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2008

In the Form of a Longhouse: Haudenosaunee Political Philosophy and Social Contract Theory

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ABSTRACT: This essay presents the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (sometimes referred to as the Iroquois League or Five Nations) as part of an alternative social contract theory, contrasting the social and political institutions and norms of the Five Nations with those proposed by Enlightenment-era philosophers. Although the oral history of the Haudenosaunee describes a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ prior to the founding of the Confederacy, the Five Nations entered into, and constantly renewed, a substantially different ‘social contract’ than that theorized by Hobbes, Rousseau, or Locke. Because these differences reveal a unique understanding of human nature and potential, undergirded by distinctly Haudenosaunee political and moral principles, the Confederacy constitutes a new and under-examined approach to – as well as a living critique of – social contract theory.

“Thy message is good,” said the woman; but a word is nothing until it is given form and set to work in the world. What form shall this message take when it comes to dwell among men?”

“It will take the form of a longhouse,” replied Deganawidah, “in which there are many fires, one for each family, yet all live as one household [...]”

~The White Roots of Peace

INTRODUCTION

Social contract theory, defined as “the view that a person’s moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement between them to form society,”¹ has wielded enormous influence on social, moral, and political thought. The majority of that influence has flowed from the work of three Enlightenment-era philosophers: Thomas Hobbes², John Locke³, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁴ The social contract theories of these thinkers involve

¹ Celeste Friend, “Social Contract Theory,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, U of Tennessee at Martin, 2004, 10 February 2005 <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/soc-cont.htm>> par. 1.

² Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) envisioned a feral state of nature, a “war of every man against every man”, which was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 403), because people are essentially selfish, suspicious, vain, and greedy. In order to escape the state of nature, people voluntarily surrender their sovereignty to an absolute monarch – who cannot be challenged – empowered to protect and preserve human life and social order.

³ John Locke (1632-1704) asserted that the state of nature was one of perfect freedom and equality, and that people in such a state were motivated to some extent by a natural morality (‘natural law principles’). Civil society, then, is the “remedy for the inconveniences of the state of nature,” (Locke 464) in which life, liberty, and property are all protected

the justification of social and political institutions by way of theorizing what persons in a pre-civil society condition would freely choose to found. In their work this ‘state of nature’ is, if not a thought experiment, at least an abstraction or semi-anthropological best guess. Differing views of what this state would have constituted, including descriptions of human nature therein, influence the political, social, and moral systems the specific theory produces. The principal congruence between social contract theories and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy lies in this description of a transition from a ‘state of nature’ into a full-fledged society, and in the use of this transition to both inspire and justify subsequent social, moral, and political action. The Confederacy would qualify as an ‘alternative social contract’ on these grounds; however, it is a ‘contract’ only in the sense that it involved an agreement to join together in bringing forth certain institutions and norms. Because the differences between Euro-American and Haudenosaunee contract theory reveal a distinctly Haudenosaunee (and perhaps fuller) understanding of human nature and potential, the Confederacy – its leadership, constitution, and the story of its founding – constitutes not only a unique and under-examined approach to, but also a living critique of social contract theory.

BACKGROUND:

THE HAUDENOSAUNEE CONFEDERACY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy⁵ is a socio-political entity that originally consisted of five distinct, sovereign peoples: the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk nations.⁶

by a government empowered to safeguard the interests of the people. The government is the servant of the people, who retain their sovereignty under the social contract.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) theorized that the state of nature was one in which man was essentially content, innocent, and free, though alone and lacking intelligence or refinement. Civilization introduced inequality and jealousy, though it also held the promise of greater human achievement. The ideal society, in which human potential is realized, is characterized by social cohesion brought about by unanimous consent to the social contract, and driven by the execution of the general will (the shared, best interests) of all. In this case, realization of the social contract involves the alienation of each person, together with his rights, to the whole community.

⁵ The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is sometimes referred to as the Iroquois League or the Five Nations.

⁶ A sixth nation, the Tuscarora, joined in 1722, after which the Confederacy came to be known as the Six Nations. John Brown Childs, “Transcommunitary: From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect in the Context of

At the time of European contact the Haudenosaunee occupied some twenty-five million acres of land, stretched out between the territories now known as Quebec, Tennessee, Vermont, and Ohio,⁷ with a population estimated to have been anywhere from the tens to the hundreds of thousands.⁸ Recent investigations place the Confederacy's founding early in the twelfth century – and it still functions today.⁹ Many historians and anthropologists (in addition to the Haudenosaunee themselves) assert that it was precisely the structure and functioning of the Confederacy that allowed its member nations to persist in the face of myriad and profound threats. John Mohawk writes that “[t]he Haudenosaunee were powerful out of all proportion to their numbers because they were able to manage complex alliances based on persuasive visions of reality which very large numbers of people shared.”¹⁰

The *Deganawidah Epic* tells the story of the founding of the Confederacy. It relates that during a time of tremendous strife, a Huron man known as Deganawidah¹¹ communicated a plan to end conflict and bring forth a new form of governance. Securing agreement among the Five Nations only after five years of ceaseless effort, Deganawidah oversaw the founding of the Great Council of fifty chiefs at the geographical centre of a new, confederate entity.¹² The *Gayanashagowa*¹³ is the Haudenosaunee constitution, an oral tradition that takes over a week to relate, codified in several wampum belts now in the keeping of the Onondaga.¹⁴ With the *Deganawidah Epic* as its inspiration, it goes on to define the structure, function, ceremonies, and

Cultural Diversity – Learning from Native American Philosophies with a Focus on the Haudenosaunee,” *Social Justice* 25 (4, 1998): 154.

⁷ Mohawk Nation/Akwesasne (Akwesasne Notes), *A Basic Call to Consciousness* (Summertown, TN: Book Publishing Company, 1978) par. 1.

⁸ Further, much of that land was settled, cultivated, or otherwise occupied, meaning that the communities of the Five Nations were in frequent contact. Doug George-Kanentio, “How Much Land did the Iroquois Possess?,” *Akwesasne Notes New Series* 1(3&4, 1995): 61.

⁹ Bruce E. Johansen, “Dating the Iroquois confederacy,” *Akwesasne Notes New Series* 1(3&4, 1995): 62.

¹⁰ John Mohawk, “Origins of Iroquois Political Thought,” *New Voices from the Longhouse*, ed. J. Buschac (Greenfield, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1989): 224-5.

¹¹ Literally, ‘The Peacemaker.’

¹² Paul A. Wallace, *The White Roots of Peace* (1946; Sarnac Lake, NY: The Chauncy Press, 1986): 32.

¹³ Literally, ‘The Great Law.’

¹⁴ “What is the Great Law of Peace?” *Haudenosaunee: People Building a Longhouse*, n.d., 1 February 2005, <http://sixnations.buffnet.net/Great_Law_of_Peace/> par. 1.

protocols of the Haudenosaunee.¹⁵ Taken together, these foundational documents “simultaneously reflected the material circumstances and history of the Five Nations, constituted the Iroquois interpretation of reality, and represented Iroquois action and belief.”¹⁶ Enshrined in these narratives, the Peacemaker’s efforts to realize a unique political philosophy constitute the very point at which the Five Nations emerged from a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ into a new social and political form: the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.¹⁷

THE AGENT AT THE HEART OF THE CONTRACT:

THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL AND THE RATIONAL COLLECTIVE

In the view of the Haudenosaunee, man was basically a benign creature, endowed with the power of rational thought, the need for autonomy, and the desire for peace. Each person was particular but interconnected, and all people were equally endowed with the potential for balanced thought and action, encompassing both reason and emotion. Thus the agent of the Haudenosaunee ‘social contract’ is not an atomised ‘citizen’ but an autonomous human being *in place*, housed within a rational collective. A “collective ability to think rationally,”¹⁸ often referred to as “linking [people] together in one mind,”¹⁹ is found throughout Haudenosaunee political and social thought, and is perhaps the most important idea in both the founding and functioning of the Confederacy.²⁰ In

¹⁵ The ‘Great Binding Law’ delineates the following: the structure and function of the Grand Council; the duties of chiefs at both the confederate and national level; the international clan system and role of the Clan Mothers; laws pertaining to adoption, emigration, secession, and treason; rights of Haudenosaunee peoples and foreign nations; powers of war; and many specific protocols and ceremonies.

¹⁶ Matthew Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace: Iroquois-European Encounters in Seventeenth-Century America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993): 114.

¹⁷ The use of the past tense in this essay is deliberate, as the analysis herein principally addresses a particular point in the history of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. This usage is in no way meant to imply that the Haudenosaunee people, or their traditions, philosophies, or culture, are relics of the past. It is for this same reason that the following paragraphs mention the ‘Five Nations,’ rather than the ‘Six Nations,’ as the Tuscarora did not join the Confederacy until several hundred years after its founding.

¹⁸ Mohawk, *Origins* 226.

¹⁹ Robert A. Williams, “Linking arms together: Multicultural constitutionalism, a North American Indigenous vision of law and peace,” *California Law Review* (July 1994): 1013.

²⁰ Mohawk, *Origins* 223.

the *Deganawidah Epic*, reason is synonymous with the power to create peace.²¹

Although the Haudenosaunee place a very high premium on reason, they have an unusual definition of the concept: rationality is exhibited by all of creation, while man, alone, has the capacity for irrationality.²² Karen McNaughton²³ explains: “That tree is doing what it’s meant to. That deer is doing what it’s meant to be doing. Even when it’s afraid, that deer does the thing that helps it to survive.”²⁴ In man, the stronger negative emotions, while natural, attach themselves quickly to questions of human survival and flourishing, overriding the clarity of thinking that Deganawidah classified as “the highest human achievement.”²⁵ The end result is that man alone is capable of selecting ends, and of choosing means to the fulfilment of those ends, that actually work *against* his own survival, prosperity, and happiness.

Emotion, however, was not held as the enemy of reason, and man’s emotional nature needed only to be balanced by rationality in thought and action, as the mind and the heart were seen as mutual arbiters. John Mohawk writes that “the goal of the society which the Peacemaker envisioned was one in which human beings are loving and caring and interacting in a positive way on the emotional level and in which collective rational behaviour and thinking are possible and desirable.”²⁶ This balance could be brought to fruition in one of two ways: as the product of the sheer will of the individual,²⁷ or with the aid of society, through the establishment of social and political structures that helped to reconcile reason and emotion, desire and prudence. Accordingly, Haudenosaunee socio-political philosophy asserts that in a society structured to

²¹ Mohawk, *Origins* 219.

²² Mohawk, *Origins* 223.

²³ Karen McNaughton is a seer of the Beaver Clan of the Onondaga Nation at Grand River Territory.

²⁴ Karen McNaughton, untitled guest lecture, Native Studies 310: Culture and Community, Trent University, 8 November 2004.

²⁵ Mohawk, *Origins* 220; also Oren R. Lyons, “The American Indian in the Past,” *Exiled in the Land of the Free*, eds. O. Lyons et al. (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996): 38.

²⁶ Mohawk, *Origins* 221

²⁷ This was the case with Deganawidah himself.

shield people from physical threat while encouraging the emergence of aspirations and talents, the individual is alleviated of much of the burden of irrational thought and, at the same time, freed to realize his or her personal potential.

In Haudenosaunee thought, connection to others was an end in itself, and no inherent contradiction was seen in the ideals of freedom and collectivity.²⁸ A communal existence was, in fact, posited as a prerequisite for personal freedom, since only collective ownership of resources and the decentralization of authority precluded the possibility of one individual forcing his or her will on another.²⁹ The Mohawk Nation has asserted that, because resources were held communally in traditional society, access to the material necessities of life could not be denied, with the result that hierarchical relationships of power simply could not arise.³⁰ Ultimately, “[s]ince the Iroquois were not inclined to give much power to authorities, unity, peace, and brotherhood were balanced against the natural rights of all people and the necessity of sharing resources equitably.”³¹ Autonomy, however, was not to be sacrificed in the name of community, and individuals neither laboured like drones nor limited their self-expression for the diffuse good of the whole. As a Confederacy whose governance was based on democratic dialogue, and to whom justice was seen as arising from a heterogeneity of viewpoints,³² the Five Nations recognized that only autonomous individuals could communicate openly, and in turn, that only open communication could foster the necessary diversity of perspectives.

²⁸ Williams 998.

²⁹ Carol Hiltner, “The Iroquois Confederacy: Our Forgotten National Heritage” (interview with Dr. Donald Grinde, Jr.), *Spirit of Maat* 2(2, May 2002): par. 75.

³⁰ Mohawk Nation par. 6.

³¹ Donald A. Grinde, “Iroquois Political Theory and the Roots of American Democracy,” *Exiled in the Land of the Free*, eds. O. Lyons et al. (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996): 240.

³² Childs 164.

Haudenosaunee society was structured to bring into rapport the needs and wants of the individual and group. As Matthew Dennis has observed, “Good life among the Iroquois depended on achieving harmony, striking balance between dual principles, and among the most important dualisms that the five nations sought to address was the one that linked inside with outside, self with other”³³ which involved reconciling the apparent tension between individualism and communalism, the personal (self-interested) and impersonal (other-interested). To this end, Haudenosaunee children “were carefully trained to think for themselves but to act for others,”³⁴ and through this teaching encouraged to realize an “ideal of autonomous responsibility.”³⁵ In terms of personal behaviour, each individual had the freedom to conduct him- or herself in any way that did not bring harm to the group.³⁶ Such a system of personal responsibility inverts rules-based action, in which the boundaries of permissible behaviour are set by sanctioning certain acts and prohibiting others.³⁷ The type and extent of autonomy found within the Confederacy earned the attention of prominent seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers and politicians: Benjamin Franklin admired the Iroquois’ lack of force, prisons, or officers to “compel obedience or inflict punishment,”³⁸ while John Adams wrote that “personal liberty is so important to an American Indian that Mohawks might be characterized as having *complete individual independence*.”³⁹

After the formation of the Confederacy, resources were mutualized through jettisoning the concept of private property, while interests were mutualized through the

³³ Dennis 110.

³⁴ Anthony Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (1969; New York: Vintage Books, 1972). 34.

³⁵ Williams 1008.

³⁶ According to the definition of ‘harm’ taught and reinforced through societal norms.

³⁷ Hiltner par. 53-4.

³⁸ Jerry D. Stubben, “The Indigenous Influence Theory of American Democracy,” *Social Science Quarterly* 81(3, September 2000): 722.

³⁹ Stubben 725, emphasis added.

extension of real and metaphorical kinship relations to the widest possible circle – both within the Five Nations and without, extending even to the nonhuman. The concept of private property was simply not found in Haudenosaunee thought,⁴⁰ since it was thought to produce a kind of slavery. “The acceptance of the idea of property would produce leaders whose functions would favour excluding people from access to property, and they would cease to perform their functions as leaders [...].”⁴¹ Similarly, individual economic activity that could negatively impact the group was limited by the interventive authority of the collective.⁴² At a deeper level, the Haudenosaunee concept of the land was incompatible with commodity-based views of the natural world – it would have been nonsensical to privatize land that was not seen to (and could never be made to) belong to any one group or individual. Nature was not ‘ownable’, but self-owned and self-determining. In other words, a combination of respect for the autonomy of others and that of nature prevented the Five Nations from restricting access to productive resources. Such conceptualizations were intended to minimize – and did succeed in minimizing – potential points of strain within and beyond the Five Nations.

In the broader realm of Haudenosaunee ‘self’ and ‘other,’ autonomy was both deeply respected and physically defended, for when international hostilities erupted the Confederacy did not hesitate to protect itself. Matthew Dennis writes that “the Five Nations were never pacifists. [... Yet they] themselves had no program of military conquest; for the Iroquois these conflicts represented the frustration or failure of their

⁴⁰ Even trade broke through narrow conceptions of the contractual exchange of private/personal property: “the formation of an alliance based on trade signified, in the Iroquois view, the creation of an ongoing relationship of interdependence and reciprocal sharing. Such a partnership comprehended intangible benefits – including security, peace of mind, extension of networks of reciprocity, and shared resources in times of hardship and shortages – that transcended the immediate value of traded goods” Williams 1047.

⁴¹ Mohawk Nation par. 11.

⁴² Lyons 33.

vision, not its realization.”⁴³ Force was only justified in the cause of self-defence; even then it could be used only up to the point that it halted an aggressive threat, as anything beyond would constitute a violation of the autonomy of the ‘outsider.’ Further, physical engagement with an enemy was always undertaken in the hope that a pause in hostilities could be used to introduce treaty negotiations that would bring about a lasting peace.⁴⁴ The central message that Deganawidah bore was that collective rational thinking could supplant physical violence,⁴⁵ and that message was an extremely powerful motivator of Haudenosaunee action on the international front.

THE PROMISE OF THE CONTRACT:

PEACE AS MORE THAN THE CESSATION OF VIOLENCE

The final attribute common to all people – the desire for peace – drove the very founding of the Confederacy, as peace was viewed as “the ultimate spiritual goal and natural order among humans.”⁴⁶ As inheritors of an unbroken oral tradition, the Haudenosaunee today would characterize their pre-Confederacy ‘state of nature’ as a real, historical condition,⁴⁷ rather than a theoretical construct or folklore. The period immediately preceding the founding is described as a “time of random and undeclared war,”⁴⁸ wherein the Five Nations “fought among themselves and with others, bringing

⁴³ Dennis 98.

⁴⁴ Lyons 34.

⁴⁵ John Mohawk, “Peace Seems as Elusive as Ever,” *We Hold These Truths*, n.d., 1 February 2005, <<http://weholdthesetruths.org/Social%20Commentary/Articles/naperspective.htm>> par. 5.

⁴⁶ David Yarrow, “The Great Law of Peace: New World Roots of American Democracy,” *Turtle EyeLand*, September 1987, 2 March 2005 <<http://www.kahonwes.com/iroquois/document1.html>> par. 15.

⁴⁷ I wish to adopt here the position Paul Wallace took in writing about the Confederacy: “The task of disentangling fact from folklore in the story [...] is not attempted here. No effort is made to distinguish between what the Iroquois actually received from Deganawidah and Hiawatha while they lived and what the popular imagination after they died gave back by way of tribute to their memory. For of course these cultural heroes, as we see them now in legend, are in part the product of imaginative processes which their living originals had set in motion” Wallace, P. 5.

⁴⁸ John Mohawk, “Prologue,” *The White Roots of Peace*, ed. Paul A. White (Sarnac Lake, NY: The Chauncy Press, 1986): xvi.

sorrow, destruction, and death to each nation.”⁴⁹ Of this time, John Mohawk writes that, “[t]he people had been at war for so long that some were born knowing they had enemies and not knowing why [...]”⁵⁰ Yet despite this strife, the founding of the Confederacy was not solely a reaction to external or internal threats, or a linear flight from brutal competition, but a constructive effort aimed at physical, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional sustenance. “Peace was not, as they conceived it, a negative thing, the mere absence of war or an interval between wars, to be recognized only as the stepchild of the law [...]”⁵¹ Matthew Dennis characterizes the Haudenosaunee interpretation of peace as distinctive in both concept and practice,⁵² pointing out that one of the names for the Confederacy itself was “The Great Peace.”⁵³ There is, in fact, no separate term for this ‘peace’ in the Mohawk language, so closely is the concept entwined with human purpose and existence.⁵⁴ Peace is conceived of and discussed in terms of its three constituent parts: health, including reason, or health of the mind; righteousness, signifying justice (as codified in law) as well as the desire for justice; and power, meaning the authority of both law and tradition, directed at the fulfillment of justice.⁵⁵ This complex definition created ‘peace’ as both a feeling, internal to the individual, and a lived reality, common to all members of the group.⁵⁶ It also established that “[p]eace was a way of life, characterized by wisdom and graciousness.”⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Tehanetorens, *Tales of the Iroquois* (Mohawk Nation: Akwesasne Notes, 1976): 8.

⁵⁰ John Mohawk, “The Warriors Who Turned to Peace,” *Yes Magazine* (Winter 2005): par. 1.

⁵¹ P. Wallace 7.

⁵² Dennis 77.

⁵³ Dennis 97.

⁵⁴ P. Wallace 8.

⁵⁵ P. Wallace 8-16.

⁵⁶ Williams 1036.

⁵⁷ P. Wallace 8.

THE CORE OF THE CONTRACT:

DUALITY, FAMILY, AND THE PRIMACY OF THE EMPATHETIC AND SOCIAL VIRTUES

For the Haudenosaunee, “the natural order accepts and celebrates the coexistence of opposites; human purpose consists in the perpetual quest for balance and harmony [...]”⁵⁸ In accordance with this tradition, the ‘domains’ of male and female⁵⁹ were mutually constructive, value-equivalent, and reciprocal.⁶⁰ Further, “In Iroquoian dualism, each sex was imbued with something of the other, for women sanctioned war parties with their consent and provisions, and men promoted harmony and safety when they worked in their communities for peace.”⁶¹ More than being ‘matrilineal’ or even ‘egalitarian,’ Patricia Monture describes traditional society as one that altogether *lacked* a gender hierarchy.⁶² The structure and function of the Confederacy valued and incorporated women’s experiences and perspectives, and individual autonomy was extended equally to its male and female members. In fact, certain leadership roles were reserved for women, whose powers within their clans included confirmation of citizenship; possession of official titles; determination of the home and household possessions; use of clan lands; authority over food distribution; the power (reserved specifically for women) to nominate, confirm, monitor, and depose chiefs; the power to adopt outsiders; the power to forbid brothers and sons from going to war; the power to grant life or death of

⁵⁸ Taiaike Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999): xiv.

⁵⁹ These domains roughly corresponded with horticulture and hunting, though this is a very limited (economic) characterization. See, among others, Anne Waters, “Language Matters: Nondiscrete, Nonbinary Dualism,” *American Indian thought: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Anne Waters (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 110.

⁶⁰ Dennis 28; Waters 110.

⁶¹ Dennis 109.

⁶² Michelle Boulton, “Monture takes advocacy for Aboriginal women to national stage on Person’s Day,” *University of Saskatchewan On Campus News* 11(6): par. 13.

prisoners of war; the power to maintain national resources; and the right to burial grounds.⁶³ As the heads of both families and clans, women of the Five Nations were afforded the highest prestige and exercised tremendous authority. More broadly, the essential model for peace throughout the Confederacy was the longhouse⁶⁴ – a physical and organizational structure headed by women, but built and maintained through a complementary relationship between the genders.⁶⁵ For the Five Nations, the domestic harmony of women-centred households was the foundational unit, both politically and socially, and the power of women served to support, interrogate, and balance the power of men. Throughout childhood and youth, Haudenosaunee were trained and prepared to enter an egalitarian society, in which power was thoughtfully balanced between men and women, young and old.⁶⁶ The concept of motherhood was also a strong influence on Haudenosaunee moral and ethical thought, and children – for at least the next seven generations – were a principal consideration in all political decision-making.

On a similar note, while virtues were ranked they were not gendered, meaning that traits often characterized as ‘feminine’ (and denigrated) in Euro-American political thought were prized by the Haudenosaunee. “Deganawidah celebrated and embodied sensitivity, condolence, atonement, forgiveness, restraint, circumspection, calmness, and peace, all of which were essential to the success of the Iroquois experiment in peace.”⁶⁷ Concordantly, the characteristics the Five Nations prized in leadership were those which

⁶³ “What is the Role of the Clan Mother?” *Haudenosaunee: People Building a Longhouse*, n.d., 1 February 2005 <http://sixnations.buffnet.net/Culture/?article=roll_of_clan_mother> par. 3.

⁶⁴ The word ‘haudenosaunee’, in fact, translates as “people building a longhouse. “Haudenosaunee Home Page,” *Haudenosaunee: People Building a Longhouse*, n.d. 11 April 2005 <<http://www.sixnations.org>> par. 2.

⁶⁵ Childs, 153; Dennis, 108.

⁶⁶ Grinde 236.

⁶⁷ Dennis 111.

“promote[d] the best understanding[::]”⁶⁸ peacefulness, generosity, honesty, empathy, courage, patience, temperance, and care.⁶⁹ Eloquence and clear thinking, along with “a good sense of Indian humor,”⁷⁰ connected all other virtues, since “[i]n a culture deeply respectful of individual autonomy, the only real political power consists in the ability to persuade.”⁷¹ Further, the ideals prized in the Confederacy were practical and attainable, human characteristics that were directly relevant to the Five Nations’ lived reality, rather than abstract, superhuman traits to which individuals could only aspire.⁷²

THE STRENGTH OF THE CONTRACT:

PARTICIPATION, CONSENSUS, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Both autonomy and coordination were the express goals of the Confederacy, made possible through dedication to coordination and coherence in political and social life.⁷³ Making a comparison to another longstanding democratic tradition, Paul Wallace wrote that:

To the outside world the spirit of the League might seem to be expressed in the Latin motto, *E Pluribus Unum*. But to the nations within the League its spirit might have seemed better expressed in the words, *Ex Uno Plura*. The strength of the whole made safe in the individual differences of its members.⁷⁴

A profound respect for difference – which flowers into the Haudenosaunee political principle of ‘unity in diversity’ – was a natural outgrowth of the view of people as

⁶⁸ Scott L. Pratt, “Native American Thought and the Origins of Pragmatism,” *Ayaangwaamizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy* 1(1, Spring 1997): 65.

⁶⁹ Wallace, P. 43; Williams 1014; Dennis 111. These qualities should not be seen as entailing meekness or submissiveness, which were not respected by the Haudenosaunee. Meekness and submissiveness were thought to subvert autonomous and honest expression (Grinde 236).

⁷⁰ Williams 1010.

⁷¹ Taiaike Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999): xix.

⁷² Childs 157.

⁷³ Childs 148

⁷⁴ P. Wallace 34.

fundamentally autonomous entities. Thus, since coercion could never have constituted an acceptable means of motivating cooperation, the Confederacy had no permanent armed force, no police, and no prisons, yet managed to maintain political, economic, and social stability throughout its territories.⁷⁵ Joseph-François Lafitau, a French Jesuit missionary to the Kahnawake Mohawks in the early eighteenth century, commented that:

Respect for human beings which is the mainspring of their actions, serves no little to keep up their union. Each one, regarding others as masters of their own actions and themselves, lets them conduct themselves as they wish and judges only himself. [...].⁷⁶

When transgressions did occur in this system of autonomous responsibility the result was ostracism and shame – social chastisement that terminated when the individual had acknowledged and atoned for errant action.⁷⁷ Disputes were addressed through an open discussion of relevant matters before the Grand Council, in which all parties were granted an equal hearing,⁷⁸ since justice was seen as both active and deliberative (rather than fossilized in legal codes or precedents).⁷⁹ Flexibility, courtesy, calmness, and openness were essential in this pursuit, as resolution required unanimity that could only be brought about by each person understanding the subtle interplay between individual interest and the common good.⁸⁰ “Above all, the Iroquois political system sought to assure that the Iroquois listened seriously to each other.”⁸¹

⁷⁵ Lyons 32-9.

⁷⁶ Joseph François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared With the Customs of Primitive Times*, eds. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974-1977): 300.

⁷⁷ Grinde 236.

⁷⁸ Grinde 240.

⁷⁹ Pratt 65.

⁸⁰ Pratt 65; Dennis 95.

⁸¹ Williams 1010.

In the Confederacy, will/power was both actual and general. It extended across the whole population, yet was localized in individuals who were actively engaged in the structures of governance at multiple levels.⁸² Ever pragmatic, the Haudenosaunee located authority closest to where it was relevant,⁸³ empowering clans, villages, and nations to guide their own internal affairs and limiting the jurisdiction of the Grand Council to matters of an international nature.⁸⁴ Even then, relevant ‘external’ issues and questions formulated within clans, villages, and nations were carried *to* the Grand Council,⁸⁵ for discussions in which any man or woman was free to express (and have heard) an opinion.⁸⁶ The structure of the Grand Council itself was circular, embodying decentralized power and horizontal dialogue, while a system of “gendered checks and balances”⁸⁷ safeguarded the ideal of full and open participation.⁸⁸ Maximal participation, in turn, ensured that “the Council was kept constantly in the mind of the common citizen,”⁸⁹ defending the people against the alienation of their own individual and *en masse* political power. Recognizing that top-heavy structures were inimical to social harmony, the Haudenosaunee “dedicated the superbly complex organization of their society to prevent the rise internally of hierarchy.”⁹⁰

Individual rights were not enshrined in the *Gayanashagowa*, as “the rights of man were so thoroughly entrenched in popular custom and everywhere taken so much for granted that any additional guarantee in the constitution seemed unnecessary.”⁹¹ The Haudenosaunee constitution thus dealt with personal *responsibilities*,⁹² though certain freedoms did merit explicit inclusion:

⁸² At the level of the family, clan, village, nation, and Confederacy.

⁸³ Hiltner par. 69-71.

⁸⁴ Lyons 39.

⁸⁵ Grinde 236.

⁸⁶ P. Wallace 38; Williams 1010.

⁸⁷ “Although the members of the Grand Council were men, most of them had been nominated by the women of their respective extended families. Women also were considered to be the allocators of resources, and descent was matrilineal” Bruce E. Johansen, “Chapter 2: The Pre-Columbian Republic,” *Forgotten Founders: How the American Indian Helped Shape Democracy* (Boston: The Harvard Common Press, 1982): par. 19.

⁸⁸ Williams 1010.

⁸⁹ P. Wallace 38.

⁹⁰ Mohawk Nation par. 6.

⁹¹ P. Wallace 36.

⁹² P. Wallace 36.

The Iroquois cherished the Four Freedoms of our own day. Two of them received specific mention in the constitution: Freedom from Fear and Freedom from Want. [...] Freedom of Religion was regarded among the Five Nations as so natural a right as to require no mention in the constitution except in the case of adopted nations, to whom it was specifically granted. [...] Freedom of Speech was a right so deeply embedded in the Iroquois way of life as to need no attention in the constitution. [...] There was one freedom that the Five Nations denied themselves: “Freedom, free to slay herself,” the liberty to destroy their own liberties.⁹³

A free flow of information was essential to the political decision-making processes of the Haudenosaunee, who today characterize their traditional government as a unique form of participatory democracy⁹⁴ in which the *Great Law of Peace* dictated that the people could propose their own laws if their leaders failed to undertake meaningful action.⁹⁵ As part of a political system grounded in a robust conception of popular freedom, the Grand Council was invested with no coercive power whatsoever. Not only were decisions made by consensus, if consensus could not be reached no decision could be made because of the deleterious effect such an imposition would have had on their sense of unity. League policy could be set only when the Grand Council of fifty chiefs was in agreement *and* when that agreement extended to the people, to whom decisions were communicated for approval through either clan or general assemblies.⁹⁶ It is for these reasons that Matthew Dennis describes the decision-making ‘apparatus’ of the Haudenosaunee as profoundly participatory:

[D]ecisions [...] were the product of discussions in households, villages, and tribes throughout Iroquoia. These were the deliberations of ordinary men and women rather than specialized elites; the discourse of the League council was, then, only a reflection of the considered debates that characterized [family], clan, town, and nation. The five nations diligently [...] sought to attain ‘one voice, one mind, and one heart.’⁹⁷

⁹³ P. Wallace 34-5.

⁹⁴ Lyons 32.

⁹⁵ Grinde 239.

⁹⁶ Williams 1012-3; Lyons 32, 39.

⁹⁷ Dennis 96.

Donald Grinde characterizes the Grand Council itself as less a classic governing body than a “think tank,” pointing out that “For the Iroquois, the more thinkers [...] the better.”⁹⁸ Chiefs, then, were not kings or emperors, but grounded, accountable representatives of their own nations. The traditional antlered headdresses of the Grand Council members “declared that the chiefs, like the deer, provided sustenance to their people [...]”⁹⁹ Interestingly, though the Haudenosaunee recognized no necessary separation of the spiritual, political, and social spheres of human existence, authority was not derived from religious principles or spiritual powers, but emanated solely from the people¹⁰⁰ and public opinion:¹⁰¹ “Power is breathed into leaders by the people, and those leaders then exist on that support. When that support no longer exists, then their power ceases to exist.”¹⁰²

THE ENACTMENT OF THE CONTRACT:

CEREMONY, PROTOCOL, AND DIRECT PERSONAL INTERACTION

For the Haudenosaunee, a common identity and shared goals were made tangible through regular, face-to-face contact in the political arena, where protocol-mediated public speech¹⁰³ was a core practice.¹⁰⁴ Ritual and storytelling served a similar function, using symbolism and metaphor to address the spiritual and psychic, social, and emotional

⁹⁸ Grinde 240.

⁹⁹ Dennis 98.

¹⁰⁰ In 1787, John Adams wrote of the Iroquois that “the separation of powers in American Indian governments is marked with a precision that excludes all controversy [...] American Indian governments were so democratic that the real sovereignty resided in the body of the people.” Stubben 726.

¹⁰¹ Grinde 239.

¹⁰² Hiltner par. 66.

¹⁰³ Including an audience that both listened and participated.

¹⁰⁴ Childs 152.

needs of the people.¹⁰⁵ Ceremonies and protocols together were essential in fostering the state of ‘being of one mind’ that undergirded all of Haudenosaunee society; in communicating meanings between individuals and groups and the promotion of peaceful understanding; and for the restoration of rational thought in the face of overwhelming pain, despair, grief, or rage. Summing up this ‘principle of direct personal interaction,’ an Oneida sachem commented in 1740, “You may say that Love & Affection may be strong in Absence as when present but we say not.”¹⁰⁶

One purpose of ceremony in the political and social spheres was in the careful conveyance of complex or subtle ideas and meanings, and the weaving of those ideas and meanings into a coherent whole.¹⁰⁷ Ceremony is described variously as a method of inductive education, as consciousness-raising, and as an important means by which the theoretical could be grounded in real-world experience.¹⁰⁸

The power of symbols is profound, especially among an active and emotional people; for symbols are a means by which practical persons, shy of metaphysics and impatient of theory, are enabled to apprehend great ideas, take them to heart, and put them to work. The Iroquois fed their minds and guided their actions by means of symbols.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Dennis 101.

¹⁰⁶ Peter D. Wraaxall, *An Abridgment of the Indian Affairs Contained in Four Folio Volumes: Transacted in the Colony of New York, from the Year 1678 to the Year 1751* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968): 217.

¹⁰⁷ Williams 1039.

¹⁰⁸ Williams 1025-7.

¹⁰⁹ P. Wallace 8.

Ceremonies were also a form of dialogue between and amongst individuals and groups.¹¹⁰ Because the Haudenosaunee viewed alliances as not static but constantly evolving, relationships were inevitably revisited, refined, and renewed through ceremony.¹¹¹ The very enactment of ceremony entailed a consideration of others; such a pause and re-focusing of personal attention sought to prevent both misunderstandings and the drifting apart that could numb or twist amity. Yet the fact that ceremony was also celebratory – expressing thankfulness, joy, or affection – should not be undervalued. The Haudenosaunee placed tremendous emphasis on the social necessity of humility, reciprocity, and gratitude, as well as laughter, warmth, and creative expression, all of which were reinforced through engagement in ritual. “Ritual practices allowed the Iroquois to represent themselves, their polity and moral order. That representation made sense and persisted because it well described Iroquois reality and experience.”¹¹²

Ceremony also had a function in Haudenosaunee politics, where it is described as providing “a well-known and intensely practiced discourse of law and peace”¹¹³ in both the international and domestic arenas. In fact, the use of imagination and feeling in Iroquois diplomacy – either informed by, or in the actual form of ceremony – is legendary.¹¹⁴ With the specific intention of awakening empathetic capacity in the listener through the use of evocative parables and metaphors, the Five Nations employed storytelling to “enter into the designs of other peoples and share with them [...] seiz[ing]

¹¹⁰ Ritual gift-giving, for example, was always accompanied by stories illustrating the giver’s understanding of a particular situation, so that reciprocity in the context of the ceremony affirmed a *shared* understanding. Such exchanges not only communicated the gift-giver’s intentions, but also explained the broader relationship between giver and receiver, so that expectations and obligations were clearly conveyed. Similarly, feasts, symbolic of the sharing of resources, were commonly used to seal negotiations with a physical manifestation of a yet-to-be-realized ‘partnership,’ which is why such celebrations occupied a central place in Haudenosaunee treaty-making. Williams 1034.

¹¹¹ Mary A. Druke, qtd. in Williams 1006.

¹¹² Dennis 101.

¹¹³ Williams 1017.

¹¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Robert A. Williams, “Linking Arms Together”.

the imagination and attention of all who witnessed [...].”¹¹⁵ Similarly, specific protocols for communication were developed, taught, and employed, so that an open atmosphere, order, and harmony would prevail in political discussion.¹¹⁶

Because the Haudenosaunee valued connection to others as an end in itself, the ritualization of this connection occupied a central place in the political and social life of the Confederacy. This explains, at least in part, why “[i]nstead of formal instruments of authority, the Iroquois governed behaviour by instilling a sense of pride and connectedness to the group through common rituals.”¹¹⁷ Deganawidah’s vision of unity and dialogue *nourished by ceremony* has been characterized as a “practical, protocol-oriented approach to cooperation,”¹¹⁸ as the “symbols and metaphors and the institutions and ritual practices bequeathed [by him] provided a political and ideological structure that described and prescribed Iroquois life.”¹¹⁹ Whether it expressed mutual support, symbolized the sharing of resources, or communicated and clarified meanings, ritual inevitably spoke to the issue of unity. Because ceremony was taught to and understood by all of the Haudenosaunee people, the message and the medium were synonymous – the concept of togetherness housed in the ceremony was congruent with participation in the actual rite. For the Five Nations, then, “Connections [...] were kept alive in ritual form.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Williams, 1025-8.

¹¹⁶ Childs 152; Pratt 73.

¹¹⁷ Grinde 236.

¹¹⁸ Childs 160.

¹¹⁹ Dennis 108.

¹²⁰ Williams 1006.

DEPARTURE FROM THE CONTRACT:

HUMAN INTERACTION AS PROFOUNDLY NON-CONTRACTUAL

Rather than a contractual view of human relationships, the Haudenosaunee described interactions in kinship terms – for example, between siblings (if peers) or parents and children (if describing a mentoring, nurturing, or formative relationship). Kinship was not understood as being exclusive, governed by blood-quantum, or as orbiting the nuclear family. Adoption was a common practice, including the adoption of non-Natives, the dispossessed and dislocated, orphans of war and conquest, and even enemies.¹²¹ Dual ‘citizenship’ was also permitted in the Confederacy, which recognized no barriers to participation based on race, gender, age, or national origin.¹²² As Paul Wallace has asserted, “What’s in a name? Nothing, so far as blood or biological law is concerned, but much, to the Iroquois mind, in the realm of the spirit. [They enacted] the drawing together of distant peoples, not by vague phrases about human brotherhood, but by actual ties that touched the personal life.”¹²³ In founding the Confederacy, Deganawidah also created a system of clans, with identical clans appearing in different nations and members of the same clan regarding one another as close kin in spite of the absence of consanguinity. These groups operated as extended families and political units, playing an active role in League decision-making,¹²⁴ and even adoptees were given a clan affiliation. Thus, through kinship-reinforcing measures of adoption and clan affiliation, theoretically limitless numbers of individuals could be brought under the conceptual mantles of ‘us’ and ‘we.’

¹²¹ Childs 154.

¹²² “Several influential Anglo-Americans, emissaries from the Colonial governments, including William Johnson and Conrad Weiser, were given full citizenship in the confederacy. Both men took part in the deliberations of the Grand Council at Onondaga.” Johansen, *Forgotten* par. 10.

¹²³ P. Wallace 42-3.

¹²⁴ Lyons 38.

Further departures from the contractual perspective can be found in the Haudenosaunee approach to bargaining and its emphasis on reciprocity (versus profit). Rather than competition and scarcity as foundational concepts, the Five Nations traditionally employed acceptance (consensus) and plenty; they would not have acknowledged the necessity of framing any negotiation as a zero-sum game. For this reason the Confederacy has been described as espousing a kind of ‘progressive pragmatism,’ a position that “seeks ends that are universal and that have the quality of win-win negotiations, [laying] out desirable outcomes that all sides can agree upon [...]”¹²⁵ Relatedly, reciprocity was a foundational tenet, enshrined in gift-giving and resource-sharing rituals, as well as in the many of the protocols that supported democratic dialogue. Indeed, the success of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy offers evidence that direct participatory democracy is possible on a large scale,¹²⁶ countering one of the least-challenged assertions of Euro-American social contract theory.

A final step away from a contractual view of motivation and obligation can be found in the very nature of the relationships laid out in the *Deganawidah Epic* and the *Gayanashagowa*. In the Enlightenment tradition of political thought, social contract theories begin with the isolated, fragile individual and terminate in the contract-mediated relationship between that individual and the state. As part of the agreement to form society, some sovereignty is surrendered to the government (be it a monarchy or democracy) in exchange for specific protections and opportunities, with the individual virtually pitted against the state in a battle for any residual sovereignty. With such theories, “individual rights emerge from the limited nature of the social compact and the restraints imposed by notions of popular consent.”¹²⁷ The Haudenosaunee, however, surrendered no personal liberty to their newly-founded Confederacy and its Great Council; indeed, in their view absolute individual autonomy was critical to the

¹²⁵ Mohawk, *The Warriors* par. 36.

¹²⁶ Lyons 32.

¹²⁷ Robert N. Clinton, “The Rights of Indigenous Peoples as Collective Group Rights,” *Arizona Law Review* 32 (4, 1990): 741.

operation of a healthy government, which acted in turn to augment the sense of liberty and opportunity felt within the populace. As a result, rights, which have a prominent place in social contract theory, were given little attention in the political philosophy of the Five Nations, which focused instead on responsibilities and freedoms. In addition, the relationships dealt with in the Haudenosaunee founding epic and constitution are not restricted to the binary interplay between the individual and the state, but instead discuss multiple and overlapping group identities, affiliations, and interactions.¹²⁸ For the Haudenosaunee, then, there was no singular model or mould of citizenship.

Ultimately, contractual relationships would, in the Haudenosaunee view, fail to address the immensity of human capacity and achievement, or to describe even our most basic aspirations. To them, relationships were fundamentally communicative and open – to be continually revisited and revitalized – in direct opposition to the concept of the finalized contract. This is reflected in the foundational stories and documents of the Confederacy itself, as “[t]he Haudenosaunee Law of Peace assumes that peace is not achievable as a static condition, just as relationships between human beings are not static but are always unfinished.”¹²⁹ If the Haudenosaunee ‘alternative social contract’ can be described as a ‘contract’ at all, then, it is a unique one: open-ended and loosely structured; a renewable compact of mutuality and interdependence, reciprocal expectations and obligations. The story of its origin – the *Deganawidah Epic* – was told and retold in ritual, in a conscious re-application of its message of growth, change, and the active unfolding of human potential:

¹²⁸ Namely, at the level of the individual, family, gender group, clan, village, nation, and Confederacy.

¹²⁹ Mohawk, *The Warriors* par. 25.

In this story, there is a relentless conversation going on about righteousness, and what does and doesn't work, and what might work if we tried it. It's a long conversation, but the point is the process, not the end of the process, because it is assumed that there will never be an end. Instead, they are working to set the stage for peace. They are working to make it possible for the next generation to be involved.¹³⁰

CONCLUSION

John Brown Childs has correctly observed that, “[N]o one has ever created the perfect society that meets all of its own founding ideals.”¹³¹ Acknowledging that there existed sporadic warfare, and that some alliances were broken, the historical record is nevertheless replete with examples of the Five Nations’ peacemaking¹³² and the creative, concerted diplomacy of the Confederacy. Armed with the distinctly Haudenosaunee political and moral principles of autonomous responsibility, gender balance, progressive pragmatism, symbolic kinship, the autonomy of nature, direct personal interaction, horizontal governance, collective rationality, unity-in-diversity, and dialogic justice, the Five Nations engaged in what can only be called an *active practice of peace*.

As it not only operated on different foundational concepts, but also attained goals viewed as utopian and unachievable in most Euro-American philosophical traditions, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy provides a unique (and perhaps fuller) account of our moral and political motivations and obligations, and an alternative to Enlightenment-era social contract theories. The analysis provided has, in fact, offered the ‘social contract’ as a point of comparison *and*

¹³⁰ Mohawk, *The Warriors* par. 30.

¹³¹ Childs 149.

¹³² Williams 1006.

departure, since the Five Nations did not describe human interactions in contractual terms, using the metaphors of satisfaction, closure, and personal gain; but in terms of kinship, diversity, and reciprocity, using persuasive and enduring visions of humankind's (ever-evolving) aspirations and potential. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy – its leadership, constitution, and the story of its founding – thus constitutes not only a unique and under-examined approach to, but also a living critique of, social contract theory.

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