

Georges E. Sioui. *For an Amerindian Autohistory*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.

In *Amerindian Autohistory*, the author, Sioui, is concerned with many Aboriginal issues. Among the major topics are: first the depopulation of American Indians due to European diseases; second, European feelings of guilt that developed subsequently; third, the Indian vision of life; and fourth, Jesuit missionary Lafitau's contribution to Indian civilization. Sioui's discussion on the Sacred Circle of Life provides a useful understanding of Indian philosophy. However, the book in general provides little in the way of intellectual understanding of Indian civilization.

Sioui claims that the "goal of the book is first of all philosophical, since it sets out to demonstrate how the evolution myth can harm those who believe in it — and consequently those who are victims in it." However, he fails to show how the evolution myth functions in philosophical and ideological ways. In a following paragraph, Sioui shifts to a different goal: removing feelings of guilt. Again, a few paragraphs later, he proposes a third premise: putting the microbes, instead of their carriers, on trial. None of these premises is developed adequately. Another main hypothesis of *Amerindian Autohistory* is "to deal with the consequences of the upheaval produced in America by microbial infections from Europe . . . before we can remove feelings of guilt and help to reconcile the two civilizations concerned, Amerindians and Europeans."

To Sioui, "putting the microbes on trial instead of their carriers has the great advantage of removing the burden of guilt from humans who are merely the victims." The assumed guilt is based on the disease germs that Europeans brought to the Indians, resulting in a holocaust. Diseases and guilt are the two main foci of his thesis. However, he fails to discuss the particular nature of the diseases and how they were transmitted to Indians. It is likely that some Indians died later from respiratory diseases and smallpox, but there is no hard evidence that they died upon early contact. The number of Indians killed by contagious diseases would likely have been few in comparison to the millions killed by the Europeans' swords and guns.

According to the eminent historian Josephy, "The European conquest of the Americans has been termed one of the darkest chapters in human history. No one will ever know how many Indian tribes were enslaved, tortured, debauched and killed."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Aptheker claims that "no method was too horrible for the accomplishment of the governmental policy of subjugation and extermination."<sup>2</sup> Communicable diseases as mass killers of Indians are generally not given serious consideration by



most historians, despite the fact that it is frequently mentioned. Nevertheless, Sioui argues that "by far the most important cause of the American apocalypse was the epidemic diseases brought by the newcomers." To make this assumption verifiable, Sioui needs to show by some reliable method or data that this was factually the case. However, he fails to do this, thus weakening his argument.

Scientific information shows that epidemics, particularly smallpox, were highly unlikely to be carried from Europe and transmitted to Indians.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the germ would have had to be carried on the bodies of the ships' crew members. As a result, most of the crew members would have died from it. Furthermore, smallpox germs are passed by skin contact. In early conquest times, Europeans did not have body contact with Indians because they considered them to be savages, filthy and loathsome. Hence, the author's major premise lacks reliable proof.

Sioui makes the assumption that Europeans hold a sense of guilt for the massive deaths of Indians from epidemics. On the other hand, he argues that White people should not be faulted for this catastrophe. Sioui states that "our people have suffered a great deal since the white people came here, though it is not the white people's fault. The Great Spirit wants them to be here and He wants us to help them." It is this type of ambiguous statement that makes Sioui's construction somewhat illogical and inconsistent. The type of guilt that Sioui discusses is basically Freudian and inapplicable to colonization. He claims that "division was the rule, which produced emotional confusion by instilling feelings of guilt." Furthermore, stifled emotions keep people from expressing compassion that produces guilt and hatred. If guilt is to be a major premise of his thesis, then he must prove to the readers, firstly, that such guilt actually exists, and, secondly, the nature of that guilt. He does neither.

Frantz Fanon, the distinguished scholar on colonization, maintains that colonialism is not a moral issue; it is an economic issue. "The imperial countries expropriate economic surplus from their colonies for their own development."<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to make a case for guilt by blaming only diseases for the depopulation of Indians. The case of slaughtering, terrorizing and dispossessing by gun and sword — and for which data are available — would be much more effective. Las Casas, a Catholic missionary who accompanied the Spanish invaders to the Americas, reported in 1648 that the Spanish soldiers "have so cruelly and inhumanely butchered, that of three million people," and that "wherein the Spaniards exercised their abominable cruelties and detestable tyrannies, there have innocently perished above twelve millions of souls, women and children."<sup>5</sup> This was



true for all European nations. Colonialism operated almost identically for every imperialist nation.

Sioui seems to lack a familiarity with colonization and its consequences with regard to Aboriginal civilizations. To him, "civilizations are but products of a chain of circumstances in the destiny of earth; they are shaped by the constraints of climate and geography." This is a rather naive view of colonization. History shows that civilization and colonization are largely products of war and power politics. This is very evident today. Sioui's narrow and restricted meaning of civilization precludes discussion of its economic, political and cultural aspects. He treats colonialism in an idealistic manner. As a result, the actual situations are given a chivalrous, but somewhat distorted, treatment.

For the Aboriginal people of Canada, oppression is still being reproduced. Situations like Davis Inlet present a vivid picture of the oppression and impoverishment of colonized Aboriginal people. Davis Inlet's community is not unlike most northern reserves and Métis colonies. From a philosophical position, "The most characteristic feature of the colonial situation is racism, which underpins ideologically the division of society into human beings and natives."<sup>6</sup> Sioui claims that "Amerindian cultural values have influenced the formation of the Euroamericans' character more than the latter's values have modified the Amerindian's cultural code." In colonialism, this is impossible because Europeans are in total domination of the values and ideology of the entire nation and its people. They control all state apparatus, thus maintaining an Anglo-Saxon culture. The colonized's culture has been devastated and disgraced through the arrangement of racial stereotypes.

Sioui is inclined to make misleading or incorrect historical statements. For example, Indians did not receive the early European invaders with respect and humanity. They were suspicious of the invaders, and reluctant to deal with them. They had very good reasons for holding this attitude. Cartier in his first voyage shot and killed some Indians apparently without reason. Also, before he left America, he kidnapped Chief Donnacona and other important Indian leaders and took them to France, where they later died in captivity. They pillaged furs used by Indians for their domestic purposes.<sup>7</sup> The French did not know the art of Iroquois warfare, whereas the Mohawks used it very effectively to drive the French army out of the Indians' homeland.

As a basis for his theory, Sioui draws on the work and writings of Jesuit missionary Joseph Lafitau. As a Jesuit priest, Lafitau was similar to all Jesuit priests of the 17th century, who were the most militant and brutal



in their determination to impose Christianity on Indians. The Jesuits of New France had a deep economic investment in their so-called missionary work. King Louis XIV paid them for each delivered page of their diaries in which they wrote about Indians. Probably for this reason, the Jesuit Relations books are today considered by many academics as myth or fiction, and, thus, relatively untrustworthy as sources of research data. Furthermore, the Jesuits were involved in the fur trade and in seizing land from Indians. Before 1763, the Jesuit Order possessed almost a million acres of the best land in New France.<sup>8</sup> However, Sioui claims that Lafitau contributed to alleviating the Americans' crushing historical burden and that he helped restore dignity to the people descended from the savage nations. This is questionable. Lafitau's religious philosophy differed very little from that of other colonizing missionaries. It was based on the religious myths of Catholicism. To him, the Americas were peopled a short time after the flood "and that these settlements were made by Noah and his children."<sup>9</sup> Such philosophy is not likely to help or contribute significantly to Indian society.

In his foreword, Bruce Trigger claims that Sioui is making an important contribution to the dialogue between Native people and Euroamerican intellectuals by providing a systematic philosophical formulation of the ideas shared by many Native people. I found the book's greatest weakness to be the lack of any systematic formulation of ideas. It is inclined to rambling unrelated rhetorical statements that are not supported by evidence or logic. Trigger claims that autohistory, which is the interpretation Sioui uses in his book, is Native history written in accordance with Amerindian values. But, in my view, Sioui's book is written from an intellectual framework of Western thought in the most profound way. There is no evidence in Sioui's writing of an Aboriginal consciousness. *Amerindian Autohistory* will be read by very few Aboriginal people and will have little effect in advancing their intellectual thought.

Howard Adams

## Notes

- 1 Alvin Josephy, *The Indian Heritage of America*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1978).
- 2 Herbert Aptheker, *The Colonial Era* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), p. 19.
- 3 E.V. Stearn, *Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of Indians* (Boston: Bruce Humphries Publishers, 1945).
- 4 R. Zahar, *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Alienation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974,) p. 11.



- 5 B. Las Casas, *The Tears of the Indians*. (New York: Oriole Chapbooks, 1972), p. 3.
  - 6 R. Zahar, *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Alienation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), p. 19.
  - 7 Marcel Trudel, *The Beginnings of New France* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 91.
  - 8 G. Myers, *History of Canadian Wealth* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1972), p. 17.
  - 9 J. Lafitsau, *Customs of the American Indians* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), p. 52.
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Rupert Ross. *Dancing with a Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality*. Markham, Ontario: Octopus, 1992.

For many years, Rupert Ross has been known in justice circles for his pioneering efforts in changing the way the justice system handles Aboriginal peoples. This book essentially recounts how he came to see the light, so to speak, to become an advocate for reform. Based primarily on his work in northwestern Ontario, Ross eloquently pleads that most "White" people who have official cause to interact with Aboriginal people, and especially those in the North, really have no clue just how different they are. The reference to "exploring" in the title is somewhat ironic, given that the book was published in the 500th year after another "White" explorer's own adventure. Much like his historic predecessor, and with apologies to a popular television show, Ross promises to take us boldly where no ("White") man has gone before.

The value in the book lies not so much in the recounting of Ross's personal journey (in which he bleeds humility and "White" guilt), but in his discussions of how Aboriginal peoples interact with the justice system. He presents tantalizing bits of information from his own experiences of the way travelling courts process offences in northern communities, and how Aboriginal offenders are clearly discriminated against in the justice system. These are the highlights of the book, yet Ross approaches these justice issues in a disorganized fashion. A thorough analysis would have benefited the reader, since the issues are very timely.

In explaining how and why the current justice system has failed northern Aboriginal peoples, Ross borrows heavily from the work of Claire Brant, a psychiatrist, who has written on the various rules of ethics and behaviour that characterize some Aboriginal groups. This approach can be faulted for the manner in which certain behavioural characteristics are ascribed to Aboriginal peoples: despite disclaimers that such traits are