

"Development of the Concept of Colonialism"

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What I am going to do in this paper is not to talk about colonialism per se, as a model, because that would be duplicating what I have said in my other paper.¹ What I will tell you is what kind of questions pushed me towards developing that model, what kind of data I was looking at, and what kind of conceptions I had to modify in order to develop that kind of a model. In other words, besides just talking about the notion itself, I would like to give you some idea of how to take a real situation and try to make some sense out of it, given the questions you are trying to deal with, and how to develop and modify theory.

As we live we have new experiences, and we have to make sense of those experiences. This means that we have to modify some notions that we held before we had those new experiences. Everybody does that. The job of science is, in fact, to take that everyday experience of life, and to codify it, and to exercise some discipline, and gather some data, and to make theoretical sense out of it.

This is, in very simplistic terms, what the endeavor is about. Now in my article on Colonialism the focus is on what I take to be a diagnostic trait of a colonial situation: the deprivation of experience. In creating an unreality for people, in sealing them off from the environment, colonialism deprives people of experience. That doesn't mean that this is all there is to colonialism, but that in my article I focused on what I saw to be a

¹Robert K. Thomas. "Colonialism: Classic and Internal," Monteith Reader .

I chose also not to focus on some things that are learned by an oppressed people in the colonial situation. I think people do learn certain things in a colonial structure. While they don't learn much about their environment, except in so far as you call that colonial structure an environment, they do learn something about that structure. They often learn how to manipulate it, and deal with it in their own terms. They sort of learn how to cope with that kind of situation. They don't deal with their environment, but they learn to deal with this structure which mediates their environment which is the condition that is definitive of a colonial situation.

The major thing that I don't cover among the many things I don't cover in that paper is the notion of marginality. That is, as far as I'm concerned, one of the most important things that happens in a colonial situation. Marginality is a phenomenon which happens in many contact situations other than the colonial. However, I suggest that the particular stages that Mr. Wright talks about in his article on marginality are the kind of stages which develop in a colonial or semi-colonial situation.¹ So, these are the kinds of things that the article does not address. It focusses, rather, on what I take to be a diagnostic trait of the colonial situation: the deprivation of experience.

Now, let me give you a little warning about the article, what is presents is a model, a structural model, and that is all it is. What you have to do with a model when you apply it is to fill in a few things. For instance, you have to fill in the completeness of that colonial situation when you look at a particular case. Take Africa, for example. The dynamics of Africa are not the dynamics of American

¹See Rolland H. Wright, "Folk Urban Marginality," Monteith Reader, 1970.

had obtained a large grant from a foundation in New York. They had spent four years of goofing around, and now, with only one more year to go, they had nothing to report so they panicked. As people are apt to do in anthropology in moments of stress, they called the University of Chicago. I was one of the University of Chicago's young hotshots, rattling around looking for a job. So they sent me down to the University of North Carolina as a project-saver par excellence.

Now at that point in my life, I had quite a bit of field work experience with different American Indian groups, some with Mexican-Americans, but primarily with American Indian groups. I had worked with Ned Spicer of Arizona on urban Yaqui Indians. I had worked with the Papago tribe, gathering information for a land settlement case against the U. S. government. I had spent a year with my own tribe in Oklahoma doing a Master's Thesis on nativism. I had spent some time among the Sac and Fox tribes in Iowa, helping on a project which I talk about in that colonialism paper. I also spent a year in Oklahoma studying factionalism among a different tribe of Sac and Fox Indians. So I was no novice, then, to American Indian communities.

In North Carolina I decided that the first task would be to do as complete a community study on one of the communities as was possible. Now, as an anthropologist, I was armed with three frameworks. In the social sciences at that time, and today in many places, there are three levels of analysis: one was social structure, that's one level of analysis; second is culture, that's another level of analysis; and third is personality, that's still another level of analysis. Depending on

They're more firmly attached. So that's what I had to work with. So, I went to work. I worked for about six or seven months diligently applying all these frameworks to this community. In anthropology, we're taught that there is a fairly closed system there. You go in there with these levels of analysis, these frameworks, and you apply them for heuristic purposes only, to that community; Now, this is an important term. Burn this in your soul: "for heuristic purposes only." This means that, in a methodological way, we really know it isn't so. For "heuristic purposes" only, then it is conceived of as a closed system.

Then I wrote up about five pounds of manuscripts (you can weight it) for the University of North Carolina so that they could write this thing up and say they're proud of it. That was Ok. I was paid to do that. But, it didn't satisfy me very well. I could see a number of things that bugged me. One of the big things we do in anthropology is what we call cross-cultural comparisons. Here I had a beautiful case and of groups separated by a hundred years and a thousand miles: North Carolina Cherokee and Oklahoma Cherokee. So, I was always bouncing my data on North Carolina off against what I knew about Oklahoma. Now, let me tell you these things I knew about Oklahoma.

One was that the Cherokee nation in Oklahoma, before 1907, was an autonomous republic. This was exactly what it sounds like: an autonomous republic, with a court system, a school system, and so on, and all administered by the Cherokee Tribe in Oklahoma. The only power the United States had usurped from the Cherokee Tribe was that the Cherokee Tribe could not deal freely in foreign relations. The Cherokee Tribe,

down the line. Cherokees have always been very traditional. Now, it's very hard, if I may say so, for European whites to conceive of people who are very traditional, but who also ran a modern government. In fact, people keep asking me about that all the time. Now, just think about what that attitude reflects. But we'll let that go for now.

Finally, I knew that Oklahoma Cherokees are even poorer than in North Carolina, and they have a much lower level of formal education at this point. In North Carolina, the average is about 8.5 years of education and in Oklahoma about 3.5. Now, you would get an indication of that from the lack of English speaking among the Cherokee of Oklahoma.

Now, I knew those things, but I hadn't done anything with them. I was still working with "social structure." Now, these framework that we have-social structure, culture, and personality-are all collections of individual behaviors. We go to a guy and we say, "Alright, what do you call so and so? What do you call so and so? What do you call so and so?" And then we go out and watch that individual behave and we check out his behavior against the terminology. And I'm good at that. But, we just watch each individual at a time. When we study culture, we do the same thing. We go to some guy and we get to know him. We talk to him, get his view of the world, we see what he is doing. Then we add all those things up. Then we look at personality, and we do the same thing. We take each individual and we add them all up. Now, at no time do we look at relationships. At no time, believe me. People in anthropology often refer to what they do as looking at relationships. It is not. For them, it is as if each individual was an autonomous behavior,

The other thing I saw was that a lot of people who couldn't speak Cherokee to me, although they knew Cherokee--lived in homes in which English was the dominate language. And they would tell me things like, "Aw, these Indians around here, we got to run things in a business-like manner. This tribal government, it's terrible." Or they would say, "These Indians, they got to start working a little bit. I mean you got to get out and hump it." The guy who says this sits on his porch drawing his welfare check. So, you get all these bromides, one after the other, but you don't see any relationship between that and the behavior. Now, the guys in Oklahoma that I knew who were seventy, knew what the white man was about. And I mean they really knew it. The guys in Oklahoma didn't give you any bromides. There wasn't that differential between these slogans and their behavior. But that was just the thing in North Carolina: half the population were people who were mainly Indian by descent, who had been born in Cherokee speaking homes, who now spoke English in the home, and so forth. Well, I was in a bind. I couldn't explain any of that behavior. So then I thought it must be that Cherokees in North Carolina have a different way of socializing children than they do in Oklahoma. That would account for the difference. So then I studied socialization, but couldn't find a bit of difference. It was the very same socialization, down to the minutia of the behavior.

were just coming up and just creating guys, right there. Just bringing them into being, making them, right there. Well, I began to think about what reality was for people in North Carolina. Reality is what that superintendant says it is. That's what reality is. What else could they know? They're not running any school board. They're not running any government. They're not doing anything, except sitting there waiting for somebody to relate to them, or trying to keep out from under foot, and hoping to hell no one does relate to them.

Well, it was at that point that I began to examine what institutions there were. I had looked at social structure. The institutions weren't there. It was only when I looked at the edge of the system that I could see that those institutions were deliberately not there, and the effect that their not being there had. When I got that, I began to see what a Cherokee in North Carolina can possibly experience. Now, Cherokees can experience an old man, they can experience a lot of things. They are not going to experience how to run a school board. They are not going to experience how to run a business or how to run a government. They are not going to experience anything of modern life. What they are going to experience is a guy who tells them what that is. As a result you get this huge group of marginal people.

Now there was also an obvious lack of self-confidence. There was also a tremendous amount of social pathology. I had never seen that before among Cherokees. And that hit me awfully hard. I was living with a lady whose son came home drunk and hit her in the back with an axe. I had to take her to the hospital. Now this happens almost every day on most Indian reservations. That's the quality of life. I got to

Now, there are other things besides that on an Indian reservation. Indians are in a minority situation vis-a-vis the neighboring whites. And that is a particular that is not in other places. The U.S. government does pressure for assimilation. That is a particular that isn't in other places. Anyway I began to see this colonial pattern.

Finally, I came to Detroit and lived on Merrick, across the expressway. Before they tore it down. It was a mixed area of Blacks, whites, Indians and hillbillies. It is a wonder it didn't explode. There must have been some dynamic equilibrium over there. There was also something called students over there. So I lived over there, and there was a Black guy in back of me who had come from Mississippi. He used to make barbeques in his back yard, and I would stand at the window and slobber. This guy thought that I was a white man, and, like a lot of nice guys, nice simple country people, he couldn't keep up the thing. You see, he knew that whites are bad, but after a little while he couldn't stand the slobbering, because he was too nice of a guy. So, he forgot all the abstract categories and he invited me over to eat with him. I would go over there about every Sunday and eat some barbeque. He lived in one of those big lineages; his wife, his wife's sister, and her mother and brother-in-law--the whole thing, like you see in the rural South and some parts of Detroit. And he was a hell of a nice guy.

This fellow would go out looking for a job, but he couldn't get any. He wasn't trained. When the employment officer would ask him what he did on the last job, he was liable to tell him what he did on the last job.

And then I began to get it. It is the same damned thing as North Carolina and Pine Ridge. So I started to look to see where the institutions are to see where a guy like that would plug in. No place. They are not here. That guy comes up to Detroit, and he is supposed to find out about something that he doesn't have a prayer of finding out about. Now I suppose there are some people who socialize their children so that, even in a colonial situation, if they are the ones who set up the operation, they would know what it is. But he didn't, because he wasn't socialized that way. So there is no place where that guy can see, as an adult, what this thing demands or what it is about. He just runs around and bumps into it, all the time.

It was at that point that I began to look at the structure of Detroit. I began to get the notion that Detroit is just like an Indian reservation in terms of the deprivation of experience. The difference is that in one place you have an explicit administrative agency which does the job, and in the other place the institutions are jacked up off of this level and are in the hands of another group of people. Given the fact that there are people who are in Detroit who do not socialize their children the way middle-class people do, anymore than Cherokee Indians socialize their children the way middle-class people do, the chances of a guy at an adult level learning what is necessary in an alien institutional framework is pretty limited. I don't think that Detroit is that sowed up. I think that there are places here in Detroit where you can get some institutional experience which give you a look at the system. College is one of them, I think.

hospital with an axe stuck in her back, bleeding all over your car?
That isn't the greatest thing in the world that you should have to do.
I didn't develop this framework to solve that dilemma for myself, altogether, but I think that what you have to do in scientific thought is to use your human concerns in your scientific work. I didn't develop this model in order to develop a political or social solution. I suppose you could use it to look for a social or political solution. I am not against that, but I tend to think that the major use of scientific models is to provide some way to understand reality. Any other use that you would put it to wouldn't be as satisfactory as the original scientific use for which it was created.