

## **Impediments to Analysis**

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For some years now it has been apparent to me that the Indian affairs scene is an intellectual desert. Not only does one never hear any new ideas or analyses, but also the bromides eternally repeated over and over by Indians are becoming grosser and grosser. What is the problem? Obviously, most educated Indians simply repeat the latest desperate lunacy they have heard from powerful whites. One wonders if it is the stupid and the followers of orders among the young Indians who are selected out for "advancement" by the modern American school system. However, the school system hasn't turned all educated Indians into parrots, surely? There must be some bright and independent educated Indians. Recently, I have been considering the general impediments to creative thinking by Indians, over and above the "bone-headedness" created by the school system. I will talk in this piece to what seems to me the impediments to incisive and creative thinking among the later group.

Firstly, I think that modern Indians are too affected, emotionally by the racial minority status to which we are assigned by American society. And we are indeed becoming more and more of a standard racial minority of American society. Structurally, at least half of the Indians in the U.S. live scattered out among whites, particularly in city areas; for Indians under 40 more than half live in this condition, and for certain tribes there are more than half in cities as well. What is even more serious is the fact that we are slowly taking over that above definition of ourselves, along with all of the emotional problems that come with viewing one's self and group as a racial minority of a larger society - rank considerations, negative definitions, social acceptance, subtle discrimination, etc. One only has to look at most blacks and middle class Mexicans in order to see what an inhibiting condition this is. I remember after World War II when Mexican American "leadership", after years of struggle, finally got the census and individual states to classify Mexicans as whites legally. What an irony if there is a Mexican community in the U.S. in which the residents are not predominately of Indian ancestry I would like to see it. What a waste of time and energy American blacks are obsessed with their acceptance or rejection of whites, even more so. It is clear that school integration is not a solution to education problems among ghetto blacks. It is only a not very successful and partial solution to a rank dilemma.

In these days, many Indians are in the above "bag". Magnificent buildings to house tribal government offices mushroom on Indian reservations while most local Indians sink further into poverty. Tribal officials appear publicly in \$400 three-piece suits while most Indians walk around with the ass out of their Levis. Indian history is cleaned up to meet middle class white standards - whites really were the ones who introduced scalping to North America, and Indians never killed white women and children in battle; the Indian religion is just good modern ecological practice spelled backwards, etc. Capitalism is the answer to every Indian problem, from alcoholism to governmental inefficiency. The list of the absurd goes on forever and it all stems primarily from a desire to be accepted by whites. Image and rank considerations cloud every facet of Indian thinking.

Some of the effects on Indian thinking of this modern Indian view of themselves as members of a low ranked American racial minority are not as obvious as the above example. Another more subtle result of this minority status is that acceptance is desired so much that a blind faith in the "system" is thus created. One sees this particularly in blacks and children of immigrants. Blacks, as a whole, are convinced that the American ideals are attainable for them and that America will finally dispense justice for all; this is in spite of all historical and present evidence to the contrary. Many children of immigrants are super patriots, in the positive sense of the word; contribute and work hard for social causes; and are certain that America can do no wrong, ultimately. Modern Indians petition, supplicate, cajole, and protest to the power holders, regardless of the fact that Indian oppression and exploitation continues on unabated as it has for the last two-hundred years, in the same basic pattern; only the words we use to mask the process has changed.

Further, a great deal of our time in Indian affairs is taken up "explaining" Indians and the Indian situation to whites. After we get through explaining to one group of whites we can then go on to the next plateau - explaining the same thing to the next group of whites; endlessly and to no avail. How could a society in such deep trouble respond to us, even if they wanted to, when they can't even act in their own behalf? Most of us are stuck in our thinking at the point where Jomo Kenyata was when he wrote Facing Mt. Kilimanjaro, an explanation of the Kenyan situation to

British liberals and a plea for understanding. (Some "explaining" is probably a necessary and functional tactic in our circumstance. Vine Deloria is our best "explainer" in this regard.) When petitions, protests, and explanations come to naught many young Indians respond with indignation. Many of my friends walk around half the time bristling with indignation and declaring in an outraged manner something like, "Why they don't intend to do right by us...Nooo kidding" Then after a while they are right there in line with their pail in hand, trying to get an extra portion of cracked corn from Mr. Charlie. I must admit that my distaste for American culture and society is probably just as much of a prejudice, in another way, and could be as distorting as a blind faith in America. I try to control this prejudice and I know consciously that it is a prejudice, at least.

Of course, the opposite side of the coin from blind faith is disillusionment and a sense of betrayal. Some of the former militants, especially among blacks, show such a sense of betrayal in the extreme. And such a sense of betrayal can be focused on one American "institution" in which one had a blind faith at one time - law, politics, churches, a profession, etc. I see this prejudice particularly in Indian friends who are former Christians. In their eyes, churches (national church bureaucracies) can do no right. I am sure that it would be the height of innocence to not take into account that church bureaucracies act like bureaucracies everywhere - protective of their power, responsive to the rich and powerful and most times willing to act for the powerful, etc. And religious ideologues are like ideologues where ever you find them. They couldn't see another human being if one bit them in the leg. But I am sure that church officials were a little more than simply the advance scouts of the colonialists in past times, and more than the modern wing of establishment oppression among Indians. Such a view forecloses any discussion of tactics in the handling of such a powerful force in Indian lives. And although this view of "the churches" may be true, it is not all that's true about the situation. Only the most secular human being could fail to see the depth of spirituality and commitment in Indian Christians, and the strength of local Indian churches as Indian institutions in some tribes. Complicating this sense of betrayal vis-à-vis Christian churches is the fact that the present fad in the Indian identity search is to publicly declare unswerving loyalty to the Indian religion while directing a cold glance at Indian Christians. (It is not necessary to, in fact, take part in native ceremonies and practices; only to swear undying loyalty.)

Once again, I must admit to a similar prejudice. In the 1950s my older colleagues and mentors in the social sciences rationally convinced me (in spite of what I had learned from Cherokee elders and my own intuition) that Indians could adjust to American society and still remain Indians. I was so convinced by my mentors because of both my personal attachment to them and the tremendous respect I had for their intellects. As I look back over it I believe that their view was a statement of faith rather than a scientific prediction based on the evidence. In any case, by the late 60s all the evidence accumulated by me over the preceding 20 years convinced me that such was not the case, and I began to feel a strong sense of having been hoodwinked and of betrayal. Therefore, any positive prediction about group relations in the U.S. by social scientists is usually taken by me as another instance of "wish fulfillment" on the part of these unwitting handmaidens of powerful, my (sic) colleagues. My only defense for this irrational response is that I did work my tail off for 20 years to no avail, basing my struggle and goals on a false premise. However, this is a profound prejudice and I work hard to contain it.

The second weakness in our thinking comes from our status as a "colonized" people and is usually referred to as the ghetto mentality or the colonial mentality. One sees this attitude particularly in colonies, ghettos, and on Indian reservations. One of the characteristics of this mentality is to see the colonial masters as the definers of the world and the source and cause of both of all the good and the bad in the lives of the "colony". Therefore, one focuses on the masters; on how to handle and please them in order to get them to do something positive in our situation; and then react surprised and erratically when the masters act negatively toward us. (One sees this attitude across the spectrum of Indian "leadership" - tribal officials, militants, traditional chiefs, etc.) Worse, it focuses our attention away from what we can do for ourselves and away from the internal condition of our communities. In fact, in order to please our masters we help exploit and to socially and psychologically damage our communities, as well, by taking part in sanctioning "development" and bureaucratic social welfare programs.

What is even more frightening, we accept the fact of our powerlessness as a good, a given, and as normal. We are more than willing to play by the rules of a no-win game; rules that are laid down by the colonial masters. We even learn his words for describing the game; buzz

words that change every few years and whose function it is to disguise what really is happening - self determination, for the process of contracting the administration of government services to tribes, without any shift in the decision-making powers; Indian sovereignty, for the exercise of a smaller degree of decision-making power than almost any other American community, etc. Franz Fanon deals extensively with the colonial mentality, this fear of freedom, in his classic book, "Wretched of the Earth". The fundamental fact of American Indian existence, however, is not that we are primarily a racial minority, or an ethnic group, or even colonized peoples; but that we are native North American peoples, small nationalities, who have been over-run, conquered, and robbed of our resources by aliens and who are now exploited and tightly controlled by these now alien masters. Harsh but true.

The third major defect in our thinking is caused by our western education and the European languages in which we analyze and write. Western education pushes one toward reifying, breathing life into and attributing cause to, abstract notions. For instance, I am doing some violence to reality by talking about "Indians" in this paper. There are as yet no Indians in any real social and cultural sense. There may be Indians in a legal sense or in the way American society as a whole treats Indians, but that is about as far as one can legitimately speak of "Indians". Such reification is most distorting because it ignores context. When I say "educated Indians" I could better say "those educated members of aboriginal North American national groups, as well as those detached members who live scattered in other areas and are educated". This educated Indian terminology is not too much of a distortion, but to say that "communism is expanding over the world" is a considerable distortion. So far as I know "communism", as such, can't act at all, much less expand. Still, we are on fairly safe ground here because we know that we are using a short hand way of describing a complex phenomenon. It is when we say things like "communism is an oppressive system" that we are in trouble. At this level we are completely out of human context. Better to say, "communism may, by its very nature as a political philosophy, be oppressive; and certainly the Russians, who have a long history of oppressive governments, have created it in this mode in the Soviet Union".

Even without this problem of reification of abstractions there is still a problem to my mind with the place of ideas in human affairs in Western thought. Most people in the West think

it is great men, great ideas, and great ideologies that are ultimately causal in human affairs, even most of the so-called Marxists. I am sure that potent ideas that spread to people who are able to then see a clear course of action are important causes in human behavior. However, if Marx said one thing right it is that ideas are generated and proceed from the particulars of human experience. This idea does not mean that Christianity was not a very important influence on European culture or that spirituality is not important in human affairs. It means that important ideas come out of human experience and must be fed back into human experience to be influential. It is not academic philosophers in ivory towers nor political theorists that chart the human course. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that codes, ideologies, etc. are most times used by individuals to justify past action rather than as guides to action.

Americans have a great deal of trouble with categories and categorical thinking because they are not clear about the content and nature of their categories. For instance, Indians are a racial minority relative to "us" and thus must be a social reality; therefore, a tribe is a local subdivision of this larger reality. Tribal differences and conflicts among Indians and in African nation-states are merely the result of some kind of provincial hardheadedness, in this view, as is "religious" strife in Northern Ireland. Younger Americans push this process further and erect large, lump in (sic) categories based on the existence of modern institutional bureaucracies. Thus, America is equated with the government, the nation-state bureaucracy; and more narrowly with the present administration and its policies. America is not the geographic area (the land) and the people, nor the ideals of constitutional democracy, nor is it a political and social vision. America is an institutional bureaucracy, the government and its symbol, the flag. Therefore, you burn the flag or wave it if you disagree or agree with the policy of the present administration.

Many young Indians get caught in this same categorical bag. These young people know that one of the rules in the Indian identity search is that one must be anti-white to be Indian. The institution which to them most exemplifies the European white is Christianity. (I suppose because white Christian bigots have, in the past, denounced Indian tribal life and native Indian religions.) Christianity then becomes the white Christian belief system, Christian faith and practice, the clergy, the church bureaucracies, Christianity as an ideology, local Indian churches, etc. And one must condemn this symbol of whiteness, CHRISTIANITY. Most young whites

would agree up to that last point, and the hippies and the ecologists might agree with the last point, as well. Most of the Indian bigots who follow a traditional Indian religion would agree for different reasons; fortunately, they are few in number. Most tribal Indians, Christian or otherwise, are simply a little confused by this exercise of categorical, out-of-context logic.

Lastly, the Western notion of human nature bothers me considerably; a common human nature which expresses itself in similar qualities of personality and character, and in similar motivations, goals, desires, ultimate ambitions, and the like. Therefore, you don't have to look at anyone to know them; you can just examine your own navel and imagine your own reactions in a similar situation. On a gross level, everyone is basically the same, aren't they? This is the vulgar Western notion of human nature, but scholars and most social scientists hold a more sophisticated view of this same notion. Therefore, you can do what you will to other people if you are powerful, because you know they have the same goals, desires, etc. as you do. If it turns out that they don't respond according to expectations they must be misled, or deluded, or subverted, or too uneducated, or twisted out of shape by poverty, or even less than human. I am convinced that there is indeed a common human nature, but I am not sure about its content. I do know that people are damned different, as individuals and as cultures; and the major sin in this century is not looking and paying attention, however psychologically painful and time consuming that is. The second major sin is not knowing that you don't know something.

Finally, let me say that I am sure that most of you are well aware of all these impediments to clear analyses. But I hope that my ire put down on paper in a systematic manner will provide some more thinking by you on this subject.