

Whitewashing History in Arizona

The dispute over Arizona's shutting down of ethnic studies programs that cite white exploitation of Chicano and Indian communities has focused on the impact on Mexican-American children, but the new policy also affects Native American students, as Bill Means explains to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Arizona is closing public school ethnic studies programs that accuse whites of oppressing Chicanos and Native Americans on the grounds that these historical lessons constitute racist hate speech. But scholars and activists are protesting the state's latest move as racist itself because it keeps students from these communities from learning about their own history and heroes.

Bill Means, co-founder of the American Indian Movement and a member of the board of the International Treaty Council, describes the impact of the state-pressured shutting down of Tucson's Chicano studies program and the banning of books used in the curriculum. Arizona has the largest concentration of Native people in the country.

DB: What was your first thought, what was going through your mind, what was your reaction when you heard that they not only banned the Ethnic Studies for Mexican-American children and Indigenous children, but they had the teachers pack up the books in boxes, right in front of the students, some of them crying and then gave the teachers, 48 hours to figure out what they're going to teach? Your response.

BM: My response is, this reminds me of the days when they were talking about turning the fire hoses and the dogs loose on the marchers for civil rights, down in Alabama and Mississippi, in the South during the Sixties. It's almost getting to that point in the sense of the denial of rights.

I mean the freedom to read, the freedom to speak, the freedom to write the foundation of freedom in America. This is what makes us a diverse and rich culture. And so it was a shock. I was shocked and dismayed by this continuation of racist policies that seem to be coming out of Arizona.

As you recall, the day we just celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King Day. Arizona was certainly the last to endorse it as a national holiday. And then we got into the various laws they passed where they could arrest you on your skin color, stop you and now this is just another step where it looks like they're trying to create a gated community in the entire state of Arizona.

DB: How do you see the community that you represent affected in this situation? It seems they want a white-only policy there.

BM: Well, that's exactly right and especially in view of the fact that Arizona has the largest number of Indian children in school in the entire nation. The largest number of Indian people, both on reservations, in urban areas. Arizona has even elected several legislators from predominantly Indian districts.

So we see that this is another attack on the sovereignty and the culture of the American Indian. And it's very, very disturbing to Indian people because we consider Spanish-speaking people to be Indians as well. And so it's very appalling and very detrimental to the children of Arizona, especially Indigenous people.

To hear that some of the names of their heroes, authors who spell out the true history of treaties, authors who spell out the contributions of Indian people to American society, authors who talk about the land tenure, the land history in the state of Arizona. These are all subjects. The environmental issues, the extractions of resources which has contaminated a lot of the water and land of state of Arizona. The militarization on the borders, all these things seem to go to the extreme in Arizona.

It's as if the right-wing has said, "We're going to take over Arizona, whether anybody likes it or not, we're going to pass these draconian laws that totally annihilate what's little is left of the First Amendment." So it's very, very racist. It's taking America back. It's ignoring the contributions of Indigenous people to the well-being of the state of Arizona. And in particular, it's an insult to the intelligence of all Americans.

DB: Why is it important for Indian people to have access to the writers in the community. What does it mean to an Indian child say to, either have access, or not have access. How are kids affected by this?

BM: Well, I think what happens without this we have aculturation, assimilation, it becomes a racist policy because Indian people feel we are relegated to a lower class of people. We have no heroes, we have none of our own people we can look up to and say "This is what they said, this is what their book has documented." So it's very detrimental to the mental well-being, the educational well-being, the character-building of Indigenous youth and children. And it's one of the atrocities of the modern day, that is being committed in the educational systems of Arizona.

DB: Now you are, of course, one of the founders of the American Indian Movement. You are on the board of the International Treaty Council. And you've

been working and know perhaps more than anybody else in this world about international law in the context of Indigenous communities. Do you see this issue in Arizona also as an issue for the United Nations, as an issue that affects people in the hemisphere and around the world?

BM: Oh, yes, as we speak we have our staff attorney from not only International Indian Treaty Council but many of the Indigenous, non-governmental organizations affiliated with the United Nations in North America looking into the legalities, looking into this policy. Because this was not the first time, education has continually been, since Columbus got here, a weapon of colonization, to limit the education. They used to have a national policy that said something to the effect that "We have to kill the Indian, and educate him in the white ways."

And so that's reason why this policy of putting our people in boarding schools, isolated, on reservations, comparable to the bantustans of South Africa, [controlling] our children's curricula up until as late at 1972, and AIM founded the first Indian-controlled school in America. Our education was controlled, either by the church or the federal government. So we've been fighting this battle of education, of censorship, since 1492.

DB: We're talking about the banning of books in Tucson and the banning of the ethnic studies programs for Mexican-Americans, Indigenous communities, isolating those communities really from the school system. Bill Means, when you were coming up, did you have access to the literature of your people, was this an issue for you? How were you affected?

BM: I was affected just like the people of Arizona. We were not given access to books about our language. We were not given access to books written by Indian authors. It was not until I went to higher education, to college, that college professors began to introduce me to some of the writers that are banned here in Arizona such as Vine Deloria, one of the most noted scholars, historian, treaty rights advocate, attorney, that has ever existed in modern-day Indian country. And now they defame, and degrade his life, and his study, by banning his books, which, in fact, were revolutionary for their time. But that was only in the Sixties so this is something that we face and have faced for a long time.

And, as for myself, growing up in boarding school everything was set. The library was very small, our access to even an open library, let alone some other types of institutions of higher learning was limited. And so I think this is just a continuation of colonial racist policy that was begun to colonize and restrict the culture of Indigenous people all over the world so that they could take our resources, limit our education, write the treaties in one language, not use any kind of interpreter. So this goes back for centuries but now to have it raise its head in this time and age when we have the First Amendment, the civil

rights struggle, the Indian's rights movement. It's very insulting, and it's very, very, shall we say, inspirational for us to want to organize against this type of racist policy.

DB: Could you talk about the impact of those schools on the Indigenous community?

BM: Well, I think, now the public school system, here, and I don't mean Minnesota but throughout the upper Midwest and, indeed, most states across the country has engaged the idea that culture can be an enrichment. That the identity of one's culture, the teaching of the true history and contributions of Indigenous people is for the benefit of the overall population of our state. And because we had limited access to that education, and now we've gone as far as the United Nations to create the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Sept. 13th, 2007, passed by the General Assembly. So it's an international human rights issue, it's not just a civil rights issue.

Because I think that, you know, as we look back in the history of poverty, one of the ways to keep people in poverty whether it's a bantustan or a reservation is to limit and restrict the access to education, a total lack of self-determination, a total colonial system where only things that are approved by the colonists are things that can be taught at school. And so are we regressing in society to allow this to happen? To have an education based on your income?

It's only since the Sixties, the Fifties, that poor people have had access to development of their own studies, be it African studies, Indian studies, Chicano studies. This has not been here for very long in America. And so to see this set back, to see this reactionary type of implementation of colonial policy, racist policy is, it takes your breath away, it makes, you know, both anger, both determination to do something, become involved, because this was one of the main enemies of Indian people throughout, has been education. And especially, not only just Indian, but poor peoples throughout America.

DB: In that context, not long ago you took members of the United Nations around to various reservations and Indian communities and there was an investigation of the abuse and the poverty, and the lack of proper education happening in the Indigenous communities in the United States. I assume that this is a strike against that attempt to educate the world, educate the members of the United Nations, and I guess this battle needs to continue. Newt Gingrich is saying "Let them be janitors." What do you say?

BM: Yeah, exactly that's why we formed the American Indian Movement, to break down those walls of racism, those barriers to a good cross section, cultural education. To be exposed to the great writers of history and I think that as we

look to what's happening, in the world, as we look to the developments at the U.N., the United States is being investigated by the committee, it's called The Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, within the Commission on Human Rights.

And so that will be coming, and starting in this year. The special rapporteur of Indigenous issues, who by the way is a professor, an Indian at the University of Arizona, is going to be going across the United States to take testimony on as to how the United States is implementing the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and other human rights instruments of the United Nations.

You can imagine that Arizona has painted themselves into a corner on the issue of human rights, especially as it pertains to censorship, especially as it pertains to restricting the education access of children. Mind you, these are the most vulnerable people in our society. We all, whether we're Republican, Democrat, it seems like we want the best for our children. We don't want what's limited, and these are the witnesses that we're going to have testify before this special rapporteur on Indigenous issues. His name is Professor James Anaya, who's the special rapporteur of the third committee that I mentioned, the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. He'll be visiting various parts of North America in April and one of the hearings will be definitely in Arizona.

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