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Indigenous peoples *and modernity*

*To be absolutely modern means
to be helping to dig your own grave.*

Milan Kundera, *Immortality*

*There is not just one single form of modernity, but
many different –and sometimes contradictory– ones . . .*

*...Modern development does not necessarily
do away with traditional folk cultures.*

Néstor García Canclini

John Durston

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Many indigenous leaders and intellectuals in the region are asking themselves how the current rapid spread of free market principles and the process of integration into a single world economy is likely to affect their cultures. The answer depends on what we mean by “culture” and what we mean by “modernity”. Cultures are not rigid sets of traditional norms and values, but instead have a deep-seated logic and a whole constellation of alternative processes which, like constantly evolving computer programmes, give each culture considerable flexibility and capacity to adapt to changes in its environment. Modernity, in turn, should mean tolerance and an appreciation of diversity. The proposals put forward by ECLAC regarding competitiveness, current uses of knowledge and the indispensable element of social equity provide guidelines that can help indigenous peoples, once they have been allowed to assume their role as recognized social actors, to make use of the advantages and sidestep the pitfalls of their situation as this century nears its end.

I

Introduction

This article explores three concepts—culture, knowledge and modernity—¹ and analyses their implications in terms of a more forceful role for the indigenous peoples of Latin America as social, economic and political actors capable of pursuing their own strategies for overcoming poverty and increasing their well-being in the broad sense.

The analysis is based on elements of comparative anthropology and the current debate within ECLAC concerning what must be done in order to change production patterns with social equity within

the current Latin American context (ECLAC, 1990, 1992a and 1992b).

Our starting point is provided by an observed fact and an anguished question. The observed fact, in the words of José Bengoa, is that the inexorable spread of the market economy is one of the facts of Latin American life in the 1990s. The question, which has been posed by various indigenous leaders and intellectuals, is: What effect will this style of development have on our values and our cultures?

II

The crisis of social actors

In the view of many experts, collective actors are in crisis the world over. The percentage of the population belonging to trade unions or mass parties based on class identity is steadily shrinking, and these organizations' places are being taken by causes which temporarily unite individuals from diverse social groups in order to further demands concerning a single issue (e.g., environmental protection). At the same time, the global planning and administration of broad, monolithic policies and their implementation by a national bureaucracy are rapidly being replaced by a search for swifter, more flexible mechanisms based on decentralization and a mounting degree of regional and local autonomy.

Against this background of a changing manner of carrying on political activity all over the world, the indigenous movement is virtually unique in that it combines a cause which draws together

individuals having diverse social identities with the incipient strengthening of a social actor in the classic sense: the indigenous peoples themselves, organized and mobilized to deliberate and act on a collective basis.

In order for a social actor to be successful, determination alone is not enough. Indigenous peoples also need to have four other elements: resources, alliances (as noted by Victor Hugo Painemal), a favourable environment and a strategy. For purposes of analysis, the following thesis will be developed here: that the resources essential to the success of indigenous groups are their own culture and the appropriation of the "universal knowledge" which exists in the world as a whole, and that both the favourable conditions and the alliances they need for their success may be generated by the spread of modernity throughout the world.

□ This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the seminar "The Mapuche people and development: challenges and proposals for meeting them", sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Government of Chile, which was held in Angol, Chile, on 14-16 January 1993.

¹ Most of the propositions set forth in this article fall squarely within the bounds of what, according to the jargon of the day, is known as post-modernism: the rejection of facile "certainties",

whether of a pseudo-scientific, technological, positivist or ideological stamp; a very favourable attitude to multiculturalism and inter-culturalism; and an attitude of humility in the face of complexity and randomness. It seems linguistically absurd, however, to relegate the term "modernity" to a realm associated with ideas of the past. We prefer (as does Berman, 1982) to retain this useful word and to use it to refer to vigorous aspects of the present that have projections for the future. In other words, we seek to gain an understanding of "modernity after post-modernity" (García Canclini, 1990).

III

Culture: definitions and connotations

How can it be claimed that favourable conditions exist for the indigenous peoples of the region in view of the progressive disappearance of traditional practices and institutions in many indigenous communities and the declining use of their native tongues by young people, many of whom also choose to migrate to the cities? In large part, the answer lies in how we define the concept of culture.

If we are to understand each other on this subject, it is important that we should not use the term "culture" to express different concepts or—even worse—fuzzy ideas. Many people have a picturesque, folkloric image of indigenous culture, and different writers have used the word "culture" to mean different things. Indeed, a still-unresolved theoretical debate surrounds this concept, and it has a number of different definitions. However, we need to decide on an explicit definition and also on the shades of meaning and connotations that we attach to the concept of culture or, for that matter, to any concept which we wish to use to carry on a meaningful dialogue.

Anthropologists are generally agreed that all cultures have two major components: a world view or *weltanschauung*, i.e., a coherent set of beliefs about reality, and an ethos, composed in turn of a scale of values that determines attitudes about good and evil and a set of norms or rules as to how people should behave.

In order to constitute a culture, this dual perspective—of reality and of what is proper—needs to be shared and transmitted within specific groups of people via a common language. In modern anthropological analysis, there is a tendency to separate the concept of culture (an abstract system of ideas not observable as such in the physical world) from the concept of social structure, i.e., a set of practices, customs, regular forms of interaction and institutions that do exist in the real world and can be observed as they are expressed in people's behaviour. It may also be useful—for reasons that will become evident—to make a distinction between the concept of knowledge and that of the values of a culture. A culture—in this latter sense of a coherent system of values—is the

ethical foundation shared by the people concerned which makes it possible for all the institutions of a given society to function and for its members to interact.

Culture is not, however, a simple set of immutable rules. Many anthropologists believe that, in addition to expressing themselves through language, cultures *function like computer languages or programmes* in that they are mutable and involve statements, routines and sub-routines that usually remain latent, manifesting themselves only under appropriate circumstances.

According to this view, each culture is a mental construct which has a deep-seated logical structure (Levi-Strauss, 1962): a not immediately discernible grammar which governs and reinforces stated values and offers different rules for different circumstances. Its enormous variety of principles or practices may even contain mutually incompatible elements that only come into play when different circumstances call for different responses. This flexibility gives people and societies the ability to respond to the wide range of differing—and in some cases entirely new—situations that arise every day.

Ultimately, it is the deep-seated structure of a culture that will determine the social institutions and forms of behaviour that are required by any society. This underlying structure is expressed symbolically and is learned, largely unconsciously, by children at their mothers' knee through legends, stories, ceremonies, rituals, proverbs and sayings; it is reinforced each time the members of the social group conduct a ceremony or turn to each other for help, or when someone repeats a traditional saying.

Nevertheless, all cultures are constantly changing and adapting their beliefs and norms in response to the changes that occur day in and day out in the social, economic and intellectual environment. In this sense, there is no such thing as a traditional culture; no culture in the world today is exactly the same as it was a generation ago or even last year. Culture, as a "silent language", is continually evolving as people change the ways in which they use it. The Spanish spoken by Cervantes and the English used

by Shakespeare differ substantially from the present forms of these languages, and some of these differences even involve their deep underlying structures, though most of the changes are in the vocabulary used. They are still Spanish and English, however, even though they have been transformed. The English and Spanish cultures have been similarly or more profoundly transformed in the same period.

In order to illustrate the mutability of cultures by making an analogy with computers, we might say that cultures, like computer programmes, can incorporate new ideas, principles and procedures, with corresponding adjustments in the original programme, so long as those changes do not threaten to throw the internal logic of the cultural system's underlying structure totally and irremediably out of balance. Cultures are regenerated and altered every day as their members strive to confront old and new problems and challenges. The more creative individuals, in particular – inspired by their readings of new elements seen through the eyes of their own culture – invent new forms of expression and new social arrangements. These experimental innovations are then evaluated by the other members of the community or population and are eventually either rejected or integrated into the culture and shared practices of the group.

When considered from this vantage point, it is obvious why it makes no sense to talk about one

culture being superior to another. One system of values, religion, etc. is not intrinsically more or less efficient or “correct” than another in universal terms; each culture is the most appropriate one for sustaining that particular social system, because the two developed together. It is also the most appropriate for that particular group of people, because that group's members have, consciously and unconsciously, incorporated the deep-seated structures of the culture in which they were raised into their own value systems and their own personalities. This does not mean, of course, that any culture has ever attained complete perfection, either in its present form or any of its past expressions.

No culture is, in and of itself, better or worse than any other, but it is indeed true that groups of people who have suffered deculturation (i.e., the total or partial destruction or loss of the *weltanschauung* and norms that guided a culture's members in their original social setting) are clearly at a disadvantage. Theoretically, it is possible for individuals to change over from one culture to another, but it is a long and sometimes painful process that will always remain incomplete. And when the original culture is associated with an ethnic identity involving distinct physiological features, then a person's or group's effort to assimilate an alien culture and to integrate themselves entirely into a dominant society marked by racist stereotypes is doomed to failure.

IV

What do we mean by “knowledge”?

1. Information, tools and beliefs

Two important components of knowledge are information, on the one hand, and the ability to handle methods and tools of communication and analysis on the other. Some of the most important such tools are reading, writing and arithmetic; mastery of these tools provides easier access to other more specific tools, such as scientific methods of analysis, foreign languages and computer skills, and possession of them permits the absorption of ever-greater amounts of information.

But knowledge is also belief. We often lapse into ethnocentrism, thinking that our particular store of

knowledge enables us to “know the truth”, whereas the knowledge of other cultures merely consists of blind beliefs or, even worse, superstitions. However, what we believe to be true this year will surely have changed by next year and may be discarded entirely a decade or century hence. The essence of modern scientific method is to remember always that there is no such thing as *absolutely certain knowledge*: only *knowledge of hypotheses* which, though they may be widely shared by many highly intelligent and learned people, are always subject to possible revision or improvement.

As the counterpart to the type of knowledge peculiar to a specific culture, or “local knowledge”

(Geertz, 1982), there is now also “universal knowledge”, which has been amassed and built up over time with inputs from all the peoples of the world, is available to all, and has already been integrated into a large number of specific cultures all over the world.

Thus, the “local knowledge” of the Mapuche people, for example, includes specific knowledge in such areas as the sustainable management of the ecosystems of southern Chile, natural medicine, and cooperative forms of labour. These types of specific knowledge can and should be shared with other people by being written down and published, so that they can become part of the universal body of knowledge.

This also means that a given culture cannot be regarded as superior to another merely on account of the *knowledge* possessed by its members. If knowledge is a universal asset, then it is the common heritage of all mankind, and anybody can take that knowledge and integrate it into their own culture. Of course, a given people may be in an advantageous or disadvantageous position *vis-à-vis* other social actors with whom they interact in terms of the power they hold at any point in time, depending on that people's particular mix of their own culture with appropriate elements of the universal culture that they have incorporated up to that time.

2. Knowledge and economic power in the 1990s

The new economic significance of knowledge in the closing years of this century is a result, in particular, of the way in which the relationship between knowledge and production has changed (Toffler, 1991; ECLAC, 1992a). Today, the production of goods and services requires proportionally less energy and

materials than in the past, but an increasingly large amount of knowledge. This also means that less and less capital per unit of product is required as the proportion of information used in that unit's production and marketing grows. Knowledge is reducing the need for raw materials, manual labour, time, space and capital, and it is becoming the chief resource of economically advanced economies. Since knowledge is always progressing, competition for markets means that knowledge is increasingly taking the place of capital as the scarcest factor of production.

Although this description of what is beginning to take place in advanced economies may sound very remote from the world of indigenous peoples, there are two aspects which are actually highly relevant: first, that a firm or nation which has the necessary knowledge can always attract financial capital and, second, that knowledge, unlike capital, cannot be held for long as private property but can instead be shared and used by anyone.

Today, owing to the degree of economic interpenetration and interconnected communications that exists, the specific, exclusive “local” knowledge possessed by any given culture is not enough for coping with the complexity of the outside world. The members of a community or a people also need the background information and technical tools existing in the universal pool of knowledge (which is available to all, generally free of charge) if they are to take the right decisions and appropriate actions with respect to other social actors, when reacting to the rapid changes taking place in the conditions for that interaction. In order to have the ability to act within the larger society, profound cultural self-knowledge must be coupled with a wide-ranging body of knowledge about the rest of the world and the universal sciences.

V

Modernity and indigenous peoples

Contrary to what is often believed, modernity is much more than the mere adoption of the latest technology in order to boost productivity; social and cultural aspects also form an essential part of it. Modernity means that the common man can begin to control his own collective destiny by becoming the subject of his own modernization (Berman, 1982). In

the words of García Canclini, modernity involves movement in four basic directions: “towards emancipation, towards expansion, towards renewal and towards democratization” (García Canclini, 1990, p. 31). Democracy and equal opportunities are thus pivotal aspects of modernity; neither the extreme poverty of a large portion of the population nor inequity are

compatible with it. The neoliberal economic model is not modern either, since it is incompatible with many of the basic ethical postulates of modernity which are gathering force in the world. In the field of economic systems, modernity is not the tooth-and-nail, head-long form of capitalism espoused by the neoliberal model but rather a type of market economy that has been tamed by an active civil society, with social actors who take part in the government of an active, interventionist, but not hypertrophic State.

Modernity is also defined by the acceptance of conflict as a normal part of democratic life and by the reciprocal tolerance that permits social conflicts to be resolved without violence. Little by little, these ideas—tolerance of diversity, democracy, the negotiated settlement of disputes—are gaining ground. Cultural modernity entails, above all, the end of dogmas, greater humility regarding our real knowledge of mankind's complex intercultural reality, and a large dose of caution in proposing or imposing measures based on our own beliefs about what is true and what is good.

Indigenous peoples have lived through a long history of conflict and domination in which sectors of society and many national governments have mounted frontal attacks against them. Today, many governments and portions of national societies seem willing to support these peoples' efforts to defend their right to exist, to have a culture of their own and to raise their material living standards. This more favourable situation for the cause of indigenous peoples is a new development. It is one aspect of Latin America's—and other regions'—entry into the modern world.

Within this new context, new ways of fighting injustice and upholding legitimate rights also need to be found. Confrontation still has a place, but a very different one: as a starting point for a process of competition and negotiation, and as an effective and dramatic way of presenting negotiable demands.

In a sense, we may see modernity as one aspect of the relatively recent emergence of a universal culture. In addition to universal knowledge, a system of values—the other facet of any culture—is also beginning to find its own universal, modern expression in, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At this stage in the discussion it is important to emphasize a point about which there is as yet little awareness. The acquisition of technology and of formal education by the indigenous peoples of Latin America does not necessarily entail their absorption

by national, European or North American culture. On the contrary, the type of modernity that is becoming a growing presence throughout the world not only tolerates diversity but actually values and strengthens it. Thus, aspects of modernity include the activities of the worldwide environmental movement and the increasing awareness and understanding of the rights of indigenous peoples.

In the economically more advanced countries, what we are seeing now is not the monotonous cultural uniformity that was predicted in past decades but rather the most heterogeneous array imaginable of cultures and subcultures, all of which are constantly engaged in an effervescent process of reciprocal—although not always harmonious—exchange.

This diversity and this flourishing multiplicity of cultures in the societies of the centre is, in large part, a result of recent changes in the cold world of economics. In that world, diversity—both the genetic diversity of plants and animals and the cultural diversity of mankind—is valued because it is seen as a pool of opportunities, of resources that are potentially valuable as a source of profits for modern capitalism.

Although it is highly doubtful that entrepreneurs value cultural diversity as much as they have learned to value the potential of biodiversity, they nonetheless benefit from cultural diversity in three ways: from the wealth of creative energy that gives rise to the invention of new products and tastes; from the store of cultural and material goods that already form part of existing cultures; and from the demand for culturally-specific products generated by members of the various cultures. The remarkable agility of communications and of technological response in today's globalized economy makes it possible to satisfy highly specialized tastes and demands in small niches within the world market. Although mass production and the formation of mass tastes through advertising still predominate, what this market is now seeking is not so much mass-produced, uniform goods designed for standard tastes as infinitely diversified products to satisfy infinitely diverse tastes. If there is a demand for indigenous Andean music, for example, capital will become available to enable some firm to satisfy that demand and turn a profit.

Indeed, the market for all kinds of products to satisfy the demand of the Afro-American and Latin American cultures is already a vast one that provides multimillion-dollar profits for countless companies of all sizes. What counts, in this context, is purchasing power and effective demand: if there is an effective

demand, backed up by hard cash, for the creative expressions of a given culture or subculture on the part of its members or admirers, then that culture will prosper.

A significant portion of the effective demand for indigenous cultural expressions today comes from a vast, amorphous sector of the population; it is chiefly among the more educated strata that an appreciation of indigenous cultures transcends the context of the market. This is based on a modern scientific and ethical mind-set into which certain anthropological, ecological and other ideas (whether clearly defined or rather vague) have been incorporated. These strata's impact also extends beyond their actual economic demand, because their members are accustomed to acting and to expressing their views publicly, thereby influencing government policy.

The indigenous cultures and societies of today have been under siege for centuries, but they have

not been wiped out. As true modernity takes hold (after all, everyone claims to want to "modernize"), the characteristics of that modernity outlined above will give rise to an environment which, in net terms, would appear to be more favourable for the cultural and physical survival of indigenous peoples. If the State, rather than laying siege to indigenous peoples, fights against such harassment, and if those peoples take up the role of effective social actors on the basis of the power of their own culture and the universal knowledge they have incorporated, and if they take advantage of the alliances offered by the environmental and indigenist movements, then there is a good chance that they will flourish, even though harassment in the form of racial discrimination and the fierce and as yet untamed aspects of the market economy may persist.

VI

Ethno-development and modernity

1. Social development and the reduction of extreme poverty

How do these concepts of culture, knowledge and modernity influence the development of indigenous peoples? Social development means increasing the well-being of the entire population in various ways: in material terms, in the perception of self-worth and in the realization of individual potentials. Ethno-development may therefore be defined concisely as the formulation and fulfilment by an ethnic group of its own objectives in respect of its well-being and of a strategy for attaining them.

One of the greatest obstacles facing indigenous peoples who are trying to attain a state of well-being and preserve their culture is extreme poverty. This is all the more true when there are opportunities for escaping poverty that involve bypassing the local economic system, when is barely sustaining the population and, hence, the reproduction of their culture. If the only prospect that an indigenous community can offer its young people is an unremitting struggle simply to survive, then the chances of that society and that culture actually surviving are much lower than what they will be if that community can offer ways of satisfying its members' basic needs that do not involve self-exploitation.

Escaping extreme poverty in today's world entails more than merely acquiring the necessary material resources; it also involves achieving sufficient levels of productivity to permit participation in increasingly integrated and competitive markets.

2. A simplistic vision of culture and economic development

Generally speaking, the relationship between culture and economic development is still very poorly understood. The problem starts with the mistaken idea, as mentioned earlier, that some cultures are superior in every way to most others. A simplistic and ethnocentric evaluation of the cultures of the rich nations led to the persistence of another simplistic proposition: that development meant the wholesale adoption of the basic elements of Northern European cultures or, later, the culture of the United States or Japan.

It is important to remember, however, that the United States and Japan –and, more recently, the so-called "Asian tigers"– have developed their *own* production, social and political models based on their own cultures and on the integration into those cultures of universally available scientific and technological knowledge along with a few specific

organizational elements observed and analysed in various other nations.

In the light of what has been said above about the characteristics of culture, it can be deduced from these examples that increased productivity based on the incorporation of universal knowledge is not only compatible with the maintenance of a people's own culture, but is actually essential in order for an increase in output to result in a higher real level of well-being for the population. The choice is thus between "inward-looking" modernization, which involves making changes in a people's own culture without causing a breakdown in the system, and "outward-looking" modernization, pursued in a futile and harmful attempt to identify with another culture and another people.

In order to compete internationally, a nation needs not only a high level of productivity and strongly motivated enterprises, but also a social system in which all groups and sectors are involved –and feel involved– in the development of the nation as a whole (ECLAC, 1992a and Toffler, 1991). In order to achieve systemic competitiveness, a nation needs to attain a sufficient level of equity for its population to ensure long-term socio-political stability and a high degree of motivation in the spheres of labour and civic affairs. Hence, avoiding a situation in which whole sectors of society are excluded from the benefits of development and from a democratic decision-making process regarding the development style to be used is a necessary condition for the type of economic change required in the Latin America of today (ECLAC, 1992a).

This analysis of the new requirements for competitiveness suggests three conclusions of relevance to indigenous peoples. First, these new requirements involve remedying the marginalization and exploitation of indigenous peoples within each national State. Second, these same systemic principles can be used as guidelines by a people or even a community; for communities, too, have to compete, economically and politically, with other social actors, although in their case it is within the same national territory and State. Third, indigenous peoples have certain comparative advantages: they possess their own, relatively intact culture; their individual members are beginning to exhibit a renewed identification with their destiny as a people; and they have a fairly equitable distribution of wealth.

Finally, indigenous peoples can become more competitive than before because their members no longer totally lack formal education: for example, according to a study in which ECLAC took part through the Latin American Demographic Centre (CELADE), only 1% of the Mapuche people between 10 and 29 years of age living on reservations in southern Chile have not finished at least one year of schooling. Moreover, for the first time, more young Mapuche women have received schooling than their male counterparts: only 0.8% of the young women, versus 1.5% of the young men, have had no formal schooling (CELADE/INE/Universidad de la Frontera/Instituto Indígena/PAESMI, 1990). This positive trend is also to be observed in Bolivia, Peru and many other countries of the region (CELADE, 1992). In many indigenous societies, women constitute a valuable but thus far underutilized resource. In addition to their newly acquired formal education, indigenous women's age-old ability to manage their households' resources and their inclination to be of service without personal ambitions ought to make a useful contribution to recent efforts to practise community self-management and pursue collective deliberations. Realizing this potential would involve making some changes in interpersonal relationships, the institutional structure of the household and some elements of indigenous culture. It is a question that merits in-depth analysis, especially by the male members of the indigenous population.

We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that the amount of universal knowledge taken in thus far by indigenous peoples is less than what has been acquired by other social sectors or actors with which they must compete. This gap, rather than reflecting some "necessary" threshold of knowledge for development, represents a disadvantage that needs to be progressively narrowed on an ongoing basis.

3. Knowledge for political competition and negotiation

The principles and weapons of modern competition do not apply only to the economy; competition is also an essential part of successful socio-political movements. Within the region (even in those cases where the dominant society persists in its attempts to assimilate the indigenous population), the imposition of the Spanish language, training of indigenous persons as professionals and the penetration of the mass media in indigenous communities are in large

measure having a boomerang effect: they are serving as resources and vehicles for a heightened awareness, are giving this population a renewed appreciation of its own culture and are leading to a "bolder and more global approach on the part of what are now called the Indian Nations in their statements and proposals" (Albó, 1991, pp. 330-331).

One of the non-economic competitive applications of knowledge is in litigation (regarding land, racial discrimination, etc.). Participation in lawsuits is, in a sense, a form of competition, since the party which has the best prepared case and the fullest understanding of how the judicial and legal systems work has improved its chance of winning. The use of learning experiences that incorporate numerous and varied elements of universal knowledge is also a valuable way of dealing with profit-seeking incursions into the community by outside agents, even though these incursions may be within the current laws, since either some type of agreement must be reached with these agents or else some legal way has to be found to thwart them.

Accomplishing this calls for mastery of a type of skill which, until recently, was not studied: the art of negotiation, whether to find a solution acceptable to both parties or to forge effective alliances with other social forces. Negotiating techniques have now been studied in various contexts in different parts of the world, and although each culture has its own way of negotiating, the abstract principles (when presented in a suitably didactic form) constitute a set of skills that can be learned. Since each indigenous community and group competes—and needs to coexist—with other social actors, these skills can play a valuable role in helping them, for example, to negotiate more successfully with a neighbouring community, to negotiate water rights with non-indigenous firms or social sectors, to negotiate shared rights to land, forests or subsoil mineral deposits, or to improve alliances and political platforms in cooperation with other indigenous or non-indigenous forces.

4. What is to be done?

The time has come to re-state our original question in the light of these various considerations. Rather than assuming a passive, defensive stance and asking "what will happen", however, we should ask what can be done to make use of the openings and alliances which the development style now emerging in the

region offers the indigenous peoples and their cultures while, at the same time, they prepare themselves to face the sizeable risks that it entails. It is not, of course, a matter of writing up recipes for success but rather of reflecting upon some of the implications of the preceding analysis.

Such an analysis leads to the conclusion, first of all, that increasing a people's level of formal education is of fundamental importance. A comprehensive universal education, in this context, means that all young persons belonging to a given ethnic group should gain a solid grasp of their own language and history, traditional techniques for managing the local ecosystem, their natural medicine, their norms, values and religion, and the mode of operation of their social institutions and practices based on reciprocity. It involves going beyond the mere expression of appreciation of the indigenous culture and, instead, actually transmitting the culture itself. It might be better for the public educational system to leave this job to the local wise men and women rather than attempting to prepare a standard textbook aimed at providing a faithful interpretation of this complex and subtle mental construct, part of whose richness may lie in its local variations. An essential foundation for such an undertaking is a mastery of the native language, which contains the logical structure of a group's particular way of thinking, as well as countless idiomatic expressions that reflect and transmit the culture's *weltanschauung* and values.

A universal education, however, also means learning to read well and to analyse wisely what is said on television and radio about economics, politics and culture. It means that a large number of young members of the indigenous population must attend university so that they may assume important positions within the national society or serve their communities and movements by providing professional analyses and technical expertise. It means that these people must study their own history as professional historians so that, rather than repeating the single, definitive "truth" that they have been taught, they will be capable of developing increasingly novel hypotheses based on fresh data and acquiring an ever-deeper comprehension of their own ethnic group's history and culture. It means that the upcoming generation of indigenous peoples, as well as developing a deep-seated appreciation of their own identity and tradition, will also gain an understanding of the scientific, technological, economic and political

changes taking place in the world in which their people must live. And it means that the not-so-young will also continue to learn on an ongoing basis by using their reading skills and study habits to continue absorbing elements of universal knowledge. The

important thing is that this process of appropriation must emanate from the culture itself, so that the culture will be a force in its own modernization and thus contribute to selecting which new elements are to be incorporated.

VII

Some final thoughts

The arguments set forth in this article are intentionally optimistic, with the aim of promoting debate on the subject. The final word is far from having been said; there are empirical data which indicate that the multi-faceted assault being mounted against indigenous cultures continues to weaken their institutions, practices and self-images in many specific cases. The optimistic viewpoint taken here therefore needs to be tempered somewhat in order to bring it more closely into line with the complex, contradictory and poorly-understood situation as it actually stands: a task which needs to be pursued on an urgent, sustained basis.

1. Culture: imperfect and abstract

As we have seen above, no culture is intrinsically better or worse than others, and each is "the best" only for its own members. The corollary of this principle is that no culture is perfect, and this truth must be borne in mind in order to prevent Indianism from becoming a form of ethnocentrism or of reverse racism. The idealization of the current or past manifestations of a culture is a serious mistake. The first reason why this is so is that all cultures conflict, to some extent, with the principles of human rights which hold that the highest value, in this new universal culture, is the well-being of all individual persons. Second, in a world that has always been in flux, and in which cultures are also always in a process of evolution, the achronistic overvaluation of a fleeting manifestation of a given culture is a negation of that force which is generated by its ongoing, changing re-creation. Third, the people who re-create their cultures in response to these changes are fallible, and sometimes their responses are ineffective; because of this possibility of error, feedback is needed in the form of information and thought, along with timely

corrections, in a process of trial and error that is an important part of the means by which cultures survive.

In analysing cultural change, it is essential that we avoid anthropomorphizing culture, which, after all, is an abstraction, not a thinking being capable of independent action. It is incorrect to say that traditional culture is wise; it is living beings who know—or do not know—how to make use of their cultures. We therefore need to rectify the possible impression that it is the culture as such which reacts to changes in the environment. It is *people* who react to changes, although in so doing they do indeed use the values and knowledge of their culture when they take decisions or act. People can also make mistakes: they may fail to take necessary actions, or they may act in a way that weakens their own institutions, the practices that uphold their form of social organization, and the ways in which their culture is transmitted and reaffirmed.

2. Obstacles to the resurgence of indigenous culture

It is very important, then, not to overstate our case or to give the impression that the flourishing of indigenous culture and the material well-being of indigenous peoples are ensured. There are at least three types of obstacles that may stand in the way of this, and they are connected with the incorporation of elements from the universal culture, the consolidation of a context and ethos of modernity, and the cultural impacts of new sorts of economic relations.

a) *Incorporation of elements from the universal culture*

A culture's norms and values are based on certain beliefs about reality and about the forces at work

in the world, either for good or for evil from a human viewpoint. Obviously, many components of the universal body of knowledge may run counter to a given culture's vision of the cosmos, especially if that vision has little in common with the European view. There is a very real danger that, if new beliefs are implanted on a systematic, comprehensive basis, they may weaken the culture's value system and hence the social system of a people or nation that is absorbing a large quantity of new knowledge very rapidly.

The human psyche can accept the coexistence of two types of beliefs, however: one based on evidence and deduction, the other based on faith. It is perfectly feasible to reconcile a vast body of modern scientific knowledge with religious faith. Acceptance of faith healing, for example, is quite common among people who are completely integrated into Western culture and universal knowledge. It may therefore be supposed that the indigenous religions of the Americas, too, can coexist and prosper as universal knowledge becomes incorporated into their own cultural frameworks.

b) *Limited consolidation of modernity*

Socio-cultural modernity is still a long way from becoming firmly prevalent in the world. For example, tolerance among different ethnic groups and cultures as a basis for peaceful, democratic forms of competition is still not really widespread. This raises two problems, one of which is obvious while the other may be less so. The evident problem is that there are still large reactionary sectors of the population that seek to promote an order based on the repression of divergent opinions and the continuation of inequalities in terms of well-being and decision-making power. This hinders the implementation of strategies aimed at preserving each group's own culture and reducing poverty. In their contacts with the indigenous population, members of the dominant society transmit their cultural stereotypes, which, in "pre-modern" contexts, include the image of the indigenous culture as barbaric. The power of this dominant culture –by virtue of the universal knowledge that has been incorporated into it, rather than through any merit of its own– has caused many indigenous persons to feel that their identities are worthless and to conclude that the dominant culture's stereotypes and racial prejudices are as accurate as its practical knowledge is. But perhaps even greater harm is done by those actors in the dominant society who want to

help indigenous peoples by "civilizing" them. The key to combating the extremely harmful effect which this has on indigenous people's psycho-social well-being and on the vigour of indigenous cultures lies largely in strengthening modern scientific and ethical values within non-indigenous society and promoting a greater awareness on the part of the less educated members of the dominant society about the value and dignity of indigenous cultures. At the same time, in order to combat the effects of the dominant society's racial prejudices, the indigenous movement can increase its ties with institutions that work to strengthen the indigenous population's sense of identity and self-esteem as a means of laying the groundwork for economic progress.

The other, less obvious, problem may be stated as follows: although a feeling of self-worth is essential to psychological well-being, if exaggerated it can lead to disparaging attitudes towards other cultures. Especially in the case of people whose own cultures have been discriminated against and denigrated by dominant groups, reactive ethnocentrism and reverse racism are very real dangers. The consequences of such racism are there for all to see in the daily news. Its current manifestations include the suffering caused by the fanaticism of the Shining Path guerrillas among the indigenous population of Peru, the barbaric intercultural war in the former Yugoslavia, attacks by neo-Nazi groups in Europe, and the fratricide perpetrated among different religious groups in India.

c) *The cultural impact of new types of economic relations*

Any innovation in a people's economic relations will undoubtedly have a cultural impact, because cultures are also expressed and reinforced through the economic relations of production and distribution. A changeover from annual to permanent crops, for example, will eliminate the *raison d'être* of many forms of reciprocal aid in agricultural tasks and take away the significance of rituals associated with the annual renewal of the crop cycle: planting, praying for rain, harvesting, threshing, etc. The establishment of a tourist centre may provide gainful employment, but may also involve servile positions or entail posing for snapshots, which may do serious harm to those so employed.

In the final analysis, we must ask just how fragile indigenous cultures are, or just how adaptable

they are. The argument has been put forward here that cultures are generally more flexible and adaptive than is commonly thought. The current indigenous cultures of the Americas, in particular, have remained vigorous despite their history; clearly, they are especially hard to kill off, partly because they have become "cultures of resistance".

Not all the original cultures of the Americas have been able to resist, however, nor can all those that exist today be described as vigorous, especially as far as the younger generation is concerned. Nor should we arrive at generalizations covering highly specific situations, each of which should be analysed within its own context by the relevant community so that this community can make the necessary decisions. What impact would a new production system have on the culture? Is that impact acceptable, or does its cultural cost outweigh the material benefits? How could the proposed new system be renegotiated in order to make it less harmful for the culture? The fact of the matter is that these questions are very difficult to answer even when all the background material is at hand. Especially in cases of absolute poverty, when people are barely eking out a living, many individuals are likely to take advantage of any opportunity whatsoever to raise their income level, without stopping to reflect or hesitating for a moment, because they are desperate to ease the constraints of a nearly intolerable situation.

Of course, the decision to adopt a potential economic innovation or not is a decision to be made by the community itself through its decision-making institutions. Information feedback and the rectification of decisions are guided by the culture, but they are obviously actions taken by fallible persons, whether as individuals, as a household or collectively as a social actor. Indigenous communities or movements should constantly be monitoring events in their environment and should gather, analyse and discuss the available information. There should also be periodic collective decision-making processes, and an ongoing dialogue should be held with the main actors, whether they are allies or adversaries (none of which should be categorized *a priori* as an unconditional enemy).

3. Mechanisms for decision-making and action

Decision-making and action at the local level call for institutional forums where issues can be debated; if such forums do not exist, they have to be invented,

but without slavishly importing models used by other cultures or, on the other hand, imposing a model chosen by national indigenous leaders. For the most part, the specific configuration of such forums will take shape spontaneously within each local group in response to the need to create mechanisms that fulfil these purposes along with a number of common basic conditions.

The answer to the anguished question of "what should we do?" will come from the community and the local environment, but the national indigenous movement can create general conditions conducive to community activation and can provide assistance for specific local processes as a way of influencing that answer. One example is the formation of commissions to influence the national political debate; another is the selection, by majority choice, of a common stance to be maintained at the national level.

Indigenous communities or organized national movements, just like any other substantive decision-making entity, may find the services of outside consultants to be useful. A particularly valuable contribution may be made by a supportive form of social anthropology (Colombes, 1982), in which anthropologists and other professionals—ideally, themselves members of indigenous peoples—provide analyses and formulate considerations as inputs for the councils formed by indigenous peoples, so that these councils may arrive at the best possible decisions when dealing with economic and political changes, opportunities and hazards. The use of advisory assistance furnished by specialists is, in fact, a typically modern phenomenon in that it provides a way of making use of specialized universal knowledge whose internalization by individual leaders or at the grass-roots level would be inefficient or would take too long. Non-indigenous agencies that seek to support the indigenous cause, for their part, are in even greater need of analyses regarding the effects of their assistance on the culture and social institutions of the relevant indigenous population, so that they can avoid approaches that do more harm than good in terms of that population's quality of life, in the broad sense of the term.

In sum, it seems inevitable that indigenous cultures will change, just as they have always changed in order to respond more appropriately to new demands, whether those demands take the form of threats or opportunities. But it is not inevitable that they will disappear, at least not if they make use of

both their own knowledge and universal knowledge with a view to the development of their own culture, if they keep a close watch on changes in their sur-

roundings, and if they take the necessary steps to deal with the changes—both negative and positive—that take place within that environment.

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