



# Fascism, the FBI & Native Americans

*David Barsamian interviews Ward Churchill*

**W**ard Churchill is professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Among his many books are *Fantasies of the Master Race*, *Struggle for the Land*, and *Indians Are Us?* His two new books are *Since the Predator Came* and *Draconian Measures: History of FBI Political Repression*.

*BARSAMIAN: The war in the Balkans, in the former Yugoslavia, has made the term "ethnic cleansing" quite current. Native Americans have their own experience of ethnic cleansing.*

CHURCHILL: "Ethnic cleansing" is a relatively polite euphemism for just plain, ordinary old genocide. Genocide is not unique. It's pervasive throughout history. Native America, both north and south, experienced a very sustained and incredibly impactful process of genocide, extending over a period of three to five hundred years, depending on which locale you're talking about.

*When we take the hemisphere, North and South, various numbers are given of indigenous peoples that were here before the Europeans, the "predators," as you call them, came. What is a minimum-maximum figure?*

I won't even bother with a minimum figure. These accrue from official sources such as the Smithsonian Institution and are ridiculously low. The method of manipulating the data to make them so low has been amply revealed by Francis Jennings and others over a fairly long period of time. At present, the best estimates that I'm aware of bracket it at somewhere between 100 and 150 million people, hemispherically speaking. That is circa 1500.

*And after the predator?*

Approximately 97 to 98 percentile liquidation of population by approximately 1890.

*Adolph Hitler took note of the treatment of Native Americans.*

Hitler took note of Native Americans, indigenous people of the Americas, specifically the U.S. and Canada. He used the treatment of native people, the policies and processes that were imposed upon them, as a model for what he called *Lebensraumpolitik*, the politics of living space. In essence, Hitler took the notion of a drive from east to west, clearing the land as the invading population went and resettling it with Anglo-Saxon stock. He drove from west to east into Russia, displacing, relocating, dramatically shifting or liquidating populations to clear the land and replace it with what he called "superior breeding stock," meaning Germanic peoples. He was very conscious of the fact that he was basing his policies on the prior experience of the Anglo-American population, or Nordic population, as he called it, in the area north of the Rio Grande River.

*In any discussion of indigenous peoples, Native Americans, the question must be asked, Who is an Indian?*

An Indian is who an indigenous community says is an Indian. An Indian is an abstract concept anyway. It's something that was created by Europeans to define a population that they were encountering. It's not, as is commonly assumed, that the first European adventurers to wash up on the beach in the Caribbean thought that they had encountered the peoples of India. India

wasn't even called India at the time, it was called Hindustan. But if you follow the Italian, and Christopher Columbus was an Italian, presumably, recording things in Italian, they felt that they had encountered the *in Dios* people who were with or next to God. That generic term has been applied to all the indigenous peoples of the Americas ever since.

*How do you define yourself?*

I define myself as an indigenous person or a person of indigenous descent. I'm of mixed heritage both racially and culturally, as are most people at this point. There's been quite a degree of hybridization. Indigenous peoples are nations defining their membership as any other nation. The practice was always that between nations, between, say the Mohawks and the Abcnakis, in cases of marriage or adoption or whatever, that there could be a naturalization of citizenry. Indians naturalized citizens between groups, and once there were non-Indians, racially speaking, coming into the hemisphere, they began to naturalize representatives of these non-Indian races as being members of their polity. Those people who were naturalized became citizen members of those nations. Were they Indians or not? Are we using a racial definition here to describe a national polity, or do we use a political definition? I would argue that unless we are going to in turn mimic the Nazis or the South Africans and try to define a constituency in purely racial terms, we would have to acknowledge that there is not a strict biological or racial definition of Indianness. It's generally assumed that there will be some lineal descent. We count in terms of lineage. Kinship is not biology. If an American Indian woman marries you and she is of a matrilineal society, your children will be American Indians, although racially they will only be half so. They will be full members of that society. That's the traditional way.

*When did this "blood quantum" business begin? Is that an invention of the Bureau of Indian Affairs?*

I think the points of origin or inception vary throughout the hemisphere. You could say that 500 years ago was the basis of blood quantum in Ibero-America. But in Anglo-America, while there was some preoccupation with it, it was not formalized until the passage of the General Allotment Act, mid-1880s. At that point they began to define Indian as being someone who was demonstrably and documentably of at least one-quarter by quantum blood indigenous in a given group. You couldn't be an eighth Cheyenne and an eighth Arapaho and be an Indian. You had to be a quarter Cheyenne or a quarter Arapaho or hopefully a

quarter and a quarter. The reason for this was quite clear. They were identifying Indians for purposes of allotting them individual parcels of land in the existing reservations at that point. If they ran out of Indians identifiable as such, then the rest of the land would be declared surplus. So it was clearly in the interests of the government to create a definition of Indianness that would minimize the number of Indians that were available. It was an economic motivation for the application of this genetic criteria to Indianness in the first place. It's become increasingly so ever since.

*In April I went to Pine Ridge for the first time. I sort of knew what to expect, but still it left me with a great sense of sadness.*

Sadness I think would be an appropriate emotion, but I would also expect that anger would be equally appropriate, or some combination of the two. It's visiting a Third World country, except it's not the Third World. This is a Fourth World, a host world upon which the Third World, what used to be the Second World, and the First World are built. I'm not sure what's left of that "socialist" Second World anymore. But at least the first and third.

*I believe Pine Ridge in South Dakota is the poorest county in the U.S.*

Shannon County was the poorest county in the U.S. I believe, at this point, for 27 of the last 30 years.

*There is tremendous unemployment.*

Ninetieth percentile.

*Presumably in this new world order that's been envisioned by the contractors with America, all Native Americans need to do is, like the Italians and the Jews and the Armenians before them or after them, just pull themselves up by the bootstraps and get to work.*

Of course. Having taken away the basis for the traditional economy that would allow the American Indi-

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ans to live as well or better than any population in the world prior to the invasion, they're told to bootstrap themselves up by the very people who took their resources away from them at gun point. Ultimately, what Indians are being told and have been told all along is that all they need to do is to stop being Indians and they'll be all right.

*Leave It to Beaver.*

Leave It to Beaver. And leave me your land, by the way. Leave me your resources. Free.

*That's a compassionate thing to do.*

That's fair. That's what we call a level playing field. I hear Republicans and Libertarians and so forth talking about property rights, but they stop talking about property rights as soon as the subject of American Indians comes up, because they know full well that the basis for the very system of enterprise and profitability to which they are committed is based on theft of the resources of someone else. They are in possession of stolen property. They know it. They all know it. It's a dishonest endeavor from day one.

*And that thinking is very much informed by racism. I've been reading Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jew who spent most of World War II in an Algerian Nazi camp. Memmi identifies four essential elements of the racist attitude. The first is that the racist seizes upon a difference between himself and his victim.*

Shoe size, for example.

*The second is that the racist then generalizes that difference to all the members of the group. The third is that the racist assigns a negative value to that difference. The fourth is that the racist then justifies his or her powers of aggression over the victim on the basis of that negatively valued difference.*

The first three points, I think, are direct hits. The fourth, I think, is a little more complex, because exactly the same processes defined in the first three is applied by the dominating group to itself, only with a

positive loading of value. So it's not simply in contrast to that group which is racially oppressed or dominated, but in its own right you have an assignment of characteristics and generalizations, stereotypes and so forth, that are supposedly signifiers of superiority.

*The Indians' struggle for sovereignty has taken many turns. One was a rather obscure 1988 law that granted tribes the right to set up casinos on their land. Since then, the sound of slot machines and bingo games can be heard on reservations across the country. There's a casino boom. What are your views on this?*

My first view is one hates to concede that one might base a national economy on bingo, even though it is an appropriation of the most sacred ceremony of the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, I think I misjudged the phenomenon. I believed that the proliferation of casinos would ultimately gut the whole casino enterprise, that there couldn't possibly be that many fools out there that want to drop their money on Friday night into slot machines and enrich additional proprietors to the degree that the original proprietors had been enriched.

Apparently I was wrong. It's a limitless supply. I believe that the Oneida nation in Wisconsin will be generating \$225 million this year. The figure in Connecticut is far higher. We're talking upwards of a half billion dollars in revenues generated by a single casino enterprise.

*For the Pequots.*

Astonishing. That's generating \$150 million in taxes for Connecticut. Never mind the Pequots.

*Given what you've described about the dire economic state of Indian peoples in this country, desperate people do desperate things.*

There's clearly a utility to it. The 1988 law you referred to, however, was a Trojan horse. The Trojan horse is still there, and it's been utilized to good effect by various groups, including the Pequots.

*In what way is it a Trojan horse?*

Indians are conceded by the federal government, which is essentially an imposition on the states, a right to engage in casino enterprises, gaming enterprises, on their land base if and only if, and here's the *quid pro quo*, they conform their operations to

state gambling regulations, which effectively places the operation under state jurisdiction. American Indians are treaty peoples. They are nations in their own right. Those rights have been abused by the government of the U.S., but that doesn't mean the right goes away. It just means that the U.S. is in violation of those rights. But once Indians concede to the state a certain jurisdiction over them, they have voluntarily foreclosed upon their national sovereign rights. Placing themselves below the jurisdictional level of a state makes an American Indian nation essentially a county in that state, or, in some instances, in California in particular, essentially municipalities in Los Angeles, subparts of municipalities. That's a long way from national sovereignty.

You've got to be very careful what a *quid pro quo* is in these arrangements. American Indians desperately need revenue. They have a right to generate revenue from their land base as they see fit according to their interests and according to their customs and their values, not in accordance with the dictates and stipulations of various external governing apparatus, whether that be the federal level of the U.S. or various state levels.

*Has this view been articulated? Have you been talking about this?*

I've been talking about it, but the fact is, given the fact that the U.S. has flatly denied and suppressed the ability of Indians to exercise national sovereignty in any genuine sense, when you balance my articulation of a principle against a \$225 million cash flow, which do you think is going to win among destitute people? They're essentially buying out. Let's call it what it is. The federal government has devised a means by which it can finally buy out Indian insistence upon standing upon national sovereign rights. They're not even paying anything for it.

That's the irony of it. They're allowing Indians to do what Indians have a right to do anyway and generate revenue for themselves. In exchange for being allowed to feed themselves, they had to foreclose upon the future, the sovereignty of that future, for their children, their grandchildren, and so on.

*The American Indian Movement was formed in 1968 and did much to promote the notion of Indian rights, Indian sovereignty, and essentially pride in one's Indianness. What's the state of AIM today?*

Your assessment of what AIM managed to accomplish in the 1970s is entirely correct. Even people who are hostile to the American Indian Movement concede that that is true.

That was 20 years ago. Presently we have a group, including some bona fide founders of the American Indian Movement, in Minneapolis, Minnesota who have turned it into a corporation and this national liberation movement has been converted into a federally and corporately funded job training, housing, and counseling programs. Essentially it's an appendage of the liberal aspects of the federal government of the U.S. It takes not only its funding but its authority from there and from the laws of the state of Minnesota through its incorporation. It has expelled the remainder of the movement from itself. A very similar sort of cooptive maneuver on the part of the feds to play upon the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of people who grew up poor and cause them to act in tangible ways directly against their own in this case perceived self-interest. The people who are doing this were functioning members, for the most part, of a national liberation movement with a consciousness of what national liberation movement meant ten to twenty years ago. That's changed on the basis of cash flow.

*You were the Colorado co-director of AIM, or were you the national?*

Colorado AIM is a constituent element of what's called the Confederation of Autonomous Chapters. We do not have a national office, a national council, a central committee, a corporate structure. We have individuals who are committed to the principles that have always informed the American Indian Movement. That aspect of AIM still exists, too, but it's being sadly impaired by the confusion generated by this other group purporting to speak on behalf of everyone and to do so on the basis of a subsidy provided by the Honeywell Corporation to the tune of \$3.3 million per year and by the federal government in excess of \$4 million. Frankly the rest of us can't compete with that. We never really wanted to com-

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pete with it in that sense. But in this case, as in many others, it's what Bob Dylan said, "Money doesn't talk. It swears."

*A lot of your academic work has focused on the history of AIM and the FBI COINTELPRO operation, the counterintelligence program in the 1960s and 1970s. You've written an introduction to a book by former FBI agent Wesley Swearingen called FBI Secrets. Swearingen writes: "COINTELPRO is still in operation today but under a different code name. The operation is*

*no longer placed on paper, where it can be discovered through the release of documents under the Freedom of Information Act." Is Swearingen on the mark with that comment?*

He's very definitely on the mark. He has reason to know. Wesley Swearingen is not a leftist. He's not a radical. He's still an FBI agent, but he's an FBI agent who actually believes in the rhetoric of the FBI. This is a guy who engaged in systematic burglaries, by his own count 150-odd burglaries in a five-year period of time in Chicago, and that's just Chicago. He was also posted to other cities and acknowledges that he participated in similar activities there. He engaged in a number of illegalities that would make burglary seem tame by comparison and is fairly forthcoming about it. He can be fairly forthcoming about it because no FBI agent has ever served one minute of jail time for any illegalities that the Church Committee and other official entities, as well as a number of unofficial perspectives, have recorded. These are documented and unquestionable. No one's going to jail for criminal activity in the Bureau that occurs today. We know COINTELPRO has continued. We know COINTELPRO continued in the 1980s against CISPES and almost 2,000 other domestic organizations that were in opposition to the Bush-Reagan Central America policies.

*John Trudell has called it the "Federal Bureau of Intimidation."*

Or "irritation."

*It's kind of interesting that Attorney General Reno and FBI Director Louis Freeh are whining about not having enough policing powers, that the FBI needs more officers, more equipment, more surveillance, more infiltration, etc. How is that playing out?*

It's playing out as it's played out throughout the history of the FBI, for the last 70 years it's been a recurrent theme. The most usual scenario is that the propaganda wing of the FBI, which is the most proliferate entity within the Bureau ...

*The media campaign.*

The media manipulators. They don't actually run newspapers. They simply control reporters and feed the information and write the copy that appears under bylines of various noted journalists and so on over the years. Sometimes in collaboration with other governmental entities, sometimes solo. This is done to generate public hysteria, the antidote to which is supposed to be increased power, allocation of resources and so forth to the various police agencies, primarily the FBI, and a corresponding diminishment, voluntarily, on the part of the citizens of fundamental Constitutional civil rights. We see a repetition for the umpteenth time of precisely that theme.

It has gone on as long as there has been a Federal Bureau of Investigation inside the U.S. Counterinsurgency warfare has been waged. All manner of illegal operations have been waged. The FBI has engaged in murder, in bombing, and in a number of lesser activities. I think those are probably the top two.

It interests me the spin that's always put on by the so-called responsible or mainstream media to this. It was suggested by certain of the militia commanders around the country, this right-wing phenomenon that's occurring right now, that it should be at least considered that the FBI was an active participant in what occurred at Oklahoma City. I don't think they said the same thing with regard to the World Trade Center bombing, but they should have. Not because I know that the FBI was directly involved in either of those events, both of which are being used as a pretext and justification primarily for a whole new raft of so-called counterterrorist legislation, vastly increasing the latitude of operation in the political sphere for federal agents and radically diminishing the rights of citizens under the Constitution of the United States.

But the question should have been asked. The mainstream media say it's irresponsible to even pose it. On its face, the FBI would not do that. I say that's the height of irresponsibility. On record the FBI not

only could have, it has done comparable things in the past. They are deliberately glossing over the fact that the FBI employed an individual in New England during the late 1960s and early 1970s named Tommy Tongyai to go around and orchestrate bombings on university campuses to justify crackdowns on student organizers campus by campus. They're glossing over, ignoring, pretending that Cotton Smith, an infiltrator in the Black Panther Party, an employee of the FBI, did not orchestrate the Marin County disaster where Jonathan Jackson went in and attempted to, as he put it, "liberate" several prisoners and had intended to liberate his brother George at the same time during a court hearing in northern California, an incident which resulted in the death of a judge, Jonathan Jackson, and several other individuals. It was a police setup. The whole thing was coordinated by an FBI provocateur.

They're glossing over the fact that there were paid FBI informants in the group that went to UCLA and gunned down two leaders of the Black Panther party right there on campus in Campbell Hall in 1969. The FBI has done these sorts of things.

It's irresponsible not to talk about them in the context of the FBI's demand for increased powers as a result of cases in which, among other things, it was known that there was an FBI infiltrator in the group that bombed the World Trade Center for a year prior to the bombing. What exactly was this individual's role? I don't know. But I do know that the question should be posed, and I'm posing it here and now.

*Two of the major political organizations in the late 1960s and the 1970s that we've mentioned, the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther movement, seem to have been specifically targeted by the Bureau to essentially eliminate it as a possible threat to state power.*

The term that is employed by the Bureau is "neutralize." That is their term. The objective of a counterintelligence operation is not to apprehend people in commission of criminal acts. It is not to engage an investigation of potential or suspected criminal wrongdoing. It is not to bring about prosecutions, convictions and incarcerations. It is to neutralize the target. How do you neutralize the target?

As Malcolm X would have put it, by any means necessary. That can be by discrediting them through distribution of false information, by intimidating them. It can be by bringing false charges against them, fabricating evidence to effect incarceration. This was done to Geronimo Pratt, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, and other Black Panthers, or Leonard Peltier of the American Indian Movement. It can be through,

ultimately, directly assassinating them, as was done with Fred Hampton, with Sam Naper, with Fred Bennett, with about 40 other Panthers during the early 1970s, or as happened to, through use of surrogates on the Pine Ridge reservation, at least 69 members and supporters of the American Indian Movement between 1973 and 1976.

When we talk about FBI counterintelligence operations, we are talking about the most consistent projection or application of their resources throughout the history of the Bureau. That is what they are there for. They are a duly constituted, highly refined political police entity, and they have been here for the last 75 years.

*This term "neutralize" appears in a CIA manual to the contras in the 1980s where they are advised to neutralize the Sandinistas. That's pretty unambiguous, what they had in mind.*

The CIA manual for export is echoing what is already being done domestically. The U.S., and let's get this clear, is not in danger of becoming a police state. It's not a situation that if we continue along present trends we will become a police state. We are and have been a police state since at least 1950, and it's about time people screwed their heads on a little straighter, looked that matter in the eye, and begin to figure out what it is we need to do about it, not to prevent it, but to correct it.

*You've painted a pretty grim picture of realities in the U.S. today. What can people do?*

I think the first thing, and the only thing, people can do to turn this around is to look it squarely in the face and stop lying to themselves. Stop pretending fascism is conservatism. Stop pretending incarceration is freedom. Stop pretending expropriation is somehow a natural entitlement.

You've got to look the dominant paradigm squarely in the face and stand it on its head in order to make sense of the world in terms that allow for any sort of constructive change. It begins right there. Z

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