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Culture Theory in Contemporary Ethnohistory

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This paper is about how historians and anthropologists have interpreted
the encounters between Europeans and native people. Since classical times
these encounters have been driven by expansionist societies that colonized
the smaller-scale indigenous people who lived around their peripheries.
Attempts by historians and anthropologists to interpret this process have
been shaped by and in turn have shaped European bias toward native peo-
ple. To a considerable extent, this bias is an expression of the widespread
ethnocentric idea that one's own society is the norm and what lies outside
is a distortion of that norm. In his discussion of the territorial rites of
passage, Arnold van Gennep identified the importance of boundary sym-
bolism to protect the inner from the outer worlds. Van Gennep wrote
that "the prohibition against entering a given territory is . . . intrinsically
magico-religious. It has been expressed with the help of milestones, walls,
and statues in the classical world" (1960 [1908]: 16–17). The Roman
arch of triumph, for example, once separated their society from that of
their enemies: "The victor was first required to separate himself from the
enemy world through a series of rites, in order to be able to return to the
Roman world by passing through the arch" (ibid.: 21). In this symbolism,
center differs from periphery, state differs from tribe, and colonizer dif-
fers from colonized, as sacred differs from profane. In a sense, the Roman
arch also symbolized the boundary between two kinds of person. Marcel
Mauss traced the origin of the contemporary western idea of the autono-
mous conscious "person" or "self" to the development of the Roman
Republic. According to Mauss, this idea was absent in preclassical and
non-Western societies where the "person" was submerged within received

roles and ritual statuses. The boundary between these various dichoto-
mies corresponds to another boundary between academic research tradi-
tions. By and large, historians and the allied disciplines of classical and
Near Eastern archaeology have claimed the centers and anthropologists
have claimed the peripheries. Efforts to understand the encounter between
Europeans and indigenous people are affected by the distances between
these research traditions and by the communication between them. The
lines are less clearly drawn today than they once were both in real world
experience and in academic partitions of that experience. In this paper
I will focus upon a few selected points along the journey that brought
center and periphery, past and present, together as a broader, more inte-
grated field of vision. I am particularly interested in the ways in which
culture theory has sometimes impeded and sometimes kept up with the
integration of historical and anthropological knowledge.

Ethnocentric Bias in Historical Writing

Eurocolonial history has tended to depict native people in terms that
validate Eurocolonial actions. Here is one eighteenth-century explanation
for the hardships suffered by American Indians:

> I pretend not to have known the mind of the Lord, or to have
> been his counsellor, or to be able to comprehend the ways of divine
> Providence. God's judgments are a great deep, but we must be wil-
> fully blind, if we cannot see that the hand of the Lord hath wrought
> this.
> The discovery and the conquest of America, with the amazing
> desolations wrought therein, appear a more remarkable event than
> any other in all prophane history, since the universal deluge. A new
> world, as it was justly called, discovered to the other, or rather to
> Europe, and all its riches and glory overturned, and given away to
> another people, and the aboriginal natives, by famine, sword and
> pestilence, destroyed and wasted away by millions throughout all
> America! (Callender 1838 [1739]: 143)

In early modern times such ideas about manifest destiny continued to
influence historical writing about native people and why it was legitimate
or inevitable that they be displaced. American Indians were described as
"static and unprogressive" while Europeans were "dynamic and acquisi-
tive" (Schlesinger 1968: 5). Another approach was to ignore indigenous
people altogether. In a symbolic sense their land was vacant and therefore
available. This mythconception appears in early as well as recent writing.
One advocate of English colonization wrote in 1622 that, "to us they
cannot come, our land is full; to them we may go, their land is empty.

. . . their land is spacious and void, and there are few and do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes and wild beasts" (Cushman 1963 [1622]: 91).[1] Similarly, Perry Miller wrote his two volumes on *The New England Mind* in 1939 and 1953 as if the first three generations of Puritan colonists had settled upon an uninhabited planet. When he mentions Indians, as in his 1955 essay on "The Shaping of the American Character," Miller revealed himself to be within the grip of stereotypic thinking. Being an American, he wrote, "is not something inherited but something to be achieved" (Miller 1955: 453). Indians, on the other hand, "astonished the first Americans by acting upon instinct" (ibid.: 441).

Early evolutionist writings in anthropology did not challenge nineteenth-century views on the moral advantages of "civilization" over "savagery." Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, attributed the historical emergence of "civilization" from "barbarism" to "the good providence of God" and to the "plan of the Supreme Intelligence" (Morgan 1877: 563). The evolutionists' principal contribution was to add a chronological dimension to the moral dichotomy of "civilized" and "savage" that bridged the distance between these extremes. Although Morgan did not confer halos on tribal people, he did give them a kind of indirect credit as representatives of those long-ago generations whose "struggles," "sufferings," "heroic exertions," and "patient toil" made civilization possible (ibid.).

Anthropology and the Emphasis on Cultural Purity

Franz Boas was the first anthropologist to sweep evolutionary reconstructions aside and to assert at least partial custody of the sacred in behalf of all indigenous people. According to Boas, cultures were neither moral examples nor living fossils but simply different and equally valued.[2] Anthropologists abandoned conjectural history for synchronic theory and sought out societies that had been the least changed by colonial intervention. Such pristine microcosms, they felt, offered the best opportunities for original insight into the structure and function of human society. Anthropologists also felt a powerful incentive to learn what they could about such cultures before they succumbed to debilitating change. Native cultures, hitherto associated with the profane, acquired privileged status in anthropological theory. In emphasizing the importance of the historical purity of indigenous communities, anthropologists such as Alfred Kroeber and Claude Lévi-Strauss also asserted the autonomy of anthropology as a research discipline. Kroeber, for example, wrote in 1954 that "What happened to the California Indians in the years following 1849—their disruptions, losses, sufferings, and adjustments—falls into the purview of the historian rather than of the anthropologist whose prime concern is the

purely aboriginal, the uncontaminatedly native" (Kroeber 1961 [1954]: 120). Similarly, Lévi-Strauss announced a distinction between pure and diluted anthropology:

> Without a doubt, the character of ethnographic investigation is changing as the little savage tribes we used to study disappear and are absorbed into larger entities whose problems come to resemble our own. But if it is true, as Mauss taught us, that anthropology is an original mode of knowing rather than a source of particular types of knowledge, we can only conclude that today anthropology is conducted in two ways: in the pure state and in the diluted state. (Lévi-Strauss 1967 [1960]: 42)

Lévi-Strauss added that "Although they exist in history, these societies seem to have elaborated or retained a particular wisdom which incites them to resist desperately any structural modification which would afford history a point of entry into their lives" (ibid.: 46–47). Echoing Mauss, he noted that "History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations" (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1949]: 18).

Let us consider two examples of what Lévi-Strauss would have described as resistance on the part of indigenous people to allowing history a point of entry into their lives. The first is a 1912 portrayal by Kroeber of Ishi and the second is Lévi-Strauss's reflection on Boas's Kwakiutl informant:

> He feels himself so distinct from his new world, that such a thing as deliberately imitating civilized people and making himself one of them has apparently never dawned upon him. He is one and they are others; that is in the inevitable nature of things, he thinks; and so he does not dream of revolting, of attempting to bridge the gulf by acquiring a new means of communication. (Kroeber 1979 [1912]: 122)

> The Kwakiutl Indian whom Boas sometimes invited to New York to serve him as an informant was quite indifferent to the panorama of skyscrapers and of streets ploughed and furrowed by cars. He reserved all his intellectual curiosity for the dwarfs, giants and bearded ladies who were exhibited in Times Square at the time, for automats, and for the brass balls decorating staircase banisters. For reasons which I cannot go into here, all these things challenged his own culture, and it was that culture alone which he was seeking to recognize in certain aspects of ours. (Lévi-Strauss 1967 [1960]: 44)

At large within these portrayals by Kroeber and Lévi-Strauss is a view of the person who is consumed by custom and whose daily thoughts and

choices refer to the past even after they have crossed the line to modern life. Theoretical perspectives, like culture itself, to borrow Marshall Sahlins's expression, "are always at risk" (Sahlins 1985: ix). The mythical distortions of historians and the static, purist models of anthropologists were inadequate for comprehending the intercultural encounters that made colonial history and anthropology possible. Ishi and the Kwakiutl informant had long been coping with the world-system despite the fact that the world-system had yet to be given a name.

Toward an Integrated Field of Vision

Examining bias. Unable to ignore the fact that large scale historical change had penetrated even the most remote sanctuaries, anthropologists and historians gradually learned to take center and periphery more seriously as an integrated field of vision. One breakthrough was simply to recognize the mythical elements in colonial perceptions and the active bearing of this mythology on the subjugation and destruction of native people. Roy Harvey Pearce (1953), Winthrop Jordan (1968), Richard Slotkin (1973), Robert Berkhofer (1978), Edward Said (1978), Karen Kupperman (1980), and most recently James Rawls (1984), have made major contributions to this genre. Awareness of the anthropological perspective helped historians to recognize this mythology for what it was. Francis Jennings, for example, began *The Invasion of America* with the following credit:

> This book got itself started, unknown to me, when I picked up a used set of Francis Parkman's works in 1956 (at ten cents the volume). Having acquired them, I did the uncharacteristic thing of reading them all the way through, fascinated by the flow of dramatic, if sometimes turgid, prose, and increasingly plagued by a sense of something terribly wrong. I had had an undergraduate course in anthropology under that good taskmaster George Simpson, and Parkman's Indians seemed impossible to reconcile with Simpson's. Growing curious, I began to investigate sources for comparison with Parkman's findings.
>
> The casual inquiry led to a dissertation and a series of articles on matters of historical fact about which Parkman and others like him had been willfully and consistently misleading. (It is not enough to say merely that these historians were in error; in some instances there is evidence of deliberate deception.) I saw little point in being only a negative Boswell; so I set myself the task of unearthing the history that Parkman *et al.* had buried under an ideology—the history of relationships between Europeans and Indians in what ordinarily is called the colonial period of United States history. (Jennings 1975: vii)

Jennings and other historians including James Axtell (1981, 1985) and
Neal Salisbury (1974, 1982) replaced the Eurocolonial view of the Ameri-
can Indian with one that was influenced by anthropology. This in turn
enabled them to represent the frontier more as it was—as an interaction
and confrontation between autonomous social entities, rather than as a
one-sided playing out of Eurocolonial myths of manifest destiny.

The shapes of the world-system. The world-system was complex and
many-headed rather than a monolithic phenomenon.[3] France, England,
Holland, Spain, Russia, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and Portu-
gal carved out separate spheres of influence. As Axtell pointed out, for
example, French Jesuits and English Puritans had very different modes
of colonial evangelism. Ives Goddard and Kathleen Bragdon have begun
to demonstrate the importance of native texts in deciphering complex in-
tersocietal interactions. Bruce Trigger (1975) and others have shown that
frontiers were characterized by interest-based alliances that pitted some
Europeans against others in collaboration with some indigenous groups
against others. The European versus native stereotype obscured rather
than revealed frontier reality.

   Not only were the agencies of the world-system diverse, indigenous
people were even more diverse and coped with exogenous agencies in
numerous local ways. Anthropologists were forced to rethink a concept
of culture that emphasized its changeless or its long-term cyclical quali-
ties. This rethinking did not come easily. Margaret Mead wrote in 1932
that "the study of culture contact is often baffling and nearly always dis-
couraging. . . . each case of contact seems to be almost a meaningless
incident, a hodgepodge of accident rather than a clue to a social process"
(Mead 1932: 4). Coming to grips with these momentous collisions meant
coming to grips with change, time, and power in altogether new ways.
We might characterize the emergent approaches as dialectical or inter-
actional because they encompassed the interplay between an overarching
world-system and indigenous people, each with its own resources and in-
terests. No inevitable outcome to these encounters could be foreseen, and
all parties could be changed in the course of events.

Culture change and the individual unconscious. What appear to be break-
throughs in culture theory often prove to have independent precedents.
Such was the case with Ralph Linton's 1943 essay on "Nativistic Move-
ments" and Anthony Wallace's 1956 classic on "Revitalization Move-
ments," for Max Weber's earlier work on the nature of prophetic in-
novation preceded some of their ideas. Nevertheless, both Linton and
Wallace shifted attention from how culture is received to how it is cre-

ated. Wallace's analysis of the Handsome Lake religion is a masterful integration of frontier history, ethnography, and the role of individual creativity. By Lévi-Strauss's criterion Wallace was doing diluted anthropology but anthropology nonetheless, for he focused entirely upon the agency of unconscious process—dreams and visions. Without claiming to do so, Wallace exposed as anthropological fictions the purist notions that native cultures resist history, or that they disappear in its presence.

Structural change. The prophet Handsome Lake criticized the old order of Iroquois society but also incorporated much indigenous symbolism in the new order that he created. Similarly, anthropologists questioned many of their most basic ideas, but also found some of these ideas to be useful. For example, one criticism of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was that he had not conceived it with history in mind. In his opening words to *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, Marshall Sahlins observed that "Structural Anthropology was founded in a binary opposition, of the kind that would later become its trademark: a radical opposition to history" (Sahlins 1981: 3). Yet Sahlins's recent work on the earliest European contacts in the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere demonstrates the value of a structural approach in deciphering these encounters. Hawaiian culture changed from the moment the ships *Resolution* and *Discovery* anchored there in 1778. In this confrontation between eighteenth-century Hawaiians and Captain James Cook's English crew, each with its own cultural expectations and each ignorant of the other's system of meaning, Sahlins saw not a "hodgepodge" or a "meaningless incident" but an opportunity to observe how the interactions between Hawaiian and English were ordered by their respective cultures, how the Hawaiians interpreted these unprecedented events, and how their culture changed in the process. Sahlins asserts that this "same kind of cultural change, externally induced yet indigenously orchestrated" is "present everywhere in human experience" (Sahlins 1985: viii). By selecting a tightly controlled situation where the world-system is represented by two ships and the native culture is pure by Kroeber's criterion, Sahlins gave a precise account of the logic in collective innovation, what he described as "structured transformation," on the native side of one historic encounter.[4] His relation to received theory is much the same as the Hawaiians' relation to their precontact culture. Both theory and culture changed when confronted with historical challenges, but changed in ways that drew resourcefully upon existing basic assumptions.

Power, structure, and change. As we know from van Gennep's comments on the purifying function of the Roman arch, colonial encounters were

not morally neutral. Nor were they politically equal. As the colonial world-system expanded from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, it imposed political and economic inequality on a global scale. Following Emile Durkheim, the structural-functionalists thought of relations *within* a given society as the key to understanding the cultural or symbolic order. Colonialism introduced a new dimension that structural-functionalism had yet to account for—relations *between societies* based upon relative power. As Salisbury and others have shown, even the earliest colonial trading relationships had major transformative effects upon aboriginal politics and religion long before Europeans came to settle: when Europeans did establish settlements, native communities acculturated in some spheres and resisted acculturation in others. The political, religious, and economic emissaries of the world-system could not simply change native people in their own image. Edward Spicer, for example, illuminated the process whereby dominated people have maintained distinct identities even while changing radically in response to externally dictated events. Jean Comaroff's *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985) is an important recent illustration of this process. Her book is an ethnohistoric and fieldwork account of the Tshidi of the South African–Botswana borderland from about 1700 to the present. Comaroff is interested in how the Tshidi have sustained a strong sense of community identity even while converting to Christianity. The explanation is that Christianity is a legitimate form of religious affiliation in contemporary South Africa and that it provides symbolic and institutional channels for asserting limited independence within the state order. The realities of their oppression require that resistance be expressed in what seem to be nonpolitical domains. This condition, Comaroff argues, is not unique. The Tshidi reinterpretation of Christianity is part of a second global culture, or rather a counterculture, that lies in the shadows of the first. Similar structures of apparent compliance and cultural resistance can be found throughout the third world.

The differences between resistance, compliance, and self-destruction can be subtle, and all may appear simultaneously in the same event. Alcoholism, within-group violence, and witchcraft are widespread reactions to colonial domination. Witchcraft, for example, seems to have had a number of positive functions in autonomous small-scale communities. My work on modern Senegalese witchcraft suggests that this belief became more destructive in the colonial and neocolonial context. There it evolved into a form of symbolic displacement whereby marginal people were punished by others in the community for misfortunes and suffering that they did not cause. For the powerless, it can be tempting to blame their misfortunes on local witches, over whom they have some control, rather than on the real sources of their oppression, over whom they have little control

and whom they may not even know or see. The point that connects this discussion of religious conversion and witchcraft is that power relations between societies have a determining influence on local cultural orders that takes numerous local forms. As the world-system imposes general constraints on widely separated communities, so certain general processes are evident in their responses to these constraints.

Consciousness and culture theory. Not all colonized people settled for symbolic resistance and self-destruction. Some, such as the Saramaka, described in Richard Price's *First-Time* (1983), successfully countered European domination. Their legendary accounts of early struggles and triumphs are now encoded in contemporary ritual and serve as an inspiration to living generations who cherish their independent identity. Presumably such successful resistance is associated with what we mean by consciousness. According to Comaroff, the Tshidi do not quite have it. Their resistance, she writes, "is largely implicit. . . . they remain largely unselfconscious in any literal sense of the counterhegemonies they construct. Like Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur,* they operate with signs that lie 'half-way between percepts and concepts'" (Comaroff 1985: 261). The view of the person expressed here is one who is loyal to custom and who responds to the drumbeat of external events in conformity with collective structural processes.

Without denying the importance and reality of such processes, we might nevertheless wonder where individual calculation, invention, choice, doubt, independence, and experiment fit into the larger picture. This is more difficult to apprehend than the "unconscious foundations" of social life that anthropologists generally study. Renato Rosaldo explored this question in his recent *Ilongot Headhunting* (1980). There he noted with some surprise that the Ilongot are quite capable of constructing, manipulating, and recasting their social universe. "Indeed," he wrote, "one of the most deeply held Ilongot values is that their lives unfold more through active human improvisations than in accord with socially given plans" (1980: 23). Clearly the Ilongot had not read *The Mind of Primitive Man* or *The Savage Mind.* I am not arguing here that contemporary Western ideas of the person are identical with comparable ideas held elsewhere. Rather I am saying that by having emphasized global process, received structure, and the collective basis of individual action, anthropologists have tended to deny individual consciousness an active role in culture theory. In this respect culture theory has both deepened and limited our awareness of what we study.[5] I suggest that our notion of consciousness is one of the last remaining symbols of the sacred that we are protecting within the arches that divide civilized from savage and anthropology from

history. Surely Mauss thought so. He wrote in 1938 that "It is formulated only for us, among us. . . . We have great possessions to defend. With us the idea could disappear" (1985 [1938]: 22).

Conclusion: Ethnohistory and Fieldwork

In their initial tendency to avoid coming to grips with the impact of modern history on native people, anthropologists moved in two directions. One was toward ethnohistory. There they could study the documents that described past cultures at a time when they were closer to their pre-European "pure" form. The other direction was to more remote field sites where traditional cultures were more intact and where anthropologists did not expect to find historical records. Both solutions veered away from the massive changes that most indigenous people had been experiencing for decades and even centuries. Historians accepted this challenge more willingly but with an intellectual heritage that reflected the sacred-profane projections of colonial thought. Modern historians replaced such mythconceptions in part through having familiarized themselves with the anthropological point of view. While historians replaced myth with anthropology, anthropologists struggled to reconcile their own myth of the timeless primitive with history. We have seen some of their successes in that direction. What I find exciting is to connect the historic record with the ethnographic present. I date this combination of interests in my own case to having been asked in the early 1970s to contribute a chapter to volume 15 of William Sturtevant's newly conceived *Handbook of North American Indians* (1978). I view ethnohistory as a form of cultural biography that draws upon as many kinds of testimony as possible—material culture, archaeology, visual sources, historical documents, native texts, folklore, even earlier ethnographies—over as long a time period as the sources allow. One can't do this without taking account both of local-level social history and the larger-scale social and cultural environments that affected that history. This kind of holistic, diachronic approach is most rewarding when it can be joined to the memories and voices of living people. In New England where I did work recently along these lines with Indians and to a lesser extent with whites, and where the records go back to the seventeenth century, such fieldwork can be like interviewing 350-year-old persons with whose earlier experiences one is already familiar. In my conversations and interviews, which focused on folklore, I could hear the voices of ancestors speaking through the present generation, the voice of the larger society in which they had been embedded, and also their own distinctive voices, speaking from their own experiences, as they made their way through the contemporary world. Here in California and throughout the Americas live numerous Native

American communities whose relationship to their land and ancestry is continuous despite the turbulence that they have known over the last several centuries. They cannot be understood in the present without taking both the continuity and turbulence into account. The literature on colonial stereotypes, structural-functional models, religious conversion, revitalization movements, cultural persistence, unconscious resistance, self-destruction, and conscious action helps us to interpret the ethnohistoric pieces and to fit them together in a story that comes close to the truth. Having done this, imagine what preparation it will be for hearing what the living generation has to say. Part of what they say will be familiar and part will be a surprise. Culture theory is best prepared for the part that is familiar. Keeping up with the surprise will be the creative part.

Notes

My wife, Cheryl Leif Simmons, listened to drafts of this paper more than once and also read and commented upon the written text. I am grateful for her clarifying perspective. Any misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and errors in this piece are entirely mine.

1 Without digging too far beneath the surface, one could suggest an additional meaning to this passage. By comparing Indians to foxes and wild beasts there is a hint that Indians were less than human and, furthermore, that they could be hunted.

2 Even Boas generalized about the differences between "civilized" and "primitive." Whereas civilized life requires "the full application of our reasoning powers and a repression of emotional life," primitive life is characterized by a more powerful emotional and unconscious adherence to tradition (Boas 1938: 227).

3 Following Emmanuel Wallerstein, I mean by *world-system* the capitalist world economy that began in Europe in the sixteenth century.

4 For another important ethnohistoric study of culture contact in the Pacific, see Greg Dening's *Islands and Beaches* (1980). I am grateful to Rhys Isaac for bringing this book to my attention.

5 Roy Wagner has argued along related lines: "The inherent contradictions in the various theoretical approaches should be made explicit and be used to elicit an implicit professional community. The ethics and methodologies of fieldwork should become 'transparent' to the creativity being studied. We should subordinate their assumptions and preconceptions to the inventiveness of the 'subject peoples,' *so as not to preempt their creativity within our own invention*" (Wagner 1981: 158–59).

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