The Rubbish of Racism

In a recent issue of JASO, T.C. Weiskel has given us a cautionary tale about racism and boundary maintenance in a style of discourse that can trace a respectable history from Herodotus to Rousseau and his latterday sympathisers. While the conclusion of Weiskel's exercise might be better received in a Theosophical publication, its appearance in a Journal concerned with social anthropology as she is spoken at Oxford requires that his argument be examined for more than its obviously laudable proscriptions.

Now, my reference to authors, ancient and modern, was to show a tendency present in the "travellers' tales" of Europe, but which is not unknown in reports of foreign peoples by those outside Europe[1] that of using a foreign culture as material for a parable for twiting aspects of one's own culture which one deems as undesirable. (see den Hollander, Thrupp). Whether or not one's representation of the foreign culture is accurate is unimportant so long as the critical homily is conveyed.

Let us look at Weiskel's argument in brief it consists of four major parts. First, all cultures construct artificial boundary systems (40 1). Second, "The ecological niche which is implied by swidden agriculture an be seen, then, to give rise to a system of conceptual bounding which differentiates.." it from that of hunting and gathering cultures (44). Third, racism is a function of this new nature/culture dichotomy (45). Lastly, this gives rise to a feeling that, "as with the physical environment, one's only proper relationship towards those who are outside is one of conquest and subjugation...." (45).

His "heroes" are Turnbull's Naturvolk, the MaMbuti, and he sets them off against their aggressive neighbours, the Bantus. Perhaps unknowingly drawing his inspiration from this 19th century German romantic concept of 'nature's children', he proceeds to show us how they live in harmony with their econiche, whereas those who exploit the land (the Bantu swidden agriculturalists) are in constant conflict with it.

Then, his tale takes a sudden lurch, as the Naturvolk join up with another Romantic idea (appropriately French, though not unknown elsewhere) - the contented rustic and the pastoral.[2] Rather than being happy Mexican peasants (a la Redfield), we are given Indian villagers whose conflictless (apparently!) lives are rules by Dharma (46-7). We are told that lacking an exploitation mould, "In the realm of social relations sedentary agriculturalists mediate the inside/outside dilemma through systems of ritualised hierarchy" (47). On the "other side", we still have "systematic predatory expansion", but this time performed by Euro-americans.

His argument "takes a lurch" because rather than the smooth evolutionary scheme upon which the components of his argument appear to be based (going back to Tylor and Maine), he constructs a somewhat Leachean alternative opposition model -

Mambuti :: Bantu : Peasants : Euro-americans

He concludes that we must learn to realise re-cycling and holds out hope that, "Indeed our technological achievements may be leading us to the type of cyclical comprehensions characteristic of feudal society or the Indian peasant" (50).[3]

Now, in his examination, he encounters two major problems - both of them related to the consequences of his theoretical orientation. The first is that the consequences of his structuralism (of which Crick and Heelas speak

so highly in other parts of the same issue) force him into a certain kind of tidiness and consistency. He cannot, for example, postulate as he does "... a society in which nature and culture are not opposed..." (47) since this, if nothing else, is the very basis of the technique, as handed down by the Master in La Pensée Sauvage and in the Mythologiques. As this consistency of the dialectic[4] requires that rigidity be maintained in paradigms, we are inevitably led to his second problem. If sedentary agriculturalists with an orientation to the whole require a hierarchy to mediate their categories of inside/outside, does this mean that if Euro-americans adopt an ecological point of view, they must perforce also accept its attendant hierarchy? This is the logical outcome of his reasoning, though, I doubt, if he would really accept this as part of his "... fundamental overhauling of Western categories of self-understanding" (50).[5]

However, the first part of his discussion, largely based upon Mary Douglas (1966) is very interesting and one would like to see Weiskel take his development of a we/they opposition out of the "inside/outside dilemma" further and, instead, make some comments about what I feel to be the universal existence of the human sentiment of inclusion/exclusion.[6] Does there exist a people who do not have a group against whom they exhibit prejudice? The author's Indian peasants formulate their suspicions of inferiority - Srinivas' Coorgs (see 1952) - against tribal groups, as well as speakers of the other of India's many major languages. His MaMbuti enjoy playing clever tricks upon their Bantu "masters", and generally hold them in low esteem. We have data showing that when a human group "lacks" such an "outside group", they may even "invent" one. DeVos and Wagatsuma indicate how, with the decline in numbers of Ainu and this group's relative geographical isolation, an "invisible race" of Eta bears the brunt of much of Japanese prejudice (1967). The Basques, not content with discriminating in their traditional legal code (foros) against the usual Iberian outsiders, gypsies and Jews, have their own invisible "race" of agotes who, in their sinister manner, exist alongside Eskualduna and are thought to be behind any number of misfortunes encountered by the Basques in their land.

As I have indicated above, these sentiments run very deep and are by no means restricted to what historians have dubbed, "The Age of Discovery". After the conquest of Mexico, Bernardo de Sahagún had to argue to his ecclesiastic superiors that the Indians of Mexico were members of the human race so that they would not have them slaughtered simply as an inconvenient breed of indigenous pest. And, just over a hundred years ago, members of what is today the Royal Anthropological Institute were debating whether or not African Blacks were human or not. Partly through the efforts of anthropologists, most people (though not all!) now accept that human beings from national states other than their own are, in fact, members of the same animal species.

But, anthropologists themselves have also been guilty of this common ingroup/outgroup prejudice by elevating their own Euro-american folk categories to the level of scientific theory when they have spoken about "primitives".[7] Only recently has our subject been able to shake itself free of this long cherished belief of dividing the world into "civilized" and "primitive" peoples. Weiskel's analytical "template", if you will, makes conscious reference to this spurious division and this is unfortunate. It obfuscates the issue with which he so ably begins to grapple.

In contradistinction to Weiskel, I would like to suggest in this brief note that only when we are able to understand the ubiquity of prejudice (often couched in terms of a concept of "race", fictive or otherwise) can we then make constructive suggestions as anthropologists and as citizens for obliterating this sentiment from Euro-american as well as other societies (for example,

Bangla Desh, Nigeria, South America, etc.)

The only difficulty, of course, with the slow method I advocate is that the peoples against whom prejudice is directed may not be willing to wait for our efforts to bear fruit and decide through revolution to follow their own courses of action. Weiskel's initial joining of our science with ecology is aposite here too, for we must hope that nature itself does not "decide" to rebel against technological man's prejudice, discrimination and exploitation!

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NOTES

1. Hardy (1958) records the reactions of an early Moslem traveller to his voyage from India to England.

2. Haaland (1969) notes how the sedentary Fur farmers cast an envious eye on the seeming freedom of the Baggara nomads who share a contiguous ecotiche. See also Storry 1965.

3. In some ways, this is analogous to the Victorian historians' description of the Middle Ages in Europe as a 'dream of order' in the social chaos of the 19th century (Chandler: 1970). In a future issue of this journal I hope to be able to publish an alternative, non-hierarchy model for village India based upon the use of Dharma as Douglas's concept of order, with purity and pollution being rendered as social order and social disorder. My model, however, will be founded upon the notion of conflict as central to my transactional analysis.

4. The dialectic is based, of course, upon de Saussure who never intended the categories to be interpreted with such rigidity (see Barthes: 1967).

5. The idea of hierarchy and stratification (whether social or "ideological", as in Louis Dumont's case) is most characteristically Euro-american and it is only since the overwhelming British influence on India in the 19th century (reformulation of Hindu law, the periodic census reports, etc.) that the notion has come to have even partial meaning at the village level in India. The "inconsistencies" in the hierarchy model have been noted frequently by researchers from Srinivas to Mayer (See Yalman: 1969).

6. I suppose that the consequence of Heelas's highly derivative review ("Tensions and Onomastics", in JASO, Vol. II, No. I) in this regard would be for this sort of task to be taken over by either a geneticist or by one of his "irridescent", metamorphosized anthropologists. This extension of Heelas's argument takes on an absurd look largely because of his failure (along with that of his mentors) to realise that anthropology has always been characterised by eclecticism and serendipity: that is, the subject, insofar as it may be said to be so beyond the degree stage for its practitioners, has always been best characterised by a normative view - i.e. "Anthropology is what anthropologists do" (see my note four, McCall: 1970). Proscriptions, such as those offered by Heelas, are best left to the individual to sort out, with respect to the particular problems with which he is concerned. Each anthropologist should probably have (and often does have) his own views as to what the proper methods and goals of the discipline ought to be. Equally, each should feel free to verbalize these ideas for comparison with those of his colleagues. However, to predict that anthropology will perish should one's individual orientation not be followed is unrealistic in the light of the history of the field. Hopefully, the anthropologist's

"point of view", as Kroeber characterized the essence of anthropology, will never find itself limited to the strictures of either a formalistic or a functionalist (as well as future alternatives) nature. Barnes (1969) has some relevant comments in this regard. The different approaches each have their uses - e.g. Orenstein - and to deny choice, if indeed it may be done in any meaningful way, is tantamount to proposing something like a Lord Longford committee for anthropology!

7. This subject has received attention in JASO on previous occasions in articles by James and Lyons (Vol. 1, No. 2) and comprehensive reviews on the problem exist in Hsu and Montagu. From the standpoint of Euro-americans, some authors have traced the "civilized/primitive" and "western/eastern" dichotomies back to the Greek distinction between themselves and the Persians (Iyer: 1965 : 12-19).

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