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Americanizing the White Man

Felix S. Cohen

In this essay Felix Cohen, a prominent lawyer and philosopher, presents some of the most debatable ideas about American society and the Indian. He depicts the European and the American Indian ways of life as incompatible. The former, he says, are based on authority and exploitation while the latter are based on mutual respect for the rights and ideas of others. Accordingly the American Indian approach was a direct challenge to fundamental European ideas. In fact, writes Cohen, all of the things which differentiate present American society from that of the Old World resulted from adaptations of Indian practices. With sweeping generalization he claims that political and social democracy, old-age pensions, and unemployment insurance all appeared west of the Atlantic before they did on the eastern shore. Some historians will cringe at his suggestions that the basis for utopian ideas and international law expressed by Thomas More, Francisco Vitoria, and Hugo Grotius originated with the Indians. Perhaps Cohen's most significant points are his plea for tolerance of minorities and his suggestion that all such groups have positive contributions to make in a pluralistic society.

"What can we do to Americanize the Indian?" The question was earnestly put by a man who was about to assume control over our country's Indian affairs. He was appalled by the fact that over a hundred

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