

Against Civilization

Introduction to Russell Means

Fifth Estate Collective

1980

The following text, "On The Future of the Earth," is a talk given by Russell Means at the Black Hills International Survival Gathering held last July at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The gathering was attended by groups which spanned the spectrum from local Indians and farmers, to Marxist-Leninists politicians, Sierra Club activists, Greenpeace, anti-power-line activists, to "alternative technology" entrepreneurs.

The U.S. government and the energy corporations have designated the Black Hills, or Paha Sapa, the sacred hills of the Lakota people, as a "National Sacrifice Area," slated for "terminal development" What this "terminal development" (a term both redundant, all development being terminal for humanity, and also reminiscent of terminal cancer) means concretely is rendering the entire area uninhabitable with coal gasification plants, high voltage power lines and nuclear reactors (having a potential "life" of thirty-five years) in order to supply energy to the Burger Kings, police stations, disco parlors and office buildings of urban civilization, which is equivalent to saying that the sacred hills of the plains Indians are to be converted into capital.

We were struck immediately by the similarities in the conclusions that Russell Means has reached and our own, in particular, in relation to the question of technology and a critique of Marxism. Means is starting from a set of experiences quite different from our own. We are all urban, European in background, and came out of the experience of the "counter-culture" and leftism in oneway or another. Means comes from a set of traditions which was whole, organically related to its environment and which resisted capitalist civilization as recently as two or three generations ago.

We have been speaking as orphans and fragments, searching for roots and a tradition of resistance to civilization anywhere we can find them. We have embarked upon an adventure which began first of all with the criticism of all of our former presuppositions, that is, of Marxism and anarchism, technological progress, modern society, the functions of art and culture, workers' organization and self-organization, the existence and function of classes and other questions. We don't claim to have resolved these fundamental problems, but we have headed in a general direction of rejection of the presuppositions of this society in all its forms, East and West, of rejection of (modern, industrial, at least) technology and of civilization and the so-called historical progress posited by the Enlightenment thinkers, bourgeois liberalism and Marxism.

We have, in some ways, come to see the revolutionary upheavals of the past few hundred years less as projects by political visionaries carrying out a new social program than as forms of resistance by masses of people to maintain community and solidarity in the face of the onslaught of capital. We came to distrust the "political visionaries" as revolutionary leaders, as well as the humanist codes that they mouthed to construct their Republics and their Five Year Plans, and to trust the instincts and the desperation of the little communities that have fought to preserve a way of life which they saw being destroyed by industrialism and massification.

Means comes from one of those little communities, and so has seen the tail-end of that process at work in a lifetime, through the experience of his grandparents, parents and his own generation; only the process which his family must have witnessed compressed into a hundred years or so took thousands of years elsewhere, this leap

from the Paleolithic into modern American capitalism. His point of view is important, because it is a voice, like our own, orphaned in the technological wilderness into which humanity has wandered, and it sounds like our own voices, it reveals our bitterness, our rage, our ambivalences, too, perhaps. But it is also a voice which sounds distant, mythic, like the warbling of a fabulous, alluring bird which sang to us in a dream of our childhood and which we had forgotten but which we can never forget. It still has a sense of place, of a history tied to the land, of a spirit residing in all of nature, of the wisdom which comes in dreams.

We think when Means speaks of “European culture” that he is not describing the culture of European peoples in their totality, but the culture of capital, which began as a characterological flaw within the European but which infects human beings wherever it has spread (including Indians), and which has been resisted everywhere, by the Luddites and framebreakers in England, by peasants and proletarians in Russia, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe, by mestizos in revolutionary Mexico, and by so-called primitive people everywhere.

The problem of capital began and spread from Europe: the Europeans were its primary victims, and their cultural traditions and their communities were destroyed by the land enclosures, mines and factories. Perhaps the problem really begins with a separation of spirit and matter, but that doesn’t begin in Europe, but somewhere in the Judeo-Christian desert, or perhaps in Sumer, or Babylon. And a critique of those societies would imply a similar critique of all societies characterized by the “Asiatic mode of production,” under which a bureaucratic, priestly or military caste is maintained through taxes and forced labor, which would include the ancient Amer-indian civilizations in Mexico and Peru.

Ultimately, we are not interested in arguing these points with Means, because we agree with him where it is important: that “development...means total, permanent destruction,” that Marxism is the “same old song,” and that there can be “another way.” Where he uses the terminology “European culture” we prefer to say culture of capital, since non-Europeans have acculturated to this despiritualization of the world, to this cleavage of spirit and matter, and Europeans have also resisted it.

The fact is, we have all been changed, and we are all threatened with extinction. We must all sift through the experiences of the millennia, find our way out of the technological labyrinth, and create a new culture which reaches into the traditional culture of our remotest past, and into our most utopian possibilities for a human community of the future.

There will be those who see the-more human aspects of Russell Means’ talk—its apparent simplicity, its spirituality, its intransigence, its “impracticality”—as flaws, and who will argue against its generalizations from a rationalist, “realistic” point of view. We are not in the least interested in these criticisms, since we agree with Means that “Rationality is a curse since it can cause humans to forget the natural order of things.” Rationalism is part of the problem; we must begin to trust our dreams. Expecting Means to think in terms of logic, or cost-efficiency, or “pragmatically,” is to expect him to allow himself to be infected with the categories of capital.

He must speak the question which confronts us all in his own specific way, it is this very cultural diversity, this symphony of voices which describes the world we desire. The future does not lie in any single homogeneous vision any more than it could be the result of a political program. To think it does is to repeat the fatal error which constitutes civilization.

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