AMERINDIAN CULTURAL SURVIVAL: A DILEMMA

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The electronic age in which we live with all it implies as to massive and rapid intercultural communication and exchange is quickly transforming the relative homogeneity and identity of cultures. This is especially true for the smaller and less powerful Amerindian ones that are sitting like frail and deserted islands in a vast buoyant American sea whose internal dynamics continuously assault them with cultural shock waves and the occasional tidal wave that threatens their very foundations. The latest of these tidal waves is electronic technology which is upsetting even the very structures of the dominant culture that created it. The sociodynamics of a strong and highly creative society are a set of unconscious forces that pay little heed to weaker foreigh sociodynamics that may be found within its midst. Strictly speaking, sociological forces per se are not bound by ethical codes; nevertheless, they can be influenced by the decision-makers of a given society if these are made aware of the more nefarious consequences that unhibited forces can have on their own and other societies. This responsibility usually falls on the shoulders of governments; it is a moral responsibility which can hardly be ignored by any group of decision-makers who profess a humanitarian ethic.

There is no doubt that the many different cultures that the world has known have not developed overnight and were always buffeted by the winds of change owing to their internal dynamics and from outside influence as well. History clearly demonstrates that the rule of force ruthlessly annihilated the less powerful cultures or at least transformed them beyond recognition. Might was right. The hard-headed realist would say, along with the famous French fabulist: "la raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure", and therefore, assert that might is still right. Be that as it may, modern man, sensitized by the findings of the social

sciences, has felt the need to expound a counter proposition, at least in principle, to the effect that no culture, irrespective of its size and power, has the right to decide which cultures deserve to survive and which should be annihilated. "A primitive people is not a backward or retarded people; indeed it may possess a genius for invention or action that leaves the achievements of civilized peoples far behind."[1] These are the words of Claude Levi-Strauss whose long experience among various Amerindian groups of South America as an anthropologist lends considerable weight to the moral argument for the survival of Amérindian cultures with the help and understanding of the dominant cultures surrounding them.

The awareness and comprehension of the sociodynamics of small and large collectivities in contact and in fact, in conflict, is an absolute necessity on the part of the elite or decision-makers in both the weaker and stronger societies. It cannot be a one-sided proposition. Social scientists, be they anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists or linguists, have an all-important role to play in creating this climate of sociological awareness in both camps. A position of mutual respect and understanding between the leaders of the majority and minority cultures can only be achieved upon an honest examination of the basic sociological realities, no matter how brutal. Only then can workable solutions be found to the major problems at hand. A climate of mutual trust will not in itself create magical answers to extremely complex questions but it neverthaless remains a sine qua non for honest solutions, be they major or minor, central or peripheral in scope and nature.

The dilemma faced by the Amerindian cultures is, of course, cruel and exasperating, for it deals with the fundamental question of survival as reasonably homogeneous and creative entities in the face of seemingly impossible odds. To let the sociological forces take their course unabated means in many cases rapid and total assimilation into the majority culture with all the painful psychological consequences that this implies. On the other hand, to preserve, revive or create a

viable sociodynamics, necessarily involves individual and collective sacrifices that certain minority cultures may not be able to perform even if there is a strong visceral and rational desire to do so. The price may indeed be too high, even if the majority culture is understanding and willing to help. How can a cultural group retain a viable identity when its main vehicle of cultural expression, its language, is dead? In other instances, only linguistic odds and ends are remembered and used only on occasion by several hundred or a few thousand people at most, not to mention the fact that their ethnic identity is vague and vestigial. What can be done to resolve their dilemma?

It can be maintained that such marginal groups are bound to be the first to suffer psychologically from the cultural ambiguity of their situation once they become aware of it in the face of the rising wave of red power sweeping North America today, especially Canada. This may very well be true but it is unavoidable. In any event, it is a basic thesis of this paper, that all those caught up in the trauma of ethnic or cultural identity, be they marginal and peripheral cases or not, are more likely to benefit from a better understanding of the subtle forces at work in the shaping of their personality and behaviour than if they are left to suffer in ignorance. If they must swim against the current, it is better that they know something about its strength, direction and general behaviour so they can at least make a kind of conscious choice to let go or reorganize their forces in the face of the known hazards and obstacles. Psychoanalysis and many other kinds of mental therapy operate on this principle; in a word, to be aware of the problem is part of the cure even if no easy solutions can be found for it, or none at all, for that matter. This process is what may be termed collective psychotherapy.

For this therapy to be effective it means that certain fundamental concepts must be properly defined and understood in the light of the latest findings in the social sciences, to wit: such vast abstractions as culture, language, personality, structuralism, sociodynamics and survival. These are the key concepts that will be discussed here. Far more important still is to try to show their

intimate and inextricable interrelationship which forms the basic postulate on which rests the subject of this paper. Therefore, it is our purpose to demonstrate that culture, in its anthropological sense, has language as its main vehicle of expression and that human personality is their point of intersection; furthermore, that this conceptual triad is tied together by the hypothetical construct of structuralism; and finally, that this complex entity can survive only by virtue of its self-creating and self-generating internal sociodynamics, with a minimum of interference from the powerful sociodynamics of the surrounding dominant culture. The first thing to be done is to try to delimit the hazy contours of the broad concepts contained in such a proposition.

Since structuralism is an all-embracing concept, we shall tackle it first. The essence of structuralism is contained in the notion that each unit, datum and function used to describe objective reality has no independent existence. On the contrary, each unit and function is so intricately enmeshed that its nature can only be defined in terms of its interdependence with the other units and functions. Units similar in nature and function form various structures and sub-structures which in turn, in themselves, are interdependent. Society, the family and the individual are examples of the interlocking relationship of such units, and functions, their sets and sub-sets. In other words, everything hangs together: no item, no pattern, no configuration, no function is superfluous. Nothing floats at random in a void or vacuum, as it were. Nothing is absurd. All is relevant. Everything is integrated in organized sets of overlapping patterns. It is but fitting to close these brief comments on structuralism by quoting once again Levi-Strauss, considered the father of structural anthropology, in these words: Man's housing has a meaning that goes beyond its relationship to the centre of his social and religious life... The structure of the village does not only reveal the fine interplay of the institutions: it sums up and determines the relationship between man and the universe, between society and the supernatural world, between the living and the dead."[2]

Culture, like language, has been compared to an iceberg, with only one-tenth of its content observable. The material content of culture-- housing, tools, implements, clothing and the obvious customary behaviour of its people expressed in its rituals, music and dance forms, are on the surface of the iceberg, while the forces that animate their open manifestation lie hidden below the surface. The sociodynamics at work in a given linguistic and cultural milieu, that is, the self-creating, self-generating and self-propelling forces of the total set of structures that constitute culture in its broadest anthropological sense, are a set of powerful forces imperceptible to those who are caught up within them, save the cultured elite. Men are never aware of the ground rules of their environmental systems - their culture, their language, their psychology. Man responds to a set of automatic patterns that determine his collective, that is, his linguistico-cultural personality.

The history of man shows that no living or extinct culture, regardless of its size and power, has ever existed without having a language as its principle vehicle of expression. Therefore language presupposes the existence of a culture whose main content it communicates among the members of the community. In turn, human personality if stripped of the formative agents of culture and language, would be an empty vessel indeed. Structuralism, as a working hypothesis, has become a foundation stone of the social sciences, to wit: anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics.

The modern anthropologist sees culture as the entire set of forces visibly and imperceptibly at work in the shaping of a society -- all that goes into informing and forming the individual. In this sense, everyone born and brought up in the confines of a given society inherits a culture, a language and a set of collective personality traits, that are freely and unconsciously transmitted from one generation to another, as a free gift from the gods, as it were. This broad

definition of culture must be clearly distinguished from its popular meaning at least in the Occidental World, where it implies individual conscious effort, will and discipline in man's constant struggle for self-development. Anthropologically speaking, culture is the school par excellence that trains its charges to fit and function smoothly within its structures. It is learning without tears. The following formula highlights the essential difference between the anthropological and popular meaning of culture: everyone has culture but not everybody is cultured. To put it another way, to be cultured is to be aware of one's culture, to understand the subtle processes of learning and human behaviour in society. In a sense, culture is an old recipe for living, indeed, for survival, bearing the stamp of experience and the test of time. In a word, the structures of culture contain the total inherited historical consciousness of a given people. Culture represents a given people's particular set of preferences, predispositions, attitudes, objectives, goals; its particular way of perceiving, feeling, thinking and reacting to objective reality.

In this connection, it is important to say a few words about the intriguing notion of linguistic relativity or the Whorfian hypothesis.[3] It is generally conceded that language has its finger in every area of culture save possibly two other classical modes of cultural expression, notably art and music, but even these are not entirely word free. Briefly, the Whorfian hypothesis can be stated in these words: the basic structures or grammatical categories of language impose on the speaker a particular view of the universe and conditions his emotive responses to this distinct view of reality. According to Whorf, language is not merely an instrument to communicate ideas and feelings but it is itself the shaper of thought and emotion. Our own findings with reference to the spatial categories of the Eskimo language would prove interesting ground for experimentation by the Whorfian group of researchers. It would seem that Eskimos view objective reality in two

dimensions only. Everything they see, objects, people, and areas are delimited and located in space in one of two ways: either the thing viewed is seen as being of two roughly equal dimensions like an igloo, a parka, or a human being, or it is of two distinctly unequal dimensions such as a gun, a harpoon or a river.

Like culture, language can be likened to an iceberg whose surface structures, namely, the speech continuum, constitutes but one-tenth of its entire structures. From a careful analysis of the speech patterns of individuals can be inferred the hidden or deep structures. Language, like culture is made up of an intricate set of interwoven structures whose basic units and functions are interdependent and definable only in terms of eachother. Everything hangs together and rests on contrasting patterns.

We have seen that culture and language are intimately related; their point of intersection is the human personality. And the human personality is vital not only as the main repository of the content of culture and the code of language but also as their main instrument of communication and transmission. In other words, a dead language and an extinct culture are the net result of the total disappearance of the vessel of human personality in that particular language and culture. If the Beothuk Indian language and culture of Newfoundland totally disappeared, it is obviously because there are no more Beothuks to assimilate and transmit their linguistic and cultural patterns.

Therefore, the human personality does not develop in a vacuum nor does it retain its identity by hanging on simply to a few traditional folksongs and favourite food recipes. Physically, the child is conceived and nurtured in his mother's womb. By virtue of heredity he will come into the world with a unique set of characteristics which will distinguish him from the other members of his group. However, the linguistico-cultural milieu, which is another kind of womb, will give him collective personality traits that will enable him to communicate more easily with his fellow members in the community and especially to feel at

home within its structures. What else does the age-old expression of feeling at home mean if not that the individual feels comfortable because he is within linguistic and cultural structures that he knows and understands unconsciously because he was shaped by them, nurtured within them, and he is made to fit and function smoothly inside them. Ruth Benedict, neatly summarizes the inseparability of culture and personality in this happy formula: "Culture is personality writ large; personality is culture writ small."[4]

The content of any particular mind comes from culture. No individual ever originates his culture any more than he invents his language. Culture is the collective side of personality; personality the subjective side of culture. Culture is a kind of suffused light that permeates subtly the psychic and emotional make-up of each individual person that comes within its radius. The collective or linguistico-cultural personality, then, is the total set of latent patterns that predisposes the members of a particular group to behave in one way rather than another.

The sets of structures of culture, language and personality are so inextricably interlocked that it is impossible to eliminate one set without doing violence to the others. For example, if the Eskimos lose their language, they no doubt will retain their slanted eyes and mongoloid spot, and perhaps their drum dance and caribou skin parka as well but who would dare say that these scanty cultural and biological vestiges constitute Eskimo personality and culture?

Normally, a given society or a linguistico-cultural milieu functions well when it is reasonably homogeneous and its sociodynamics is essentially self-propelled, self-creating and self-perpetuating. Its institutions and collective existence must be the expression of this homogeneity and inner functional harmony. Its inventiveness and creativity must be fostered chiefly by the interplay of the total set of forces at work within its structures. It is realized that cultural change is the inevitable result of concrete individual action through whom both

internal and external influences flow. However, if the foreign influence outweighs and overpowers the internal dynamics, a serious disequilibrium will result. Cultural borrowings are as old as history and have worked both ways, from a minority to a majority culture and vice-versa. The borrowings can be done both at the conscious and unconscious levels. Borrowings are normally done to serve certain immediate and specific needs by the borrowing culture but when these are so massive and rapid that they begin to disrupt the internal dynamics of the receiving culture, then the process might be more accurately termed cultural interference. This is precisely the case that applies to Amerindian cultures. For example, schooling was introduced to the Indian and Eskimo population of Canada as a totally alien structure. The curriculum paid little or no respect to the native culture and language of the pupils, for the sole language of instruction was foreign, the curriculum content was entirely foreign and so were the teachers. In such a situation, the Indian or Eskimo personality suffered psychological disarray for its identity was threatened from all sides. Such a program can only lead to rapid and total assimilation of the native peoples.

In recent years the term assimilation has become taboo. It has been subtly replaced by the attenuating and ambiguous concept of integration. This new terminology is but a handy euphemism to camouflage gracefully a continuing policy of assimilation of the native cultures of North America. An even more recent but no less nebulous euphemism called cultural inclusion has been added. For an Eskimo child to be asked to colour a seal instead of a horse, in itself, is a good thing but is a mere external frill and a drop in the vast complex of structure that constitutes culture, language and personality. An Eskimo is not a well-integrated self-respecting Eskimo personality just because his name happens to be Qilavvaq and he can perform a drum dance or draw an igloo, or even because he possesses obvious Oriental physical characteristics.

Always keeping in mind the inseparability of the three components of our basic postulate, we can state that the average Amerindian scorns himself because he cannot identify clearly with the image of a well-integrated personality within his own linguistico-cultural group where even the most vital aspects of its sociodynamics are undermined or in the process of rapid disintegration. His language becomes a useless tool if he lives in the dominant culture and even if he lives on a reservation, very frequently he knows but little of his language and customs. Yet, for all this, he is assiduously aware of his Amerindianness which too often amounts to no more than cultural, linguistic and biological vestiges. In the North American context, total assimilation for him is far more difficult than for the French-Canadian, for example, because his biological differences from the White majority are clearly identifiable. In many ways, the position of the Amerindian is comparable to that of the American Negro who has lost his language of African origin but has nevertheless retained other latent substrata of African culture that are in turn reinforced by his obvious physical differences, as well as by the socio-economic sub-culture to which he belongs. In the case of the American Negro, the emergence of the African nations has increased the prestige of black culture or negritude as it has been aptly called by Senghor, the African poet-statesman. The Amerindian cultures have no such strong and growing cultural fountainhead to turn to for reinforcement. French-Canada has France and the many other francophone countries but the Amerindians have to stand on their own resources which rest all too often on uncertain knowledge and vague memories of better days in a distant past.

In recent years, the Indians of Canada, for example, have attained a new awareness of their cultural identity. Up to the present, they have concentrated their efforts mainly on achieving greater economic equality with the members of the dominant culture. They have also challenged the rightness of their ancient treaty rights with the White man. The question of linguistic survival as such has

been not particularly highlighted largely because there are few of their leaders who are fully aware of its sociological importance in maintaining group identity. Let us say, that this is understood viscerally by most people but it still needs to be articulated to become a meaningful force. Hence, the urgent need to train Amerindians in the social sciences. For instance, it is deeply moving to see a Canadian Indian chief, a leading activist in the movement to reaffirm the traditional rights of his people, assert his Indianness with a mere vestige, wearing the traditional single long braid of hair, while he is forced to admit that he knows nothing of his language because it is extinct. Knowledge of the sociological forces at work in the perpetuation of cultural identity would no doubt enable such a leader to continue his struggle for individual and collective assertion more effectively. Such knowledge, of course, does not in itself guarantee easy solutions for the individual concerned or his group. As a matter of fact, in many cases this new awareness is traumatic for the individual because he is literally crushed under the weight of brutal evidence. Nonetheless, there is no other way out of this cruel Amerindian dilemma. It is a choice between continuing to suffer mutely from various ills whose nature and root causes are unknown or bearing the trauma of unmitigated facts. If he remains ignorant of the ailment, he is not likely to find a suitable remedy for it. Once in possession of the diagnosis of his disease, even if he discovers that there can be no total cure, he can at least enlist the help of hiw own people and others outside his group for help to find reasonable palliatives.

To be able to admit the inevitability of change is therapeutic in itself for all those caught up in it. To be able to devise ways and means to reduce its nefarious effects by seeing that this necessary transformation takes place within the context of the individual's roots, origins and past is surely worth the attention of all those interested in humanitarian ideals. Heidegger would have said: "qu'on se dépayse dans ses origines". To put this same notion paradoxically, it is an exhortation to change while remaining the same. Hobart and Brant, put it another way in their analysis of the Greenlandic situation.[5]

By pursuing a policy of cultural continuity in Greenland, the Danes avoided cultural replacement (their euphemism for cultural genocide) which has led to the present stage of cultural synthesis. This solution may yet prove possible for some Amerindian cultures. For the others, to know the worst, may be best for all concerned.

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