

SAVAGE AND CIVIL: INDIAN VIOLENCE AND NON IN THE REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT

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The question of violence is not easy to deal with. This is especially so when discussion turns on indians. The images the word «violence» itself calls up are simplistic and stereotyped and, when it is associated with indians, tradition immediately furnishes a series of hackneyed and lurid corollaries. The area we mean to explore here is thus posted with «caution» signs we will do well to observe as we attempt to indicate some aspects of the practices of violence which characterized the several protagonists of the revolutionary period, «savage» and «civil».

The American «savages» and the «civil» or «civilized», have long been an object of discussion. Columbus «discovered» the Indians, the enlightened writers of the XVIIIth century wrote thousands of pages about them, modern historians had, until recently, forgotten them. On the other hand, as James Merrell said, «It seemed logical to ignore Indians (...): after all, they did not cross an ocean to inhabit some faraway land»¹.

In 1974 Gary N. Nash criticized in *Red, White and Black: The People of Early America*, the «historical amnesia that has blotted out so much of our past»². But notwithstanding the efforts made since by several scholars, the indians are still only minor walkers-on on the scene of American history, colonial and non, that continues to be a history of whites. We can say that they have not even yet obtained co-protagonist status with the different populations which arrived on the American soil between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. There has been however a «nice and neat» resolution of the United States Senate, that of September 16, 1987, stating:

the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was explicitly modeled upon the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself³.

¹ James H. Merrell, *The Indians' World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapter Hill, 1989.

² Gary N. Nash, *Red, White and Black: The People of Early America*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974.

³ United States Congress, *Congressional Record*, 100th Congress, 1th Session, Vol. 133, n. 140, S 12214, 1987.

The resolution being but a recent afterthought, contemporary historians have continued confining the Indians to the landscape, and there too with a secondary role: that of an aspect of the menacing wilderness surrounding the settlers. As James Merrell aptly put it in an article published by the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1989, the Indians are «possessed by the landscape». In Merrell's opinion, the attempt to find a new methodology for the study of Native History has indeed, strengthened the idea that the Indians are a special case, to be treated outside the general historical context with the specialistic zeal of a small group of scholars who know how to use «Ethnohistory»⁴.

The prevalent «white» image for the revolutionary period is no less stereotyped and may be synthesized under the heading of «sacred experiment»; though the model allows for variants and need not be without sophistication, the category itself comprises a noticeable dose of violence. To overcome the wilderness and the English, the use of violence is assumed legitimate, it is «just violence», though not, as we shall see, dissimilar to what is declared savage and gratuitous when Indians engage in it.

We cannot fully understand the notion of violence in the revolutionary period without considering the theoretical context of Indian-white relations, that is, the context constructed by the historians. According to Alfonso Ortiz⁵, there are eight concepts at its core: 1) Western Civilization; 2) Frontier; 3) Wilderness; 4) Civilization/Savagry dichotomy; 5) Christianity; 6) Manifest Destiny; 7) Time; 8) Violence.

The inter-relationships binding these eight concepts together are very powerful ones, whose dominant, shared, center is the conquest of the «New World». The decisive aspect of this brief list is that the concepts composing it have *no* correspondency in native cultures and each item implies violence as the means of imposition. Think, for example, of the idea of the frontier, which quickly assumes characteristics that are cultural as well as practical for colonists. «The frontier is the crest, the cutting edge of the wave», the point of contact between barbarity and civilization⁶. But for the natives, the attempt to contain this wave, which was breaking over the land they lived in, is still viewed as mere violence, though only the most backward still think it was an attempt to stop the «un-arrestable march of civilization».

⁴ James H. Merrell, «Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians» in *William and Mary Quarterly*, January 1989.

⁵ Alfonso Ortiz, «Indian/White Relations: A View from the Other Side of the Frontier» in *Indians in American History*, ed. by Frederick E. Hoxie, Harlan Davidson, Inc., Arlington Heights, Ill., 1988.

⁶ Frederick J. Turner, *La frontiera nella storia americana*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1959. Almost a century has gone by since Turner gave his lecture on the meaning of the frontier in American history (12 July, 1983, American Historical Association). Though his theories on the moving frontier conditioned generations of historians, as Gregory Nobles puts it, «Historians now shy away from many of the assumptions underlying Turner's concept of the frontier. The very notion of "frontier" is regarded as a cultural construct that has meaning largely in ethnocentric terms». (Gregory Nobles, «Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800», in *Williams and Mary Quarterly*, vol. XLVI, Oct. 1989).

Each of the concepts contains – more or less overtly – elements of intolerance and/or cultural arrogance, whose roots are in European cultura and whose full realization is in the «New World»⁷. The first travelers to the Americas had to interpret a «new» reality. As Anthony Pagden observes in *The Fall of Natural Man*, something new can only be described with reference to a system which is already established and known. A wholly «new» point of reference to describe a new experience is not only «unimaginable», but would, as well, be «unintelligible»⁸. The example Pagden gives, the Kwakiutl indian in New York, is cogent:

Most of the early travellers to America were in the position of the Kwakiutl Indian whom Franz Boas sometimes invited to New York to serve him as an informant. His sole interest in the city was limited to the dwarfs, giants and bearded ladies exhibited in Times Square, to automats and the brass balls decorating staircases and banisters. The motor cars and the skyscrapers, the things he might reasonably have been expected to notice, went apparently unobserved because they had no connection with anything in *his* culture⁹.

For the Europeans the decisively new element is the wilderness. The cultural situation – and the daily existential situation – is then that of the transformation, more than the creation, of the «new» on the basis of old models and with the aid of an even older instrument, violence. In this process of transformation a relationship of harmonic violence tending to «civilize» the wilderness replaces the harmonic relationship with surrounding nature previously obtaining across these territories.

Further, the instrumental use of these concepts has made it possible to envelop the Indian in an indefinite haze, where he need not be recognized as a wholly human being. As Indians do not – or do not seem to – have those instruments which are for Europeans of the centuries of contact the classic marks of civilization (that is, writing, a strongly hierarchized and institutionalized social structure, private property), only the element of violence is perceived. And it is the violence of a blind and mute figure. It is worth noting that what Ortiz calls the «white counterpart» is always seen as entirely intelligible, for its values, motivations and interests. The indians are the accused in a «trial» which finds them perennially guilty until proved innocent. Except for a few

⁷ This ambiguous relationship with the «new», the bringing of the «new» into the compass of the «old», is already explicit in Columbus's notes. From Columbus' ship's Log, 9 January, 1493: «The day before, when the Admiral reached Rio de Oro, he said he saw three sirens rearing up well above the waves, but they were not as beautiful as they had been described; indeed their faces looked like men's faces», in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (Italian edition, Turin 1983). In so far as regards the application of Old World interpretative models, some of Todorov's considerations on Columbus are worth recalling: «[Columbus] sees that [the sirens] are not beautiful women (as was believed). But instead of concluding that sirens did not exist, he prefers correcting one prejudice with another prejudice: the sirens are not as beautiful as we are led to expect». And he adds: «He knows beforehand what he will find; real experience is not interogated – according to pre-established rules – in the search for truth, but it serves instead of illustrate a truth which [the observer] already possesses».

⁸ Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man*, Cambridge 1982.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

scholars like Francis Jennings or Anthony Wallace, this veritable «system of reversed justice» was until very recently the norm. Whenever indians moved, it was a foregone conclusion, reached before any data was collected or examined, that a «massacre» must have occurred.

The Wyoming episode of 1778 passes into history as «the surpassing horror of the Revolution». The tales of Indian atrocity narrated by whites who had survived the battle circulated rapidly throughout the region. In reality, what had happened was an engagement of forces consisting, on the one hand, of Butler's Rangers and numerous groups of indians from various nations – Seneca, Delaware, Mohawk – and local settlers and Continentals, on the other. Butler and his indian allies attacked Forty Fort on 3 July, 1778, drawing out the soldiers commanded by Col. Dennison, who were holding the fort. The Americans took heavy losses (an estimated 340 men of the 400 involved were killed in *battle*) and the next day the fort surrendered. The settlements along the Wyoming valley were destroyed and burned but no atrocities were committed. Most of the reported or presumed cruelties were attributed to Joseph Brant, Mohawk leader, who was «seen» here, there and everywhere, scalping and mutilating corpses, to the point that he was called «Monster Brant». But Brant was not present at this battle, for, on 3 July, he was at Oguaga, far north of Forty Fort, in search of food and ammunition¹⁰. Inevitably this fact casts a certain doubt upon the trustworthiness of the stories unless, of course, we accept the view that Brant is guilty in virtue of his «moral solidarity». From the diaries of participants in the battle it seems clear that the real «massacre» was wrought on the property of the settlers, their houses, animals and crops, and not on women and children. In the *Journal of Richard McGinnis*, a carpenter at the service of «His Majesty our Gracious Sovereign», enrolled under the command of Col. Butler, we can read the following (if, naturally, we concede any authenticity to a loyalist diary):

May 2, (1778). We set out for Wyoming with about 70 white volunteers and about 300 Indians of different tribes, chiefly Senecas and Delawares. With these nations Col. Butler held frequent counsels. The purport of them was chiefly to deter them if possible from murdering the women and innocent, in consequence of which they agreed not to do it on any pretence whatever, and I must say for my part they did not comit any thing of the kind to my certain knowledge¹¹.

Once the «Sons of Sedition, Schism and Rebellion», as McGinnis defines his adversaries, were defeated, there «followed a total confiscation of their property»¹² and their request that at least a few animals be left to them was denied by Butler. Comments McGinnis:

But on the whole my heart was affected for the women and children, who came after

¹⁰ For a detailed account of the movements of Brant in this period, see Isabel Thompson Kelsay, *Joseph Brant, 1743-1807, Man of Two Worlds*, Syracuse University Press, N.Y., 1984.

¹¹ «Journal of Richard McGinnis», in Commager and Morris, *The Spirit of Seventy-Six*, Bicentennial Ed., Harper Row, N.Y. 1975.

¹² *Ibidem*.

us, crying and beseeching us that we would leave them a few cows, and we told them it was against the orders of Col. Butler. However, privately we let them have 4 or 5 cows...¹³.

The American point of view is presented instead by an authoritative commentator, Hector Saint-John de Crèvecoeur. Although the famous author of the *Letters* accepts the existence of atrocities and describes the Wyoming episode in some detail declaring: «The enemy, blushed with the intoxication of success and victory, pursued them [the Americans] with the most astonishing celerity, and, being naked, had very great advantage over a people encumbered with clothes»¹⁴, or, again, «Such was their situation, while the carcasses of their friends were left behind to feed the wolves of that wilderness on which they had so long toiled, and which they had come to improve»¹⁵, he has a moment of uncertainty and surprise:

But now a scene of unexpected humanity ensues... Happily these fierce people, satisfied with the death of those who had opposed them in arms, treated the defenceless ones, the woman and children, with a degree of humanity almost hitherto unparalleled¹⁶.

Naturally, the reasons for which, aside from the political role of the English, the indians attacked the settlements along that frontier, are not considered in themselves. The same situation holds true for other episodes like the «massacre» at Cherry Valley in the same year¹⁷, where the fact that it is a reply to American massacres in the indian towns of Oguaga and Unadilla is not mentioned. On the other hand, the model was already consolidated: «Pontiac's Conspiracy» of 1763 became famous as a plot organized by the Ottawa chief to destroy innocent and peaceful white settlers. To look beyond the «official» reading consacrated by Parkman in the nineteenth century and transmitted by tradition, we have to wait until Wallace (1972) for a balanced look at the question. Wallace states that «Pontiac himself had not actually organized a pan-Indian uprising»¹⁸ and that, in any case, the general feeling of hostility towards the English and the colonials living in the area derived from the increasingly aggressive occupation of territories where the various indian nations had always lived and where their towns dominated the landscape.

A redefinition of the concepts listed, necessarily implies as well a way of

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Hector Saint-John de Crèvecoeur, *Sketches of 18th Century America*, Yale, New Haven, 1925.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*. It is worth noting that Crèvecoeur's desperation regards, too, the fact the wilderness «so long toiled» and «improved» will become once again wilderness.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ In November of 1778 the English and their indians attacked Cherry Valley, a group of old settlements founded in 1739. While the English engaged the soldiers in the fort, the indians, mostly Seneca, laid waste the settlements, killing women and children as well as men. Very few recall that, on the occasion, Brand did his best to avoid the massacre, but was unable to effectively stem the will to vengeance of the Seneca who had previously been object of attacks in which their families were massacred. See, I. Thomson Kelsay, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1972. Wallace affords a more detached view of the battles involving indians and «whites» of which we have given a few indications, as well as the others which took place during the revolution.

writing history which is different from that which led to their formulation in the first place. One of the central problems is the aura of universality attributed to key words.

Take «Democracy»: many words are spent on it, but what is in fact the pattern of reference? Is it Greek or Jacksonian democracy? Is it the Iroquois or the modern bourgeois version? Thus during centuries the term «Democracy» is transformed into a universal concept which, in fact, each speaker adapts to his own feelings and context. In a sense, universality is privatized.

The concept of «violence», too, has been universalized. But the question of what violence is, is still open. Are the savages violent because they are savages, while the civil or civilized are not characterized by violent behavior? Is violence a biological characteristic or a social one, which develops in particular historico-political conditions?

To better understand the problem of violence in the revolutionary period, it is necessary to refer to the theoretical core cited above. The combination of those elements brings to the confrontation between Savages and Civilized: for the first it is a battle for the preservation of their territory, for the latter it is a battle to conquer the same territory.

In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin writes:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness – the rogues, adventures, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history¹⁹.

«They tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness»: therefore, if on the one hand the wilderness is the negative symbol, which, as we have seen, includes the Indian, on the other hand it coincides with the glorification of violence for the control of the wilderness, which is almost an ideological violence. This transformation requires the use of violence to win the intrinsic violence of the wilderness, and that violence becomes the «natural» means for the control of nature. All of the cited concepts are inevitably intertwined with that of violence, as is, for example that of the frontier: the idea of America as an immense territory offering unlimited opportunities to strong, ambitious and confident individuals who want to succeed. The Indians are not included in this vision. Slotkin writes:

¹⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn., 1973.

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience²⁰.

At this point, the old equation Savage-violence fails, and we see violence as a perpetual instrument of domination and power of the so-called civilized populations.

The relationship with nature is different in savages and settlers, and this is reflected in their respective approach to violence. The savages have a qualitative vision of nature, while the settlers' is quantitative, instrumental. The obsession about the control of the wilderness, consisting in «impenetrable forests, wild beasts, warlike peoples who are cruel and treacherous and Stone Age»²¹ is emblematic of a vision implying control and dominion as the sole approach to «otherness». In 1933 Luther Standing Bear wrote in *Land of the Spotted Eagle*:

Only to the White man was nature a «wilderness» and only to him was the land «infested» with «wild» animals and savage people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it «wild» for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was for us the «Wild West» began²².

Analysing the diaries, unusually numerous, of the soldiers and officers who participated in the Sullivan campaign against the Iroquois confederation in 1799²³, we can see that violence is an intrinsic part of the daily life of these people. It is, of course, the systematic instrument of destruction of crops standing in the fields, of the enemy's stores, homes and possessions; the orders Sullivan moves under are Washington's own and they are explicit: «to lay waste all the settlements around... that the country may not be merely overrun but destroyed»²⁴.

The hearts of the various diarists beat only for the beauty of the nature before them which one day will no longer be a wilderness. On September 16, 1779, Lt. Robert Parker writes:

But here let us leave the busy army for a moment and suffer our imaginations to Run at large through these delightful wilds, & figure to ourselves the opening prospects of future greatness which we may reasonably suppose is not far distant, &

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Allan Nevins-Henry S. Commager, *Storia degli Stati Uniti*, Einaudi, Torino, 1960.

²² Cited in Ortiz, *Indians in American History*, *op. cit.*

²³ Most of these diaries are published in *Journals of the Military Expedition of Major General John Sullivan against the Six Nations of Indians in 1779 with records of Centennial Celebrations*, ed. by Frederick Cook, Knapp, Peck and Thomsom Printers, Auburn, N.Y., 1887.

²⁴ *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscripts Sources, 17445-1799*, ed. by John C. Fitzpatrick. See also Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*.

that we may yet behold with a pleasing admiration those deserts that have so long been the habitation of beasts of prey & a safe asylum for our savage enemies, converted into fruitful fields, covered with all the richest productions of agriculture, amply rewarding the industrious husbandman by a golden harvest; the spacious plains abounding with flocks & herds to supply his necessary wants. These Lakes & Rivers that have for ages past rolled in sacred silence along their wonted course, unknown to Christian nations, produce spacious cities & gilded spires, rising on their banks, affording a safe retreat for the virtuous few that disdains to live in affluence at the expense of their liberties. The fish too, that have so long enjoyed a peaceful habitation in these transparent regions, may yet become subservient to the inhabitants of this delightful country²⁵.

Parker is the only diarist to record a personal thought on the discovery of the body of Lt. Thomas Boyd, killed in an ambush into which he had fallen together with Sgt. Michael Parker and two indian guides, an Oneida and a Stockbridge. Only this latter indian managed to escape alive; the others were found dead and atrociously maimed. Comments Parker of Boyd:

Thus died a good citizen, an agreeable friend and a gallant soldier – Inspired with every Heroe's virtue he fell a victim to their savage barbarity in defence of the injured rights of mankind²⁶.

The other diarists conserve a «military» detachment in presenting this and any other act of violence which they practice or suffer. It is interesting, in this sense, to note what Lt. William Barton enters in his diary on 30 August, 1779:

Monday, 30th – At the request of Maj. Piatt, sent out a small party to look for some of the dead Indians – returned without finding them. Toward noon they found them and skinned two of them from their hips down for boot legs; one pair for the Major the other for myself²⁷.

This episode of revolutionary cobblery requires no comment, but it is worth mentioning that the diaries also make it clear that the practice of scalping was not an indian exclusive but rather was widely in use among the soldiers with Sullivan as well, who took the scalps of the indians they killed as a matter of course. The impression one derives is that violence upon men and things is less important in their mental scheme than the image of dominance over nature that they are realizing through it upon both.

The Boyd episode is mentioned in the diaries of other officers participating in Sullivan's campaign, such as Erkuries Beatty and William Barton, but also in one of the best known «captivity narratives»: Mary Jemison's²⁸. This narrative is the story (first published in 1824) of a white woman, who, having

²⁵ *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. XXVIII, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1904.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ «Journal of Lieut. William Barton» in *Journals of Sullivan Expedition*, *op. cit.* The same episode may be found in the diaries of other officers.

²⁸ James Seaver, ed. by, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (1824), Corinth Books, N.Y., 1961.

been captured by Shawnees, had been given to a Seneca nation family which had adopted her. Despite the occasions offered her to return to «her people», this woman decides to live with her indian family and friends. Jemison's story is told in the first person and, looking beyond its romanticized narrative format, is the source of interesting considerations which the protagonist makes about indian life and the acts of violence which she has seen, both those carried out by her new people and those perpetrated by her people of origin:

Notwithstanding all that has been said against the Indians, in consequence of their cruelties to their enemies – cruelties that I have witnessed, and had abundant proof of – it is a fact that they are naturally kind, tender, and peaceable towards their friends, and strictly honest; and that those cruelties have been practised, only upon their enemies, according to their idea of justice²⁹.

Though definite efforts have been made by the various transcribers and editors to give as bloody an image as possible of the indian protagonists, both male and female³⁰, we can derive a view which is at once much more realistic and balanced from the words and the explicit affirmations of Jemison herself which appear through the veil of the presentation. This woman is an eye-witness of the whole pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period; but she has lived that experience from the other side of the «frontier», enduring with the indian populations and as one of them every phase of the dramatic invasion of their territories.

In some sense, indeed, two narrative voices are present in the text, Mary Jemison's – at once «up front» and stylized – and the editor's, attempting, through the stylization to put across his interpretation of the facts and the emotions presented. But it is principally from Jemison's voice that we receive information on Sullivan's devastations; his sweep takes few prisoners, but leaves the territory in such desolation that on their return, Jemison says, «we found that there was not a mouthful of any kind of sustenance left, not even enough to keep a child one day from perishing with hunger»³¹. In a phrase, Jemison synthesizes quite brilliantly the relationship between *savage* and *civil*: though she admits her initial reluctance at the idea of marrying an indian before her first marriage, she concludes:

But his good nature, generosity, tenderness and friendship towards me, soon gained my affection; and, strange as it may seem, I loved him!³².

The images we find ourselves left with are not only far from the classic stereotypes, but introduce an element for reflection: the violence practiced by

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Although the only image of the indian woman is the «squaw», an almost asexual figure, the editor adds a feminine touch to torture, as if the cruelty of the male characters presented were not enough, telling us of the eagerness of one of Jemison's indian sisters provoked by an execution which was to take place in the village.

³¹ Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, op. cit.

³² *Ibidem*.

the Indians Jemison presents is part of a code of morality and justice different from that of Euro-Americans. The heart of the question is the acceptance of the fact that the «savages» can have a moral code and a common law. Their violence was part of community life but not in the sense that it was normal to torture people to express or reestablish power; the terms of discourse were entirely «other», nor did they move from the enlightened rationalism which characterized the Euro-Americans³³.

Fundamentally, indians lacked the concept of violence as linked to the imposition of power. If we think about the Indian ceremonies which contain acts of violence, we seem to find immediate confirmation of the «savage nature» of the indian, according to our cultural terms of reference (even George Catlin who rendered due dignity to the «lords of the forest» in his travels and letters, has a moment of uncertainty when he sees the Mandan sun ceremony³⁴). But on further reflection, it becomes evident that this is a personal, ritual violence, of fundamental importance for the life of the individual within the community, and that we can find its equivalent in Christian tradition with different intent. No one thinks of calling «savage» the ascetic who donned a hair shirt for penance, though the personal violence involved is quite similar to that practiced in some indian religious ceremonies.

The «captivity narratives» are also interesting for the political vision of violence they reflect. The protagonists of their «torture stories» are often white, either French or English, depending on the point of view of who is gathering the evidence. Thus, we see Frenchmen participating with their indian allies in cannibalistic banquets, or English directing the most horrifying torture ceremonies³⁵. Their participation in the violent act is especially significant from a political point of view, because they belong to the civilized world. In a sense, the indians are «defrauded» even of their most negative image.

Thus violence, or its image, appears not only as an instrument of destruction, but as a political one. Mary Jemison's narrative confirms this. The episode of the murder of lieutenant Boyd, mentioned above, appears in the officers' diaries and in Jemison's story. The officers, Parker excepted, recorded it in a cold, detached manner: they report that Boyd's body was found headless, and that he had probably been tortured rather than simply killed.

Jemison is detached, but less cold. Pity for «poor Boyd» is expressed. But to Mary Jemison's story an appendix is added, written by John Salmon, a

³³ In an editor's note to the 1898 edition of the Jemison narrative, William Pryor Letchworth writes: «The torture of Lieutenant Boyd by the Iroquois was inflicted while the Indians were highly exasperated and filled with a spirit of revenge at the destruction of their houses, crops, and means of subsistence by Sullivan's army; while the whites of San Domingo, inspired by the baser motive of avarice, committed in cold blood the barbarities described». For further comments, see Pierluigi D'Oro, ed. by, *Una donna bianca tra gli Indiani. La vita di Mary Jemison scritta da James E. Seaver, 1743-1823*, Lubrina editore, Bergamo, 1991.

³⁴ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of North American Indians*, (1844), Dover, N.Y. 1973.

³⁵ See Richard Vanderbeets, *The Indian Captivity Narrative. An American Genre*, University Press of America, 1984.

respectable old gentlemen who lived in Groveland, Livingston County, New York.

It is a specification on Boyd's death: we read that he had been overtaken by a group composed of 500 Indians guided by Brant and 500 rangers, led by the «infamous Butler», and taken prisoner with some of his men. The Indian chief, Brant, assured him that his life would be spared, but after their arrival in the Indian village Brant was called away for a few hours, and Boyd was left at Butler's mercy. As Boyd refused to answer his questions, Butler had him tortured and then killed in the worst possible way. Thus the rite of violence is performed by the Englishman – and in the most horrifying way – not by the Indian. Butler is an infamous civilized man, not a savage³⁶.

In Jemison's narrative there is another episode, that of Allen, a tory, who participated in Indian raids. Allen was a ruthless man, capable of totally gratuitous violent acts. One morning he burst into a settler's house where he found the sleeping man with his wife and infant child. The man jumped out of bed trying to defend himself and his family, but Allen killed him at once, then cut his head and threw it on the bed where the terrified woman held the child to her breast. Allen grabbed the child and holding him by the feet hurled him at a doorjamb. He then left the house.

If, therefore, a «savage violence» and a «civilized violence» can be distinguished, their protagonists often exchange roles and stereotypes.

Brutal violence is not aimed only at English or other enemies. In the diaries of Luigi Castiglioni, an Italian traveler of the second half of the eighteenth century, we find both colonists and American soldiers acting ruthlessly. Inside a fort a *Sachem* was killed to avenge a man presumably killed by savages, even if the commanding officer was opposed to this act, and present. The nature of this violence does not greatly differ from that of Indian executions. In that period the situation in the colonies had so deteriorated that Castiglioni writes:

When the war between England and the Colonies began, the Savages did not know how they should treat the Americans, that is, if as friends or as foes; or whether after the peace the new Republicans would fortify the borders, respect the rights of those Nations, and seeking their friendship, contract a useful and permanent alliance with them. But in this instance too their conduct went against their interests, because internally lacerated, they allowed new wood farmers to settle along the frontiers without regulation, those farmers being mostly evil people. They so provoked the

³⁶ In reality the whole «Boyd» episode is vague. The only thing certain is that Thomas Boyd was captured, with three other men, tortured and killed. The «facts» reported by John Salmon in appendix to the Jemison narrative do not agree with those presented in the Brant biography by Kelsey. Here it seems that Butler interrogated both Parker and Boyd, from whom he learned that Sullivan had about 5,000 men, supplies for a month, and would not, therefore, push beyond the Genesee. Butler informed Col. Mason Bolton, commander at Fort Niagara, adding that Boyd was a very intelligent man. At this point it was decided not to engage the body of the army, and the Indians released their anger on the two white prisoners, torturing them brutally and, incidentally, avenging the death of an old Tuscarora. Butler never said or wrote a word about what he had seen, then or years later. See, I. Thompson-Kelsay, *op. cit.* Jemison gives still another version of the story in which the torture of one of the Indian guides is central.

Savages, stealing their *Canot*, harrassing their wives, and trespassing into lands that had not been ceded to them, that often the Natives avenged those wrongs massacring entire families³⁷.

For Castiglioni violence becomes the sole and almost justifiable means to which the Indians can resort to defend their lands and dignity.

To conclude I would like to cite the Italian translator's note to an essay by Walter Benjamin, *For the critique of violence*, where he specifies:

The German term for «violence» (Gewalt) also means «authority» and «power». In each case we have translated the word into Italian with the prevailing meaning, but the reader must keep in mind that at the basis of these different expressions there is, in the original, one term and one concept³⁸.

The essential difference between «Indian violence and non in the revolutionary context» rests exactly in this identification of violence, power and authority. In every historical period the problem of violence is indissolubly linked to the exercise of power. As the Indians lack a notion of constituted power or of the fight for power, their violence has connotations which are almost exclusively ritual and later defensive of their territory and lives. The Euro-American, as has often been said, put their actions in the context of the birth of a nation that will become a world power, or of a «sacred experiment»; the fight for independence is a fight for power, the independence is not only independence from the motherland, but from the wilderness and all its components. It is a fight for the creation of a legal state over a natural state, and, as Walter Benjamin wrote, «The creation of positive law is creation of power, and therefore an act that is an immediate manifestation of violence»³⁹.

³⁷ Luigi Castiglioni, *Viaggio negli Stati Uniti*, Giuseppe Morelli, Milano, 1790.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, «Per la critica della violenza, in *Angelus Novus*, Einaudi, Torino, 1976. This note is by Furio Jesi.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.