A Woman's Place:
Gynoprimal Iroquoia as Post-Capitalist Inspiration

by Stanley Dundee

Unreleased

> Nothing is more real, however, than the women's superiority. It is they who really maintain the tribe, the nobility of the blood, the genealogical tree, the order of generations and conservation of the families. In them resides all real authority . . . they are the soul of the councils; the arbiters of peace and war; they hold the taxes and the public treasure; it is to them that the slaves [captives] are entrusted; they arrange the marriages; the children are under their authority; and the order of succession is founded on their blood.
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> — Father Lafitau (1724), quoted by Barbara Alice Mann, Iroquoian Women,[1] p. 182

In trying to imagine life after capitalism, a useful strategy may be to carefully examine life *before* capitialism, especially where that life was a good one. Tastes vary, but many might agree that the pre-settler life of the Haudensaunee (Iroquois) in the eastern woodlands of Turtle Island had much to commend it. What lessons might we take from a way of life that embraced popular sovereignty, communal effort, and spiritually-driven ecological stewardship replete with material

[1] https://www.peterlang.com/abstract/title/57024

abundance and durable democracy?

This inquiry is hindered by the ignorance and prejudice of western sources writing a victor's history. But the triumph of western ways is incomplete. Surviving tradition is complemented by the chronicles of the earliest explorers and missionaries. Ohio Bear Clan Seneca scholar Barbara Alice Mann weaves early observations with persistent native teachings in *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas,*[2] revealing the dominant roles of elder women in an egalitarian, communal society that enjoyed a life of spiritual and material richness. Mann displays remarkable erudition, commanding sources stretching back to the earliest days of the European invasion. Her prose is lucid and forceful, enlivened by a slashing wit that will likely be offensive to some but others will find refreshing and compelling. I've been lavish with quotes to ensure that readers get a good sample of what they can expect from this most provocative of texts.

Twinship: Iroquoian Metaphysics

Elder women ruled in pre-contact Iroquoia. The *gantowisas*, i.e. "a mature woman acting in her official capacity," (p. 16) exercised leadership in political, economic, social, and spiritual life. Gynoprimal, we might call it. In awarding leading roles to elder women, Iroquoian society relied on gendering to distribute responsibility among its members. This use of gendering reflected a paramount theme of Twinship in Iroquoian philosophy:

> For the Iroquois, Twinship is the abiding principle that organizes nature. Everything that exists, does so by halves. A thing is only complete when it is paired with its naturally reciprocating half. . . . Reality consists of parallel agents of equal power functioning synchronously so as to maintain a balanced cosmos. . . . There is no battle here, but only a

[2] https://www.peterlang.com/abstract/title/57024

> ceremonial dance, as each circles the council fire, perpetually re/treading the other's path, which is also his own path. As a reflection of this twinship principle, the genders are seen as simultaneously independent, yet interdependent, each gender one half of the paired, human whole. . . [with] reciprocity, balance, cooperation, mutuality, and the joyful coming-together of two to create one self-perpetuating whole. Each half must be meaningfully intertwined with the other, if the cosmic balance is to be maintained. Thus, gendering is the principle of cosmic equilibrium in action, balancing the natural male and female halves of life. (p. 90)

Cooperation and balance thus serve as foundational principles substituting for the eternal existential Manichean struggle between good and evil that seems to underlie western metaphysics. The gulf that yawns between native Twinship and western Manicheanism presents a formidable hurdle to historical understanding:

> In 1633-1634, the Jesuit missionary Le Jeune noted that the "Savages have not this word 'sin' in their language." As Tuscarora Chief Elias Johnson observed in 1881, the Iroquois first "heard of Purgatory form the Jesuits" and the philosophy of "endless woe from Protestants." The record is quite clear: Oppositional thinking, sin, and sacrament, the Manichean dichotomy, and all the other accoutrements of Christian oppositional thought were quite foreign to the Iroquois at first contact. (p. 72)

Clan and Nation: Iroquoian Society

In another application of Twinship, each Haudenosaunee individual simultaneously had a patriarchal nation and a matriarchal clan, "thus tied to the League by two cords" (p. 161). Clans spanned nations; within a clan, matrilineal relations were paramount:

> Since the Mother-Daughter relationship was the basis of society, longhouse kinfolk were, by definition, matrilineal grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, and nieces.

> Up to a hundred individuals might live in one longhouse, all of whom considered themselves members of the same large family. Furthermore, this family felt inseparably connected with, and were welcomed as such by, all members of all longhouses of their clan, in every town throughout Iroquoia. Most of the men in the longhouses were matrilineal sons or brothers of their resident clanswomen, although some were husbands of those women. All bowed to the authority of their female leaders. (p. 254)

The Clan Mother who presided over each clan house was "the wisest, most impartial, and most politically astute of the Elder women of that lineage" (p. 253). She was put into office by acclamation of her female peers. She was the boss lady:

> She thereafter had the responsibility of seeing to all executive duties, including family living space allotments and equitable distribution of clan goods and work; oversight of her clan's tasks in calling and putting on feasts; maintenance of calm relations among clan members; and the judicious disposition of disputes within her longhouse. She represented her lineage at the Clan Mothers' Council. In addition, she was the ultimate proprieter of her clan's weapons of war, distributing them to—or withholding them from—the young men according to the judgement of the women on the rectitude of the military action proposed. (p. 254)

The nuclear family, which plays such a heavily freighted role in western life, was unknown in Iroquoia. Husbands were typically secondary in influence to maternal uncles:

> [T]he nuclear family of Europe had no Iroquois counterpart. "Family life" was arranged around the clans, with the mother-daughter bond primary. The husband-wife relationship was incidental, since the central female-male bond was the gendered pair of sister and brother. . . . In adulthood, for example, sisters and brothers were more likely to prefer each other to their spouses as female or male role models for their children. Particularly at a time when children lived in their mother's clan longhouse, they were much more likely to see their maternal uncles than their biological fathers. Uncle was an important

role. (p. 98)

Mothers restricted the number of children to ensure "that every child should be the undivided center of its elders' attention until the child is able to walk about and provide itself with rudimentary care" (p. 266). Children were reared with great tenderness and permissiveness under the undisputed control of the *gantowisas*, reflecting "the Iroquoian philosophy that children learned only from experience" (p. 271). Training in the skills that enabled successful communal life took place when mothers used verbal approval and condemnation in public settings, bringing to bear the weight of public opinion. Despite the contrast with punitive systems popular among Europeans of the time, at least one observer recognized the utility of the Iroquoian system in producing democracy-ready citizens:

> Not all Europeans condemned the Iroquoian method of child rearing. Some, such as John Heckewelder, boldly argued for its adoption by Europeans, contending that, unlike the alienating system of Europe, which only trained people to respond to—or cleverly evade—punishment, the Iroquoian system turned out talented, responsible, civic-minded citizens capable of living in a democracy. Noting that this boon was achieved without the rod of "any external authority" to compel honest behavior, Heckewelder recommended the end-product of Iroquoian pedagogy, a mind able and willing to live "in peace and harmony, and in the exercise of moral virtues." How different from the Europeans who, as *Adario* remarked to Lahontan, "must be forc'd to do Good, and no other Prompter for the avoiding of evil than the fear of Punishment"! (p. 275)

Elder women ruled the social sphere. Their powers and freedoms were astonishing to western observers. Conversely to western demeaning of women and especially mothers-in-law, women were revered in Iroquoia. Social practices embodied that reverence as freedom and power:

> Iroquoian cultures esteemed elder women as sowers of wisdom and givers of life, the guardians of the next generation. Daughters inherited these mantles at maturity. This female focus led to social practices outrageous to Christian patriarchy: inheritance through the female line; female-headed households; pre- and extramarital sexual relations for women; female controlled fertility; permissive child rearing; trial marriages; mother-dictated marriages; divorce on demand; maternal custody of the children in case of divorce; polyandry; and female-appointed Hunting Wives. (p. 241)

In much the same way that crucial elements of the constitutional structure of the U.S. are prefigured in Haudenosaunee political arrangements (see below), many noteworthy modern social arrangements now taken for granted had their earliest examples in gynoprimal Iroquoian social practice:

> [T]he inspiration for many modern "American" social practices owes a deep debt to Iroquoian customs and laws. Some practices that have since gained Euro-American acceptance include the acknowledged rights of a woman: to her own body; to abortion; to sexual liberty; to retention of her identity in marriage; to divorce; to economic independence in and after marriage; to custody of her children after divorce; and to remarriage. Just as importantly, the enlightened child rearing practices of today, that condemn battering and see children as sentient beings deserving of consideration and respect, are squarely rooted in Iroquoian pedagogy. So is the modern practice of allowing children twelve and older to choose their own custodial parent in the case of divorce. None of these rights, laws, or customs existed in Christian Europe before contact. All of them crept into Euro-American law after settler women (and men) became aware of the extraordinary social example of the *gantowisas*. (p. 289)

Popular Sovereignty: Iroquoian Politics

In the political arena, elder women were supreme:

> The *gantowisas* enjoyed sweeping political powers, which ranged from the administrative and legislative to the judicial. The *gantowisas* ran the local clan councils. They held all the lineage wampum, nomination belts, and titles. They ran the funerals. They retained exclusive rights over naming, i.e. the creation of new citizens and the installation of public officials. They nominated all male sachems as well as all Clan Mothers to office and retained the power to impeach wrongdoers. They appointed warriors, declared war, negotiated peace, and mediated disputes. (pp. 116-117)

The *gantowisas* ensured the operation of Popular Sovereignty, which, along with Health and Righteousness, formed the three foundational principles of League government. Mann asserts that the Founding Fathers borrowed the revolutionary concept of Popular Sovereignty from the Haudenosaunee; there was little precedent in western political thought for the "will of the people." Mann neatly demonstrates that the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution uncannily echoes these Iroquoian political philosophies.

Mann provocatively traces oligarchy, rampant inequality, and loss of popular sovereignty in the U.S. to the Founder's failure to incorporate the Iroquoian principles of Health and Righteousness into U.S. political structure, choosing instead to enshrine European plunder economics:

> [I]n all of the debate furiously raging ever since Bruce Johansen's *Forgotten Founders* (1982) rubbed academia's nose in the fact that the authors of the U.S. Constitution had been influenced by the Iroquoian Great Law, few have noticed the main disparity between Iroquoia and the United States. . . . It was. . . the failure of the so-called Founding Fathers also to adopt and adapt the Iroquoian system of grass-roots economics that complemented its political base of [Popular Sovereignty]. The true failure of the resultant hybrid lay in the unthinking assumption by the Founding Fathers that European war-lord economics and Haudenosaunee [Popular Sovereignty] could operate in harness without the plunder economics of Europe throwing the political system of [Popular Sovereignty]

into disarray. By furthermore ignoring the sibling principles of [Health and Righteousness] as practical tools of economic prosperity (as opposed to mere moralistic pieties), the Founding Fathers sabotaged hopes for real participatory democracy by writing the proprietary economics of Europe into their Constitution. It is this mismatch of popular but unfunded sovereignty bound to the naked exploitation of capitalism that is short-circuiting American [Popular Sovereignty] today, subverting the political will of the people through the undue economic pressures exerted by a financially privileged elite. No such unbalancing access was possible in the prototype, however, for the clan level where [Popular Sovereignty] was fomented was also the level at which the confederated economy was managed. Power, will, and weal did not trickle down in Iroquoia; they percolated up. (pp. 212-213)

Sharing and Cooperation: Iroquoian Economics

The communal economics invented and practiced by Iroquoian women presents a fascinating model of a hugely successful non-capitalistic system. Western observers tended to assess Iroquoian economics in light of capitalism and Marxism, but those observers were mostly concerned with talking their own book. Mann is especially dismissive of Marx and Engels:

. . . Marxist prating is remarkable in view of the fact that the end-stage of Marxist history was to have been the dictatorship of the proletariat, modeled on the political *Ne Gashasde sa* (popular sovereignty) and the "primitive communism" of the League! Obviously, Marx and Engels saw the ultimate salvation of humanity peeking out through the participatory democracy and economic system invented by the Haudenosaunee. It would, however, have been too embarassing for them to have simply admitted that low-down, female "barbarians" had attained a "higher" culture than their own civilized European men, so Marx and Engels developed convoluted theories covering thousands of pages to disguise the fact that they were, at bottom, recommending a return to the social security and participatory democracy of the League. All this helps explain why the Haudenosaunee, and woodland natives in general, have been less than enthralled by Marxism. They have

> always known what the prototype looked like, and that it did not resemble the Eurocentric universe of scientific socialism. (p. 201)

Iroquoian economic principles conflict sharply with western ideals:

> First, Iroquoian economic theory starts from the premise of plenty, as opposed to the European premise of scarcity. Second, Iroquoian economics was a spiritual system. Third, sharing and cooperation were (and remain) paramount social values. In diametrical contrast to European strategies, the point of Iroquoian economics was not to exploit Mother Earth, ripping off her bounty like a bloody scalp, but to reciprocate Her gifts of life with human gifts of Keeping. This concept was clearly articulated in the many traditions, ceremonies, and strategies of environmentalism. . . It is an interesting comment on perception creating reality that abundance actually did exist under Iroquoian management of field and forest, only retreating into scarcity with the advent of European colonialism. (pp. 202-203)

Although there may be a growing recognition that the spiritual deficiencies of capitalism (greed and selfishness as paramount values) are at the root of its ugliness and unsustainablity, the spirituality inherent in Iroquoian economics remains a stumbling block for western observers:

> If materialism underpins capitalism, spirituality is the core of Iroquoian communalism. The use of "spirituality" and "economics" in the same sentence usually leaves my Euro-American students shuffling their feet and looking askance. Finally someone will blurt out, "But economics is about money!" So well-schooled have Americans been in the knock-down, drag-out materialism of Europe that the thought of economics as a *spiritual* system seems like an outrageous contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, the Iroquoian Plenty Way was, first and foremost, a spiritual way. In sacred ceremonies, the Hunters and the Cultivators spoke directly with the Spirits of the Game and the Spirits of the Three Sisters. . . . All things that belonged to Mother Earth partook of the glow of Her spiritual Being. Mother Earth was (and still is!) a living entity. . . . Her breasts were the

> hills and the mountains; Her sweat ran into the rivulets of Her streams; Her waters were the lakes; the creases in her body were the valleys; the grasses were Her hair, and the trees were Her lungs. Merely setting foot on Her skin of dirt was a sacred act. (pp. 204-205)

Lessons from Iroquoia?

Taken all together, *Iroquoian Women* is decidedly unnerving, even for a reader who has drifted far[3] from American exceptionalism and the values of western civilization. A sense of disbelief gives way to a mixture of anger and hope, and finally envy: what a magnificent society, nearly but not completely destroyed. Could it be revived? Certainly not in all its particulars, but can we not identify approaches that honor its traditions? We could put popular sovereignty, health, and righteousness at the foundation of politics; we are part of the way along that path but must overcome entrenched corruption to redirect resources accordingly. We can try to realign our divisive, competitive individuality towards sharing and cooperation in a grateful, respectful, spiritual approach to bounteous Mother Earth. A Green New Weal, perhaps. Could we displace or at least complement our Manichean obsession with struggle with a pursuit of balance? This one really goes to the root of western presupposition. Exercise in seeking Twinship might help us unshackle from a paradigm of winners and losers towards one of mutuality and balance.

As the traditional nuclear family withers away[4] , can we rediscover communal living arrangements in which the grave responsibility of child-raising is shared and every family member is assured their basic needs? The longhouse is an invaluable

[3] ../purpose.html

[4] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/

example of a living arrangement which doesn't depend on the nuclear family and which devolves production and distribution to a grassroots level. Can we revitalize it, with suitable adaptations for our era? Longhouse communal ownership of the means of production is a useful alternative to private (capitalist) and state (socialist) ownership. We will need to get communal control of some of the means of primary production, particularly land, if this is to be a meaningful effort. Modern longhouses will likely also have to specialize in some outward direction (e.g. social services to the wider community, light manufacturing, agricultural surplus, etc.) to provide cash for trade and other interactions with senescent capitalism. Any billionaires out there want to try to get on the right side of history by funding experiments in this direction? Of course, if we could decentralize money creation[5] to local levels, perhaps we could dispense with billionaire largesse.

Can popular sovereignty "percolated up" (p. 213) from the grassroots level restore a measure of responsiveness to a government that seems only to serve an oligarchy and its minions? This is a difficult battle in which victory hardly seems assured but how can we decline to attempt it? Distraction and division among the populace along with rigged elections and voter suppression have left many discouraged with electoral prospects of regaining sovereignty, but much of the necessary democratic machinery is in place, albeit unused. If the levers of control could be wrenched from oligarchic hands, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people might be restored.

Can we put elder woman back in charge? And not just women who have been "made men" by their struggle in corporatist workplaces, but women who put health and righteousness ahead of greed and lust for power. Perhaps nurses, teachers, and librarians can come forward. Values of motherhood, sisterhood, and

[5] ../money/democratic-sovereignty.html

stewardship could be elevated to restore dignity and respect to our female elders. Gynoprimacy seems to have already arrived according to some observers.[6] Can we embrace it as a tool for building a post-capitalist society?

"It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." Jameson?[7] Fisher?[8] Zizek?[9] Somebody said it, and we need to prove them wrong. Imagining the end of capitalism[10] is our solemn duty. Barbara Mann illuminates an exemplary society which has refused to pass away despite the relentless hammering of church and state. Let's cultivate its examples as seeds for our imagination. Mann urges us accordingly:

> [T]he Elder Spirits are speaking in our time, and most of their messages start with the past. Through the traditional media of dreams and vision, the message revealed again and again, regardless of the seer, is the urgent need to revive ancient knowledge, not to retreat from the present into a romance of the past, but to shore up the present with the strength of memory, the agility of cultural wisdom. (p. 4)

[6] https://fabiusmaximus.com/2018/11/27/metoo-scares-corporate-america/

[7] https://newleftreview.org/II/21/fredric-jameson-future-city

[8] http://www.zero-books.net/books/capitalist-realism

[9] https://despitecapitalism.wordpress.com/2014/02/16/theendoftheworld/

[10] ../purpose.html