion as the matrix of human life, and presents an ideal of life as guided by reasoned moderation, especially through its descriptions of the proper mode of conduct of chiefs. They were expected to act as models of moderation and reason. Wampum 28, which deals with the installation of a new chief, details the proper conduct of those who are to lead. These words are spoken at his installation:

With endless patience you shall carry out your duty and your firmness shall be tempered with tenderness for your people. Neither anger nor fury shall find lodging in your mind. All your words and actions shall be marked with calm deliberation. In all your deliberations in the Council of the League, in your efforts at law-making, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast away. Do not cast over your shoulder behind you the warnings of your nephews and nieces should they chide you for any error or wrong you may do, but return to the way of the Great Law which is right and just. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people, and have always in view not only the present, but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation.

The last sentence of this pronouncement is especially instructive. Leaders, in fact everyone, is obliged to act not with self-interest in view but the interests of the next seven generations. The aboriginal view,

expressed here and elsewhere, is that all of our actions must be guided by the effects they will have on the coming generations. Our highest obligation is to those yet unborn—to so act that they will be able to live when their time comes.

Finally, the Great Law presents, in metaphorical form, the Iroquoian notion that human being is bounded by the natural world and by the transcendent order. It contains the requirement that the ontological continuity of human being with the natural, as well as its boundedness, be ritualistically recognized and celebrated. Wampum 99–103 spell out the obligation to give thanks to the natural order that sustains our life. There are nine prescribed festivals of thanksgiving. Wampum 100 spells out the responsibility for the festivals:

It shall be the duty of the chiefs of each brotherhood to confer at the approach of the time of the Midwinter Thanksgiving and to notify the people of the approaching festival. They shall hold a council over the matter, and arrange its details and begin the Thanksgiving five days after the moon of Tiskomah is new. The people shall assemble at the appointed place and the nephews shall notify the people of the time and place. From the beginning to the end, the chiefs shall preside over the Thanksgiving and address the people from time to time.

Human life is also seen as embedded in a transcendent order. One of the most striking aspects of this text, which in many ways is a constitutional document like the Canadian and American constitutions, is the attention devoted to burial rites. The last ten Wampum, 108–117, deal with the burials of chiefs, clan mothers, men, women, and children. The rituals of burial and grief are detailed. All funeral rites, for instance, contain the following words (Wampum 108):

Now we release you, for it is true that it is no longer possible for us to walk about together on the earth. Now, therefore, we lay the body here. Here we lay it away. Now then we say to you, Persevere onward to the place where the Creator dwells in peace. Let not the things of the earth hinder you.

Pervading the document is the sense of the properly lived life when the obligations to respect the boundedness of human action are observed.

## **Our Place in the Environment**

Western culture is commonly regarded as containing a fundamental disrespect for the natural world. European culture has conceptualized

nature as a resource, as a mere instrumentality through which we satisfy our wants. Nature, in itself, is understood as pure negativity, as a nothingness upon which we write and act our own script. It is mere matter, raw material, natural resource, natural endowment to be used in the production of commodities. We evaluate states on a scale of development from least to most developed—and define development as the capacity to transform nature.<sup>10</sup>

Not imbuing nature with any meaning or value in itself (as opposed to the value it has for our purposes) has had important consequences both for our relation to the environment and for our relations to others. As lifeless and inert in the Western understanding, nature is seen solely from the perspective of the satisfaction of our wants. Nature is judged in its relation to its pliancy to our purposes, and is transformed in the image of our wants. We want to live in a certain way, and the environment must be reshaped to suit this. The relentless instrumentality of our attitude to nature also extends into our relations to others. European, white civilization looks upon aboriginal persons as either a natural resource to be used or else as a natural obstacle to be overcome. European settlers understood aboriginal persons as part of the land, and like the land they needed to be cleared, dug up, rooted out, and so on.

The universalizing tendency of white thought and practice is evident here. Western civilization has transformed nature in Europe. Further, it will not rest content until it has developed the whole world, eliminating what is aboriginal and replacing it with a managed, manipulated, reprocessed, fertilized, strip-mined, overharvested environment. The last three centuries are witness to this transformation of everything into an instrument.

The aboriginal view of nature, and of the proper way of living within it, is vastly different. Based on the idea that we have an obligation to preserve the environment for the seven generations to come, the aboriginal understanding is that we should live so that when we are gone there is no trace of our having been here. Humans are not the center of the universe with the power and the right to shape and reconstitute the system of life. The natural world must be respected in its own right. For example, when an animal is killed, it is thanked. Even though it must be killed for our survival, it is itself a living being, worthy of respect, and its spirit must be accorded proper dignity. In this way the basis of human being within nature is reaffirmed.

The most poignant summary of the aboriginal view of the natural world, and the human relation to it, is the thanksgiving invocation required before any meeting of the people. Whenever people gather to



deliberate they must open their meetings by giving thanks to all that makes life possible. This is constitutionally mandated (Wampum 7).

Whenever the statesmen of the League shall assemble for the purpose of holding a council, the Onondaga statesmen shall open it by expressing their gratitude to their cousin statesmen, and greeting them, and they shall make an address and offer thanks to the earth where men dwell, to the streams of water, the pools and the lakes, to the maize and the fruits, to the medicinal herbs and trees, to the forest trees for their usefulness, and to the animals that serve as food and give their pelts for clothing, to the great winds and the lesser winds, to the Thunderers; to the Sun, the mighty warrior; to the moon, to the messengers of the Creator who reveals his wishes, and to the Great Creator who dwells in the heavens above who gives all the things useful to men, and who is the source and the ruler of health and life.

In practice this invocation is much longer—often lasting thirty minutes or more. According respect to nature is seen as critical to moderate, reasoned deliberation. We are thought to act and decide wisely only insofar as we are cognizant of the groundedness of our being in the natural.

This discussion allows us to observe the variance between aboriginal and white attitudes towards nature. The first is the ontological continuity/discontinuity of the natural and the human. Where aboriginal understanding sees an ontological sameness between all living things, the white view is that human being is superior to nature and that nature exists only as tool and instrument. The natural world is not seen as having value in itself. This is the ontological correlate to the notion that reason is mere instrument in satisfying impulses. Such a view of the natural world permits us anything.

Second is the related juxtaposition between the aboriginal notion of the natural world as living and full of spirit, and the Western notion that matter is essentially inert. The idea of thanking the rivers and the air, of expressing gratitude to plants and animals, is anathema to the Western conceptualization of nature as lifeless at best, and because passive and unyielding, life destroying at worst. Nature is an obstacle, a block, something to be subdued and reshaped. In contrast, the aboriginal intuition is that nature is fully spiritual. Corn, beans, and squash—the basis of Iroquoian agriculture—are the Three Sisters. The smoke from tobacco carries our prayers and our thanks to the Creator. After the Oka, Quebec, crisis of 1990 ended the elders at Kahnawake, a Mohawk reserve near Montreal, Quebec, realized the pain and the fear that the children of their community still suffered. The young people

were encouraged to draw pictures of their fears, which the elders then burned mixed with tobacco. This smoke sent their fears to the Creator, who could calm them. White ideas of scientific truth, of myth, of psychosomatic healing cannot embrace the full sense of the living spirit within the natural that underlay this event. We find no evidence of a Creator and so attribute healing to the effects of belief in the immune system and so on.

The modern Western view of the environment as a resource has led to behavior which has depleted the environment to the point where future life is not assured. Oil, minerals, fish, topsoil, and forests are all disappearing. Even water, air, and ozone are under significant threat. These impending (or present) catastrophes could only happen in a culture where the environment is seen as an object to be manipulated, managed, and even, in the height of hubris, improved. The Great Law of Peace envisioned that people would exist in harmony with the environment. The aboriginal peoples believed that they should live so that they do not leave any marks on the earth. Transforming nature was ungrateful and in violation of Wampum 7.

### **Peacefulness between Peoples**

Perhaps most telling of all the difference between the aboriginal world view as epitomized in the Great Law of Peace and the European, or white outlook, can be found in their respective understandings of, and relations towards, the other. Whites have demonized the other. Racism, anti-Semitism, witch burnings, anticommunist hysteria, slavery, the enemy as subhuman, and so forth pervade Western attitudes to others. Our fear of alterity, our chauvinism towards difference, have been elaborated with scientific precision—the *Bell Curve* (1994) is only the latest such craze—inculcated into our soldiers, and glamorized by our popular culture.

The Realist understanding of international relations, which dominates the theory and practice of the Western world, conceptualizes peace in a radically different way. Following Hobbes, Realism sees peace and war as ontologically equivalent.<sup>11</sup> The dominant view in Western culture is that humans relate to each other in ways that are at base mutually hostile. Our sense of our being as self-contained, our notion of the self as autonomous, mean that our economic and political relationships are characterized by a life and death struggle that is only mitigated by surrender and standoff. Peace is, therefore, not different from war in the underlying antagonistic relations between the peoples. For Hobbes, hostility, and the war of all against all, remain a permanent possibility, even in civil society. We only cease hostilities when it is

in our interest to do so, and yet it is this very motivation of self-interest which constitutes our relationships as warlike. The white attitude towards nature similarly evinces notions of mastery and domination that vary profoundly from the aboriginal understanding that emphasizes accommodation. Moreover, the tendency of whiteness to create others out of difference underpins the notion of permanent war and hostility that is formalized in the Realist doctrines of international relations, a notion that radically departs from the aboriginal idea of the natural peacefulness of peoples.

The Great Law rejected the notion that other peoples were “otherness” and less worthy of respect. Wampum 73 summarizes the understanding of difference:

The Great Creator has made us of one blood, and of the same soil he made us, and as only different tongues constitute different nations, he established different hunting grounds and territories and made boundary lines between them.

This respectful understanding of the other as not different is reflected in the Two-Row Wampum Treaty, a seventeenth century treaty between the Iroquois and the Dutch. The relationship established was symbolized by two colored rows of beads set against a solid background. The symbol of the two rows represented the Iroquois belief that the river was large enough to carry the two boats—one standing for the Iroquoian peoples and the other for the Dutch. Each group would live in its own way in harmony with its neighbor. The striking contrast between this attitude to alterity and that of white European culture can be drawn by imagining the reception the Iroquois would have received had they arrived on the Dutch coast and asked to share the land. The Two-Row Wampum is still the governing ideal behind Iroquoian negotiations with Canada (see Alfred 1995, 13a).

Less dramatic, perhaps, but no less telling of the Iroquoian understanding of the other was the practice of adoption articulated in the Great Law. Rather than identifying the Iroquois as biologically or culturally distinct and superior, the Great Law spelled out how others were to become part of the League and, indeed, members of the various nations. Wampum 68 states how the adoption of an individual into an Iroquoian clan will take place. Individuals can be adopted by a clan other than their own, and even persons who are not members of the League may be adopted. Refuge is also offered to anyone who asks for it. Dennis Banks, a prominent member of the American Indian Movement (AIM) sought refuge under Wampum 75 with the Onondaga. As a veteran of the standoff at Wounded Knee he was under

indictment. His request for adoption was sponsored by the Onondaga Council of Chiefs in March 1783, and their decision to accept him was confirmed by the Grand Council of the League. He remained under the protection of the Onondaga nation for over a year until he surrendered to New York State authorities.

The Great Law also permits—even encourages—the adoption of whole nations. The League, as it was first established, contained five members. In the early years of the eighteenth century, the Tuscarora nation of North Carolina, an Iroquoian-speaking people, had suffered a series of defeats and were being driven from their home territory. They presented themselves to the Grand Council and asked for admission. By the early 1720s they were formally included as the sixth nation of the Confederacy. In fact, so common was the practice of adoption that Francis Jennings has estimated that as much as one half of the current ethnic composition of the Iroquois is from adopted peoples (1984: 95–96)

The practice of accommodation of neighbours and of adopting foreign peoples into the clans of the League or even as new members of the League stems from the central ideal and goal of the Great Law—namely the establishment of peace through reasoned moderation. This vision of proper living was not exclusive to the Iroquois themselves. Wampum 1 states,

With the statesmen of the League of Five Nations, I plant the Tree of Great Peace.

I plant it in your territory, Atotarho, and the Onondagan Nation: in the territory of you who are Firekeepers.

Wampum 2 extends the ideal of peace to all who desire it:

If any man or any nation outside the Five Nations shall obey the laws of the Great Peace (*Kaianarekowa*), and shall make this known to the statesmen of the League, they may trace back the roots to the Tree. If their minds are clean, and if they are obedient and promise to obey the wishes of the Council of the League, they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.

There is no sense that the arrangements envisaged by the Great Law, the peaceful relations that it established between the Five Nations, are to be exclusive to them. Peace was not imagined as a pragmatic, instrumental cessation of hostilities, but as an active, cooperative living together. The Five Nations, therefore, were not exclusive. All who wanted peace were invited to join.

To elaborate, the Great Law was founded to establish a peacefulness between nations and within nations that is based on reasoned moderation. The Great Law of Peace and its message were brought to the Iroquoian people by the Peacemaker.<sup>12</sup> The Iroquois nations were at war, caught in an endless cycle of blood feuds and revenge killings. The Peacemaker came from across the waters of Lake Ontario with a message of peace through reason: only if the people moderated their passions through reason could there be any hope of peace. He first brought his message to Hiawatha, a Mohawk noted for his rhetorical skills. Using Hiawatha as his spokesperson he brought his message to all the peoples of the Five Nations, who were eventually convinced that peace through reason was superior to war. Only Atotarho, the terrible chief of the Onondaga, remained unconvinced. So awful was Atotarho that by legend he had snakes for hair.

At first he repulsed Hiawatha and the Peacemaker, rejecting their appeals with a cynicism reminiscent of Thrasymachus. Evil and war are the way of the world said Atotarho, and he refused to follow the Great Peace. Eventually he was convinced by the inner strength of Hiawatha. Hiawatha had three daughters who had been killed—most likely by Atotarho himself. So overwhelmed by grief was Hiawatha that he wandered off into the woods to be alone. He was only able to return to his people and to renew his life because of the consolation that he received from the message of the Peacemaker. In so doing he renounced revenge. When Atotarho saw the courage and tranquility that Hiawatha displayed he realized the strength of the message of peace through reasoned moderation offered by the Peacemaker. He was made the first chief of the League and the Onondaga nation was made the seat of the Confederacy.

The meaning of peace in the Great Law is symbolized by the renunciation of the passion for revenge by Hiawatha. Similarly, war is utterly rejected by the Great Law. Wampum 65 states,

I, Tekanawita, and the United Chiefs, now uproot the tallest tree (skarenhesekowa) and into the hole thereby made we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, down into the deep underneath currents of water (Tionawatetsien) flowing to unknown regions we cast all the weapons of strife. We bury them from sight and we plant again the tree. Thus shall the Great Peace be established and hostilities shall no longer be known between the Five Nations, but peace to the United People.

The Great Law of Peace recognizes the possibility of war. Human being is properly governed by reasoned moderation, but we live in the space between reason and passion. Even when foreign nations are

presented with the opportunity for peace they may reject it. Foreign nations are each offered the chance to accept the Great Law of Peace and to live in peaceful relations. Wampum 78 encourages those who accept peace with the League to “endeavour to persuade the other nations to accept the Great Peace.” However, it is envisioned that not all will do so. War, though, is only permitted when foreign nations refuse the offer of peace. Wampum 88 reads,

When the proposition to establish the Great Peace is made to a foreign nation, it shall be done in mutual council. The foreign nation is to be persuaded by reason, and urged to come into the Great Peace. If the Five Nations fail to obtain the consent of the nation at the first council, a second council shall be held and upon a second failure, a third council shall be held and this third council shall end the peaceful methods of persuasion. At the third council, the War Chief of the Five Nations shall address the chief of the foreign nation and request him three times to accept the Great Peace. If refusal steadfastly follows, the War Chief shall let the bunch of white lake shells drop from his outstretched hand to the ground, and shall bound quickly forward and club the offending chief to death. War shall thereby be declared, and the War Chief shall have his warriors to back any emergency. War must continue until this contest is won by the Five Nations.

Warfare, when necessary, was never to be pursued to the finish. Wampum 83–87 spell out that the underlying relationship between peoples is peace, not war. The moment that a foreign nation ceases hostilities peace is reestablished. Typical is Wampum 84:

Whenever a foreign nation is conquered or has by their own will accepted the Great Peace, their own system of government may continue, but they must cease all warfare against other nations.

Unlike the dominant vision of Realism, the Iroquois saw war as an aberration. The real interests of both sides are served by peace and by peaceful relationships. The Iroquois themselves were testament to this. After they had accepted the vision of the Peacemaker they put aside all hostilities and accepted peace through reasoned moderation.

## **Conclusion**

The universalization of whiteness paradoxically masks its essential properties. Some of these properties have been thrown into relief by examining the Great Law of Peace—an articulation of aboriginal life that provides a standpoint outside Western bourgeois culture. In

particular, the Iroquoian understanding of human being, its cultural attitude towards nature, and the peacefulness it accords to the relations between nations contrast sharply with the Western understandings that comprise whiteness.

When we contemplate the excesses inflicted upon the world by the ascendancy of whiteness, our analysis of the Great Law of Peace, in addition to staining essential aspects of whiteness, also provides a measure of those properties. Here we can begin to see that the European understanding of human being fails to be true to the concrete richness of life and, consequently, easily lends itself to immoderate conduct. The white attitude towards nature similarly evinces notions of mastery and domination that vary profoundly from the aboriginal understanding that emphasizes accommodation. Moreover, the tendency of whiteness to create others out of difference underpins the notion of permanent war and hostility that is formalized in the Realist doctrines of international relations, a notion that radically departs from the aboriginal idea of the natural peacefulness of peoples.

Indeed, from the aboriginal standpoint whiteness emerges as a pathological condition characterized by distorted conceptions of human being, a quest to dominate nature, and the systematic conquering of nonwhite nations. Whiteness, as a form of life, informs the excesses of modernity. It is also the form of life least likely to encourage a balanced and moderate approach to living, an approach necessary to foster long-term human well-being. The need to recover more moderate forms of life—in effect to save humanity from whiteness by simultaneously saving whiteness from itself—will be served well by examining those countless others who dangle from the precipice of extinction, and doing so on their own ethical and philosophical terms. The potential for instruction from nonwhite forms of life is paradoxically fading as they become needed more desperately. The Great Law of Peace can serve us well in this epoch of need.

## Notes

1. Wampum are belts made of shells. The different colors are arranged to form patterns that act as a kind of language. Wampum was reportedly discovered by Hiawatha. Each of the sections of the Great Law has its own Wampum belt.

2. The white pine is the symbol of peace for the Iroquois. Tradition says that at the conclusion of the Great Law the lawgiver overturned a white pine and buried under it all the weapons.

3. This brief list of twentieth-century excess could be expanded easily to include the innumerable holocausts and protracted conflicts and wars that have characterized modern life. The sheer volume of attention that these tragedies

occupy attests to their scope. And yet their frequency also contributes to a sort of “banality” (Arendt 1963).

4. For an elaboration of this see our article (Bedford and Workman 1977).

5. Many commentators have argued that modernity is characterized by an absence of constraints or boundaries to human praxis. As such, we appropriate for ourselves the right to determine good and bad, and the limits to our actions. See Bedford (1994).

6. The mechanisms that permit the unprecedented expansion of European culture include such diverse practices as direct military aggression, the commodification of all domains of daily life, and the dominance of Western media.

7. This conception has continued from the early expression of the classical economic tradition by such writers as Adam Smith (1937) through to current liberal theorists such as John Kenneth Galbraith (1958).

8. The Great Law had a system for balancing power between men and women. Only men could be chiefs; however, only women could appoint chiefs, who could be removed at any time. Older women who had the right to appoint chiefs were known as clan mothers.

9. We use the term “man” here because the gendered nature of the concept “economic man,” that is, the way that its content overlaps with our ideas of masculinity makes it incomprehensible to say “economic woman.”

10. Ecological critique, especially eco-feminist analysis, has drawn attention to the problems associated with the white attitude towards nature. See for example, Shiva (1988).

11. The clearest and most enduring expression of Realism may be found in Morgenthau (1973).

12. According to custom, the Peacemaker’s name is not uttered.

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