Benjamin Franklin

1. Life and Works.
2. Franklin’s Ideas.
3. “Remarks Concerning the Savages of America”.

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1.1. Life:

Perfect embodiment of the self-made man and the 18th century American Enlightenment (emphasis on rationality, the scientific approach to reality, the defence of parliamentary systems of government…). He was born in Boston in 1709 in a humble family, but he ascended to a position of fame and success. He was the 10th son of 17 children. His father moved from England to North America in the 1607 for economic reasons.

At the age of 10 he worked with his father making candles, but he didn’t like it, so at the age of twelve: apprentice to a half-brother who was a printer. At the age of 17 he moved to New York and then to Philadelphia. At the age of 24 he was owner of his own printing business. This allowed his to publish his own texts, and he also started printing texts from European Masters, that was a very profitable business. He wrote pamphlets, scientific research, experiments with electricity…

Devoted to science and politics. Working as a diplomat in England (1757-1762, 1764-1775) and France (1779-1785). Retired from public life in 1788. He died in 1790 in Philadelphia.

He was one of the intellectual leaders of the American Revolution. He was one of the members pointed by the congress of the United States to write “The Declaration of Independence”. He participated in the constitutional convention that wrote “The Constitution of the United States” in 1787. He was a president of an anti-slavery society, he promoted universal publish education, because from his perspective it was education that could make people free.

1.2. Works:

“Poor Richard’s Almanack” (1733-1758): origin of self-help books. While he was leaving in Philadelphia he started publishing “Poor Richard’s Almanack”, and he kept publishing this annual Almanack 24 years. In this almanack he included different kinds of information, especially, pieces of advice, for being socially successful and achieving wealth; he included some famous aims from different sources or sometimes sins that he himself made up. So, this is a very peculiar kind of work. This almanack made him famous and rich but probable, his most important work was his “Autobiography”.

After, Franklin’s “Autobiography” is considered to be as a model for many other autobiographies in the United States. It was read in Europe and in the United States over a period of 80 years. In this book he uses a didactic tone because he has an educational aim, as he wants to use his life as a model of public behaviour and this is the reason why he is constantly translating his own personal experiences into general propositions that could be useful and applicable to everybody. In the book, we can find some references to the myth of the way of how to become rich.

2. Franklin’s Ideas:

He was a self-taught man, as he did not go to university. But thanks to his personal effort he achieved an education that was probably surprising.

His main interest: political and scientific interests.

Representative of the Enlightenment: defence of the natural rights of the individual, the separation of powers, independence, education, anti-slavery movements…

Stress on self-scrutiny, hard work, public duty and public responsibility, combination of personal success and public good, belief in human progress through science and common sense (as he was born in Boston he was in touch with Puritanism). He had like a mission for the nation; he was concerned with the improvement of his situation but also felt that he had to help others doing the same by sharing his experiences.

3. “Remarks Concerning the Savages of America”:

Dismantling “Manifest Destiny” and the definition of Native Americans as savages by enhancing the simplicity of their lives and their civility. He suggested that the contrast between savages and white people is not a contrast between savages and civilized.

SIMPLICITY: life in harmony with the natural order:

* Division of labour: natives had all the same types of works, but Franklin said they were all natural and honourable.
* They do not have artificial needs, they just have natural needs, in contrast to white people.
* Their learning is natural, practical, and useful. They learnt the survival skills necessary to live in harmony with nature in contrast with the abstract learning that characterises the white people.
* Creation of myths. In the essay there is a moment when the American natives listen to a priest explaining the myth of creation of the Bible. When he had finished, natives thank him. Origins of agriculture and some agriculture products those were necessary for the survival of the Native Americans in nature.

CIVILITY (Politeness: emphasis on the respectful and polite attitude of the Native Americans toward one another and also to the White race and its traditions and beliefs):

* In conversation: as they do not have artificial needs, they have more time for leisure and polite conversations.
* Avoiding rude sincerity and open confrontation: they are so polite that, in order to avoid confrontation they never contradict or deny what is being said to them.
* In religious matters: even though they have their own myths, they respected the Christian features. They told theirs myths in exchange to know more about chritianity.
* Hospitality (he compares the rudeness of the white people who are intrusive when the native American visited their village, with the rules of hospitality):
* Announcing their arrival.
* Providing shelter for the visitors.
* Providing food for the visitors.
* Providing conversation for the visitors.

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| **Franklin’s perspective** | **Puritan perspective** |
| Native Americans are civilized, polite, hospitable, and respectful. They respect nature. | Native Americans are savages, devilish creatures threatening the Puritan mission of building communities of God’s will. |
| Respectful attitude to the religious beliefs of Native Americans. | Native Americans as pagans and heathens. |
| Secular didactic tone (teaching the benefits of civility and politeness). | Religious didactic tone (spiritual growth through suffering, omnipresence of God’s providence). |
| Civility as essential to build a human community. | Piety (devoción) and divine grace as essential to build a community of God’s will. |
| Native American demand and deserve to be treated as equal to the white people (defence of the natural rights of the individual). | Native Americans as beasts, non-human beings. |
| Comparison of the Indian Councils with the House of Commons, suggesting the reference to another important aspect from the period of Enlightenments that is the separation of powers that was basic in Parliamentary systems. | |