Ethnicity, National Identity and Social Conflict

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The problem of the relationship between social science and social conflict must be approached in its proper historical context and addressed on two levels. In the first place, an account is needed of why the conflicts of the contemporary period have increasingly taken cultural forms - between ethnic groups, between nationalities within multinational states, between religious communities. In as much as such developments move in the opposite direction to the implicit evolutionism of the dominant modernist schools of social thought, the second level must involve an account of the failure of social science to anticipate such developments or to comprehend their results. Actually, the second level must come first, and it is there that I begin, outlining the basic features of the modernist conception of culture before proceeding to an examination of the contemporary crisis of modernism, both as a way of life and as a framework for understanding the world. On this basis, I then propose a critique of modernist culture concepts focused on the premise of radical cultural difference and drawing on an analysis of ethnic processes in 20th century Sudan for illustration. I use this critique as a starting point for exploring possibilities for building a more dynamic and inclusive conception of culture through a review of Amilcar Cabral's theory of cultural mobilization for liberation. Finally, I consider the implications of this discussion for understanding and resolving the recent proliferation of apparently ethnic and nationalist conflicts.

1. MODERNISM AND THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

The dominant modernist conception of culture is one that is emptied of all social, political, economic, and historical content. Historically, the development of the social sciences out of moral philosophy proceeded from the foundation of political economy as the study of the dynamics of wealth and power to the separation of politics from economics as the studies of autonomous phenomena. Then, social relations were abstracted from their political and economic content and conceived as containing a separate substance that defined the discipline of sociology. History, in its turn, was reduced to the mere chronicle of events, and anthropology took up the study of what was left, namely difference (see Wolf 1982).

This residue then became the diagnostic content of culture: pure and arbitrary difference. That is, cultural difference came to be seen as having no rational

content intelligible in terms of anything other than itself. Culture, in this conception, is not **about** anything. Accordingly, if a difference can be shown to derive from "rational" matters of political economy (for example), then it is deemed not to be in any significant sense cultural. In this understanding, culture is inherently irrational. It is thus entirely analogous to individuality as understood by modernism and constitutes for modernist thought the collective personality of a group of similar individuals. My favorite color is red and yours is blue. There is no explanation and nothing to discuss between us. I am Irish and like potatoes while you are Sudanese and prefer kisra. End of story.

The cultural relativism that officially supplanted the racism of nineteenth century evolutionism formally endowed these irrational differences with equal value. Potatoes are no more superior to kisra than red is to blue.

Fine so far. However, since culture is the domain of the irrational and the arbitrary it occupies an inferior status to rationality in the modernist project, where progress is deemed to extend the domain of rationality at the expense of the irrational. Science grows as religion contracts. Modernism tells us that with Progress and universal schooling people become more rational, more aware of scientific knowledge, and therefore more alike. Irish eat fewer potatoes and Sudanese eat less kisra as both adopt nutritionally balanced diets. Or, like President Clinton and contemporary Muscovites, we may all succumb to the universally seductive appeal of junk food. But at national celebrations I still eat potatoes to celebrate my Irish heritage and you eat kisra to show you are Sudanese. Our learning does not alter our respective favorite colors, though my mother tells me that scientific studies show that yellow is the favorite color of people with high IQs.

In accordance with this modernist notion of culture, we may tell our children different stories about how the world came into being, where the first people came from, and how our particular people became potato lovers or kisra eaters, but it is understood that as educated people we know about the Big Bang theory, Darwinian evolution, and so forth, and even if these theories are not conclusively proven, we know that some sort of natural forces - ineluctable even if unseen and unknown - are behind things, and we make sure our children realize that the old stories we tell them are just fairy tales our ancestors believed in the days before modern science.

Progress, according to modernism, shrinks the domain of culture to correspond to the dwindling realm of the irrational and aesthetic as science and rationality expand. Civil society replaces tribal society, and culture splits into the universalistic "high" culture commonly known as "(Western) civilization" and a "popular" culture that is reduced to little more than ethnic food, national anthems and surnames. Sociology, political science, and economics study civil society. Of course, not everybody progresses equally rapidly. Therefore, modernist thought gave us anthropology as the discipline to study the cultural differences of tribal societies that hadn't yet advanced.

This fable of modernization has become untenable in an era of spreading cultural conflict, and we must now expose its fabulist character and discard it.

2. THE CRISIS OF MODERNISM

All over the world people seem to be responding to appeals that in some sense are framed as rejections of civil society as defined in the modernist project and represented in the various forms of the secular nation-state. Religion, ethnicity, family, race, etc. are the forms embraced. In the 1992 US presidential election, all three major candidates, Clinton, Perot, and **even the incumbent** Bush posed as political "outsiders" and campaigned **against** the government, **against** the state structures and the bureaucrat-monsters they have created and which the candidates portrayed as preying upon "the people" ("taxpayers", "the middle class", etc.) and the "natural" order of things. All three claimed to represent something "natural" or "moral" that could conquer the corruption of the state.

There are rival projects, though, and the discourse of dispute among them bears investigation. Saddam Hussein of Iraq could be widely condemned on the basis of violation of territory belonging to another "people" or "nation". (Was it only widespread Palestinian support for Saddam that prevented that rhetoric from damaging Israel's similar claims to territory taken from another people?) The west pressed claims for independence for the Baltic states against the USSR and for Eritrea against Ethiopia (but only after the overthrow of the Emperor). The state may have lost its good name, but so far the nation appears sacrosanct.

The boundaries between nation-states have in any case bled. Now with Eritrean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Armenian, Georgian, etc., independence, the question arises of the basis for legitimate claims to citizenship, or, from another angle, what is to become of all the Ethiopians in Eritrea and all the Russians in the Baltics and other break-away states? Who gets to decide who is Estonian and who is Russian? Also Poles in Lithuania, and so on and on. The initial impulse in almost all cases has been open chauvinism embarrassing to "democratic" western backers of independence: expel all "foreigners", even if they are national minorities of a generation or two or more standing in the territory.

It seems that there is genuine confusion about what the fundamental issues and principles at stake are and on what rhetorical space they shall be debated. It almost seems that the only people who are ready to take up confident positions and press them forcefully are chauvinists of various sorts. And how can others honestly oppose their claims who have long supported Israel's exclusive claims to the homeland of the Palestinians? The bottom-line proposition of nationalism is that every people deserves its own exclusive territory. Armenians were the victims of genocide and deserve to carve out a comfortable homeland for themselves, even if they must hurt some non-Armenians in the process. Others who aren't ready to accept the currently proliferating chauvinisms without a struggle seem a bit tentative about the moral/ideological ground on which they stand. Even if they

are clear on where their interests lie and on what they want the solution to current conflicts to be they seem tentative about how to articulate their positions and justify their claims.

3. THE PROBLEM OF NATIONALISM

There have always been special difficulties in fitting the modernist framework of "civilization" and rationality for aggregating people and regulating social conflict to the social realities of the Third World. Few of the nation-states created by Europe in Africa bore any relationship to any reality other than the imperial designs of the colonizers. For the most part, though, and with spectacular exceptions, Africans seemed to accept the nation-state as the framework within which to sort out their conflicting projects. Indeed, most accepted - at least tactically in the short run - the specific nation-states bequeathed to them by colonialism.

Despite two protracted civil wars, there has been widespread acceptance in Sudan of the colonial delineation of a Sudanese state. At a gathering of Sudanese intellectuals studying or working in North America immediately after a popular uprising brought down Nimeiri in 1985, there was a heated discussion about how to end the civil war and guarantee the rights of Southern Sudanese against future infringement. At one point far into the debate an Eritrean observer intervened, saying that coming from the debates over Eritrean independence he was struck by the fact that all the participants in the Sudanese debate clearly positioned themselves in the discussion **as Sudanese**: all of them clearly identified themselves as Sudanese and accepted the Sudanese identifications of the other participants, however much they might disagree among themselves about how best to organize the Sudanese state. In the case of Eritrea, in contrast, the parties to the debate could not even agree on who they were - some claiming that Eritreans were Ethiopians and others insisting they were not.

With the fall of the Dergue in 1991 Eritreans began setting up their own nation-state, largely with the blessing of Ethiopians. In the meantime, the question of Sudanese identity had been thrown into massive confusion. There are those in Sudan who insist that profession of a very stern vision of Islam - which they claim is the only Truth - is an integral aspect of Sudanese identity, and some of them go beyond to demand Arabic language if not Arab ethnicity. In the South some have come to see their region as a separate nation that should have its own state, and there are other Southerners who have come to the conclusion that, regardless of how they identify themselves, they cannot trust Northerners and must therefore protect themselves by establishing a separate state. Will they welcome back the millions of "Southerners" currently living in the North? Will the Northern government compel "Southerners" living in the North to "return" to an independent "Southern Sudan"?

Somalia has effectively ceased to exist as a nation-state, and it remains to be seen whether it can be reconstituted as one or will metamorphose into something else. Social scientists are generally more discreet in their language, but many would seem tacitly to accept the morbid diagnosis of rightwing pundits such as Charles Krauthammer who attributes Somalia's disintegration to "barbarism" (**San Jose Mercury News**, 13 October 1992). Whether they would also endorse Krauthammer's strident call for a new era of colonialism (a la the "mandates" of the League of Nations and the United Nations) as the only method of "civilizing" such countries is not as clear, but their analyses seem to imply something of the sort as the only possible solution to the current crisis. Outside Africa, Iraq and Serbia have been popular candidates for such new-fangled colonial rule. This gives an appropriate measure of the importance of this project of reworking basic concepts: the old ones are being co-opted in service of old-fashioned varieties of imperialism as well as for chauvinism.

Whatever constraints on political thought the postcolonial structure of nation-states may have imposed in and about Africa, it seems clear that they have been weakening. This process has not been confined to - or most dramatically exemplified in - Africa, but rather has been most explosive in Europe. In a matter of less than two years the two Germanies reunited, the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Maastricht Treaty sought to tighten the European Community as additional states applied for membership, and Yugoslavia detonated. At the same time virulent neo-Nazi movements sprang aggressively to life in Germany, Scandinavia and elsewhere.

To the extent that social science has addressed the conflicts involved, it has tended to fumble around with open or veiled notions of atavistic nationalism and parochialism; social scientists view the conflicts as expressions of the recrudescence of ancient ethnic hatreds. They and the political pundits tell us that Serbs and Croats, Poles and Lithuanians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, etc., have always hated each other. Communist dictatorship suppressed the freedom to express this hatred for decades along with all the other freedoms it suppressed (so the story goes), and the coming of freedom has brought forth an orgy of ethnic hatred, alas. Scratch the surface of most available explanations and the answer actually offered is something to the effect that these ethnic conflicts "persist" (meaning that their true home is in the past and that they therefore have no living substance) because the groups in conflict are insufficiently civilized to have "advanced" beyond such petty quarrels. The question of why so many serious conflicts of such similar type should erupt all over the globe in such a short period of time scarcely gets raised. The contribution of social science to understanding why these conflicts are occurring is to tell us that they are expressions of ancient cultural hatreds. Its implicit advice for solving them is to stop them forcibly from killing each other and force them to become "civilized". Or else to leave them to it - so long as they don't harm the rest of us.

4. TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

I would suggest that it would be more fruitful to investigate the global political-economic crisis that has resulted from post-1973 processes: an acute and traumatic spasm of what Harvey (1989) calls "time-space compression". The economic processes involved arose from a combination of technological breakthroughs in the mastery of geographic space and a conjunctural shift from centralized Fordism to "flexible accumulation" dominated by global and instantaneous processes of circulation. In this process, premium has come to be placed on accelerating turnover of capital, proliferation of fictitious forms of capital, and so forth, rather than on output ratios and others measures of productive efficiency. The savings and loan scandal in the United States and a number of spectacular bankruptcies and corporate takeovers have been manifestations of this process visible to the public. There have been parallel political processes growing out of the revelations of corruption and cynicism by high-level politicians in the fall-out of these and related disasters, such as the Watergate scandal and the Iran-Contra scandal in the U.S.

Economically, the Third World has suffered devastating consequences from the energy crisis and the collapse of raw materials markets following 1973 and the long-term changes in international food markets that followed the U.S.-Soviet wheat deal and widespread famine in 1973. The consequences for the rest of the world have been significant too, if not uniformly so disastrous. The rise of the European Community as a major factor has also been important.

Culturally, all borders have been bleeding, even more rapidly than they did during the heyday of global Fordism when cheap labor flowed between nations as freely as capital. Many European countries now have sizeable racial minorities while countries as diverse as the United States, Sudan, Thailand and Sweden have taken in enough refugees from political turmoil and economic chaos to alter their social and political make-up fundamentally. Estonia, having chafed for decades under Soviet occupation, achieved liberation on "national" terms only to confront the problem of how to define and organize an "Estonian" nation-state with a very large minority population of ethnic Russians born and raised in Estonia. When the Yugoslavian republics sought to go their separate ways, they stumbled into warfare apparently over the brute fact that the constituent nations did not coincide with the would-be states: their nations were not geographic facts. In Sudan groups in both north and south who seek to separate north and south into two states try very hard to avoid the question of the fate of the "Southerners" now resident in the north who may even outnumber those resident in the south.

An international culture, defined principally in commercial consumerist terms, has begun to take shape. One can travel to most capital cities and find Pepsi to drink and very likely eat a burger and fries at MacDonald's. Authentic Levi's jeans and Nike shoes can be bought nearly anywhere, and Michael Jackson draws crowds in Rumania as large and enthusiastic as those anywhere. Live-Aid concert broadcasts are bounced off satellites to all continents simultaneously, with

hotlines open everywhere to accept pledges of donations from around the world to feed starving Ethiopians.

The dark side of international charity is international competition in which local survival often appears to be available only at the cost of the destruction of other communities elsewhere.

> The shrinkage of space that brings diverse communities across the globe into competition with each other implies localized competitive strategies and a heightened sense of awareness of what makes a place special and gives it a competitive advantage. [Harvey 1989:271]

Identification of place, and of ethnos with place, substitutes for social identity.

As broad segments of the middle classes in the "industrial" countries find their standards of living eroding dangerously and the poor in those countries are increasingly marginalized into homelessness, permanent unemployment, drug addiction and despair, the ideas of progress - of upward mobility and trickle-down growth - reveal themselves to be shabby myths. In the Third World, where Progress is called Development, the crises of the 1970s in many places wiped out the advances of the 1960s, and economic conditions for the masses have deteriorated still more since then. Many in the Third World have come to see development as yet another European fraud. Indeed, all over the world, increasingly, all truth, stability, and coherence - in short, the entire ideational edifice of modernism - seems falsified in the face of fragmentation, volatility and incoherence.

5. AFTER THE GLOBAL POOL HALL: REWORKING BASIC CONCEPTS

If I can leave a committee meeting with a Korean, a German and a Mexican American colleague, chaired by our Bahamian dean, rush back to my office to counsel a Laotian student before going to see my South Asian physician, stopping on the way to buy Saudi gasoline from an Ethiopian, picking up felafel for dinner from a Lebanese deli, fetching my son - who is wearing a pair of Reeboks, the left shoe of which was made in the Philippines and the right in South Korea - from school where his teacher is Hawaiian, and get him home in time to take my wife to the Druze-operated garage to pick up her Japanese car, I think it is high time that we acknowledged that cultural boundaries are leaking. A straightforward observation of commonplace facts of late-20th century life, not particularly surprising or likely to spark dissent from social scientists. But a social science that aims to come to terms with leaking cultural boundaries must accept that doing so will require a thorough reworking of basic concepts. In particular, we must explode the primordialism and unitarianism of dominant ideas of ethnicity.

Eric Wolf characterizes contemporary social science as preoccupied with dividing its subject matter into distinctive cases, or societies, "each with its

characteristic culture, conceived as an integrated and bounded system, set off against equally bounded systems" (1982:4), and concludes that:

> By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls. [Wolf 1982:6]

What is missing is an appreciation of the interconnectedness of social and cultural phenomena and the historical contingency and internal differentiation of the units which present themselves for analysis at any particular moment.

I am not simply referring here to changes in cultural identification. Anthropologists have long recognized that cultural identities change. Unfortunately, their understanding of such change has been framed by a situational understanding of ethnicity in which, according to Worsley (1984:246), it tends to assume a market model in which individuals make choices, such as which ethnic identity to embrace, without constraint in much the same way that American consumers select which make of car to buy. Or else they buy it piecemeal in a sort of cultural cafeteria line, selecting their favorite items and placing them together on their trays. The result is that the role of inequality and power relations in restricting the field of choice, and ultimately in shaping the larger cultural constellation, is left out. In particular, such a model of ethnicity is incapable of grasping the nature of cultural dynamics within and between societies divided by class. To illustrate this deficiency in the prevalent models of ethnicity and identify the requirements for an adequate conceptualization, I offer a brief look at actual ethnic processes operating in 20th century Sudan.

6. ETHNICITY IN 20TH CENTURY SUDAN

In an earlier analysis of the social relations of the agricultural labor force developed in Sudan under the impact of capitalist penetration in the 20th century (O'Brien 1986), I argued that the ethnic terms in which the labor force came to be structured were not primordial or traditional in any static sense but were fundamentally constituted in the context of capitalist incorporation. The mosaic of patterns of incorporation into the agricultural wage labor force mirrored differences between local and social groups which both participants and observers generally conceived in terms of cultural differences among them. If one knew a person's ethnic identification, one could fairly reliably predict what form her or his incorporation would take, including types, patterns and intensities of work. The result was a highly segmented labor force structured on a basis that was expressed in terms of ethnic identities. Groups whose internal division of labor involved women in agricultural production, or allowed it in principle, tended to migrate to the Gezira irrigated scheme in family groups and put all family members to work in activities such as cotton picking. Other groups, particularly

those which practiced a strict seclusion of women, often preferred to intensify village production and to meet their cash needs through production of a cash crop demanded by the British, a preference that sometimes required relocation to more favorable areas. When members of such groups did engage in seasonal wage labor, they tended to be exclusively adult men.

The situation was, however, not a simple matter of one-way cultural determination of social forms of production. Indeed, once incorporation had become widespread, the process seems more generally to have moved in the other direction, from social form to ethnic identity. Employers who sought labor of a particular type wanted first of all to know which ethnic groups provided it and then tended to go to the villages where those ethnic groups were known to live in order to recruit. Hence, workers who sought work of any particular type found it necessary or convenient to be in the villages where they could expect potential employers to look for them. In ways such as this an ethnic template came to impose itself on Sudan's social geography.

There was not only a single ethnic process at work, but many. The dynamics of each derived from the specific intersection of precolonial local characteristics and capitalist encroachment. In rural areas the social composition of a particular ethnic identity tended to be more or less heterogeneous but to take its central character from a predominant form of market participation. In urban areas and some rural trading centers, a more narrowly occupational definition of ethnic identity - or ethnic definition of occupational identity - occurred. In both sorts of conditions, access to certain locations in the labor force and markets tended to become regulated by ethnic identity, often involving substantial cultural change. Whether through coalescence and synthesis of a new identity, assimilation and accommodation of individuals and small groups to shifting established identities, or through other means, people came to participate in labor migration circuits and other markets as "ethnics" of a particular sort.

The ethnic segmentation of the Sudanese labor market and the ethnic processes that were associated with its development corresponded to a historically specific set of conditions of capitalist expansion, not some inert legacy of age-old ethnic identities. Not only did new ethnicities arise and old ones change or disappear, but the very principles of their organization and differentiation underwent profound transformation from precolonial conditions. At no point - much to the frustration of colonial and postcolonial administrations - did Sudanese ethnic groups show the fixed and bounded nature characteristic of the billiard ball model.

By the mid-1970s the global economic processes I mentioned earlier and associated with the year 1973 were radically changing conditions Sudanese workers faced, and the dynamic of the labor force began to change dramatically. The needs of rural populations for cash in order to meet subsistence requirements expanded and deepened rapidly. Forest and pasture land disappeared, eliminating direct sources of building materials, fuel and supplementary foods. Terms of trade shifted drastically to the disadvantage of small producers. People generally

experienced increasing pressures on their labor time, leading to the adoption of ever-narrower calculations of returns to individual labor time as the sole criterion of work. The result of the combination of these forces has been a breakdown in the ethnic structure of the labor force (see O'Brien 1986, 1987, 1988; Ali and O'Brien 1984). Individuals who previously migrated with their families to pick cotton began to split up between different jobs in order to maximize income from the work they did. Thus, regardless of ethnicity, men, plus women unencumbered by small children, began to work in the higher-paying sorghum harvest while children, old folks, and women with children continued to pick cotton. As workers generally sought higher returns to labor time, increasing numbers turned their backs on payments in kind of transportation, food, etc., in favor of higher piece rates in whatever kind of work they might find them.

Employers in turn, faced with escalating recruitment costs attendant upon inflation in petroleum and other prices and a generally rising wage bill, sought to cut costs wherever they could, and began to cut back the long-distance recruitment effort. The structure of the labor force consequently began to take on an increasingly direct social form, with people of all ethnic groups seeking the highest paid work available to them at the lowest cost. Age and sex were becoming more reliable predictors of patterns of labor force participation than ethnicity. New social processes emerged, including regionalism and regionalized class struggles as well as clashing nationalities and national identities. Such developments do not imply the disappearance of ethnicity as an important form of identification, but only a change in its structure and significance as class, nationality, and regional identities began to take over some of its functions in organizing political and economic relations.

There has, however, been no smooth transition from the old pattern of political-economic integration to a unified new pattern. Instead, Sudan has reeled from one crisis to another, with uniformly disruptive and destabilizing effects on the national political economy. A series of droughts in the early 1980s culminated in the devastating famine of 1985 (O'Brien 1985; O'Brien and Gruenbaum 1991) that saw many thousands of rural people from the most severely affected regions of Kordofan and Darfur stream into burgeoning squatter settlements around the capital, where many of them remain despite the forcible relocation of thousands to empty wastes by the Bashir regime. Civil war broke out in the South partly as the result of Nimeiri's imposition of a particularly brutal form of Islamic law in 1983. The meager resources available to combat economic crisis were siphoned away at the rate of a million dollars a day to prosecute a war against the people of the South.

A popular uprising eventually brought Nimeiri down, but the parliamentary government that followed was too preoccupied with dismantling and looting the state and replacing the institutions of government with parallel apparatuses controlled by the biggest political parties to end the war or solve any of the problems afflicting the economy. Policemen had the bullets for their antiquated guns strictly rationed and accounted for while the members of private militias

organized by the sectarian political parties bristled with the latest automatic weapons and all the ammunition they could use (see O'Brien 1989).

Apart from the army - deployed mainly in the South against the SPLA - the apparatuses of the Sudanese state one by one began to cease operation, and their functions, to the extent they continued to be performed at all, came to be performed by tribal warlords, the black market, or the numerous foreign Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating clinics, feeding stations, schools, etc. (Duffield 1990). Tribal militias and warlords ruled much of the countryside, looting villages and pressing refugees from the war in the South into a new slavery (Salih 1989).

At the first signs that something was finally going to happen in Khartoum to bring peace in the South and reestablish government elsewhere, the Bashir coup of June 1989 short-circuited the process and unleashed a brutal reign of terror under the banner of a particularly stern and chauvinist vision of Islam. This regime's definition of the Sudanese citizen has increasingly introduced Islam and Arabism as core features.

An inclusive Sudanese national identity has now been under sustained assault for some time. The state to which it was formerly supposed to correspond has been destroyed and then reconstituted on a narrower base as the fraction of the single-national ruling class that has dominated Sudan since independence has responded to the loss of legitimacy in terms of multinational harmony and developmentalism by pressing its claims to legitimacy on the basis of claims to Arabism and Islamism. The futures of both the state (or states) and nation (or nations) of Sudan - not to mention the nation-state - are uncertain. Nor is it clear what roles in either arena will be played by what sorts of ethnicities. What is clear, however, is that the dynamics of ethnicity as well as the character of specific ethnic identities have changed fundamentally in the past two decades.

7. PSEUDOHISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION IN CULTURAL ANALYSIS

This Sudanese case study illustrates that ethnicities are not natural objects, slightly modernized traditional identities, relics, or billiard balls. Accounts of the impact of capitalist encroachment on Third World peoples which have taken ethnicity as an artifact of precolonial structures have been little more than pseudohistories, based implicitly on oppositional models of non-capitalist society. This is the case because the method of reconstituting the precapitalist past of these societies has often consisted of subtracting away features supposed to be the effects on them of capitalism and then analyzing the abstract consequences of adding back in the subtracted elements. That is to say, the starting and ending points of analysis, regardless of theoretical stance, have tended to be identical; analysis itself is pseudohistorical, being based on imputed absences of capitalist characteristics in the past or in existing supposedly autonomous units. The results vary depending

only on the oppositional models employed: e.g. market/nonmarket, industrial/pre-industrial, modern/traditional, etc.

The limitations placed on our analyses by pseudohistorical construction upon a basis of oppositional models seem to me crippling. Capitalist penetration is reduced to market creation and/or replacement of one external dominating structure by another, with qualitatively unchanged "traditional" local communities either quickly dissolving or persisting in stunted form. Such impoverishment of theory leaves us incapable of contending with the complex dynamics of modern ethnic processes, and of finally transcending the apologetic tribal atavism thesis which ascribes contemporary political fragmentation in African countries to the effects of primordial ethnic loyalties. It also renders us unable to anticipate or adequately analyze fundamental transformations within the bounds of capitalist political economy such as Sudan has experienced over the past two decades - or any of the apparently ethnic conflicts erupting around the world in the 1990s.

Another aspect of the problem is formalism in social science discourse on ethnicity, in which ethnicity is treated as qualitatively the same kind of phenomenon regardless of historical period, social context, or level of operation (Worsley 1984:246-249). Thus, the ethnicities of the contemporary Nuer, the classical Roman, and the Corsican nationalist are viewed as functional equivalents. Similarly, analysts such as Colson (1968; cf. Worsley 1984:367) have portrayed ethnicity expressed through "tribalism" as qualitatively the same as ethnicity expressed through "nationalism", only on a smaller scale. Analytically, tribalism, regionalism, nationalism and class struggle come to appear as mutually indeterminate alternative forms of social conflict linked by an implicit evolutionist schema. Social forms such as the ethnic segmentation of the Sudanese labor force or the national, cultural and religious appearances given to Sudan's civil war tend to be seen as manifestations of stubborn tendencies of outmoded traditional ideologies and sentiments to persist and of conflicts based on them to draw blood without cease. Such a fundamentally ethnocentric view misses the most central determinants of such processes. Not only that, but its tautological character makes it virtually immune to falsification in light of contrary instances.

8. CULTURAL DISTANCE AND CONDITIONS OF INTELLIGIBILITY

The limitations that I have argued the global pool hall model imposes on our analysis of cultural difference seem to me to stem ultimately from the very notion of cultural difference as radical and arbitrary which underlies modernist thought on the subject. To question the premise of radical difference is, at base, simultaneously to question whether cultural distance is so great as to require specialist interpretation. The anthropologist who does fieldwork and writes an ethnography produces a book based on a year or more spent in a village. Doesn't this very fact tell a reader that the cultural chasm is vast, simply because it took years of specialized training, a year of fieldwork - which generally entails

separation from family and friends, enduring the rigors of unaccustomed living conditions, strange food, etc. - and a book-length description to establish cross cultural empathy and understanding as a basis for forging links? It could be that anthropology has effectively joined imperialism in **creating** cultural distances that appear unbridgeable.

The cultural relativism that is anthropology's proud stock in trade and which is borrowed by the other disciplines whenever they turn to consideration of cultural differences may, then, be a part of the problem too. By saying that all humans are basically the same and that "cultural differences" are simply arbitrarily different mental images of the same reality, while offering an "understanding" of other cultures that is assumed to be in some sense scientific, anthropology may unwittingly foster chauvinism despite seeking to debunk theories of racial inferiority and superiority (McGrane 1989:118). It may do this by saying, in effect, that the members of other cultures could be just like us if they adopted our ("rational", etc.) cultural patterns (cf. Riesman 1972). Anthropology teaches us that all culture is relative, except for anthropology itself, which is rational and scientific - i.e., truth--and is therefore not itself cultural. The reader who appropriates the anthropologist's (scientific, non-cultural) knowledge of another culture borrows the mantle of truth in doing so, thus establishing superiority over the known culture. To know another culture becomes, in effect, to master it and to have transcended culture as such.

Members of the other culture, insofar as they remain members of their culture, do so as prisoners, trapped within the limiting framework of their culture, unable to follow the "warden" to the absolute vantage point from which all cultures can be viewed as the prisons they are (see McGrane 1989:119). Or, to choose a more active metaphor, they are the slaves of their cultures, placed in the fields and set in motion by their master, doing the work their master/culture sets for them and thinking the thoughts and feeling the emotions the master gives them.

Social scientific practice generally treats "traditional" cultures and "advanced" cultures - also known as "Western" cultures and, especially, collectively as "Civilization" - differently. "Traditional" cultures appear as "prisons" or "masters" while "Civilization" appears as a rational democracy that allows its members freedom bounded only by rationality. Accordingly, "Civilization" also plays the role in modernist thought of the potential liberator of the prisoners/slaves of "traditional" cultures. This is so, for example, in studies of change which treat "traditional" culture as a static structure taken as a baseline before change began to occur (Spiegel 1989:62). Both social scientists and political agents often treat "authentic" traditional African cultures in this way. First, they construct "traditional" culture by subtracting or disregarding features of observed cultural conditions which they presume to be modern in order to arrive at a supposedly pristine culture, and then they take the resulting model of traditional culture as a baseline from which to measure change in terms of accretions of supposed "western" or "modern" features. "Modern" ("rational", "scientific") culture thus liberates members of traditional cultures as it modernizes (i.e., deculturates),

ultimately leaving little more than cuisine and symbols as the remnants of traditional culture.

Accepting that the boundaries between cultures have bled, and tracing out the changing interconnections among cultures as Wolf (1982) exhorts us to do provides a starting point for reconceiving culture, but it does not by itself do away with the notion of cultures as self-constituted separate entities (billiard balls) in some pristine past that have more recently begun to open up in certain ways. Indeed, it could be that cultural practices designed to mark and enforce definite cultural boundaries arise only out of certain limited, historically determinate (though perhaps not unique) social conditions. There is certainly no shortage of instances in which Europeans landing in other parts had difficulty eliciting names for neighboring peoples or in locating boundaries between them - or discovered much later that the "names" elicited meant something on the order of "those folks in the next valley" (not always so politely expressed).

I am not arguing for an original state of cultural homogeneity or seeking to revive the modernist notion of modernization as a process of cultural homogenization. Rather, I am suggesting that we take seriously the possibility that cultural boundaries might be **about** something more substantial than simply marking otherwise arbitrary differences.

At any rate, it seems to me that it is time social science ceased to take cultural units - however leaky or interconnected they may be - as starting points for analysis and began to look at ethnicity and similar cultural phenomena as expressions of social relations. That, in fact, is what Sudanese ethnicities in the context of the development of the agricultural labor force between 1925 and 1975 basically were; one's ethnicity defined one's social location in a particular market system. This definition was not static, but reflected social history and future possibilities as well: certain ethnicities, some of them unrelated in any prior culturally meaningful sense, were classed together by dominant social groups as related to one another on the basis of shared social liabilities constructed as stemming from foreign origins.

If ethnic identities present their bearers as constituting separate and bounded cultural units rather than straightforwardly reflecting the social relations they express, they do so by consistently hiding the same term of the relation - social domination - in a way that suggests that the ethnic form of expression is ideologically constituted as a way of mystifying exploitive social relations. If so, then social scientists who analyze them as units rather than relational nodes simply reproduce that ideology in another form.

The surprise of intelligibility. The weakness of the proposition of radical difference has not always gone unnoticed by anthropologists. Levi-Strauss, for example, raised an important aspect of it in **Triste Tropique**, but without following out its implications or provoking others to do so. He marveled that being able to relate to the cultural Other in the field belies the strangeness upon which ethnography is based, and that encountering genuine strangeness as

presupposed in many respects by anthropology would result in inability to understand. McGrane (1989:122-123) has recently followed up Levi-Strauss' insight to question the bases for the intelligibility of cultural difference. For there to be intelligibility in the absence of absolute superiority, he argues, it must be separate from both the object culture and the subject culture of that understanding. Thus the conditions of intelligibility must reside in something common to both cultures (something common to all cultures?), something that is itself above difference. If our ability to understand the cultures of others or to translate their practices into terms intelligible within the framework of our own culture has meaning, then perhaps the undeniable fact of the intelligibility of cultural difference would provide a promising starting point for building a theory of culture that is capable of fostering cross cultural harmony in place of conflict.

9. CABRAL'S THEORY OF CULTURE

Amilcar Cabral, founding leader of the PAIGC, the national liberation movement that led Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands to independence, approached culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination and developed a theory of cultural mobilization for liberation that has provided inspiration for political movements in Africa and elsewhere. Cabral's theory has been the object of academic study but has not had the impact it deserves on social scientific thinking about culture (see O'Brien 1977). Though foreign domination generally does not provide the main immediate context for specifically cultural action in the situations we are currently concerned with as it did for Cabral, his concerns are easily translatable into situations involving other forms of domination.

For Cabral, a culture is simultaneously an expression of and the embodiment of a people's history (1973a:42):

Whatever may be the ideological or idealistic characteristics of cultural expression, culture is an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production. Culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society, which may be more or less influenced by external factors. History allows us to know the nature and extent of the imbalances and conflicts (economic, political and social) which characterize the evolution of a society; culture allows us to know the dynamic syntheses which have been developed and established by social conscience to resolve these conflicts at each stage of its evolution, in the search for survival and progress.

Here Cabral deploys culture at two distinct levels of analysis: at one level he discusses it as an ideal expression of a people's history and way of life, while at another level he treats culture as itself material, as the embodiment of a people's history, as their mode of living itself. His botanical metaphor moves back and forth between culture-as-flower and culture-as-(flowering-) plant. This metaphor stresses the dynamic quality of culture:

> Just as happens with the flower in the plant, in culture there lies the capacity (or the responsibility) for forming and fertilizing the seedling which will assure the continuity of history, at the same time assuring the prospects for evolution and progress of the society in question. [Cabral 1973a:42]

It is, in fact, this dynamic aspect of culture that Cabral was most concerned with. His interest in the cultures of his people was not redemptive in the sense that the ethnographic enterprise was conceived as a redemptive mission meant to save vanishing traditional cultures out of time as they evaporated under exposure to expanding, modernizing western cultures (see McGrane 1989; Fabian 1983). He did not wish to embalm traditional culture as a memento of the past, but to tap into its liberating potential to advance the struggle for national liberation.

> In order for culture to play the important role which falls to it in the framework of the liberation movement, the movement must be able to preserve the positive cultural values of every well-defined social group, of every category, and to achieve the confluence of these values in the service of the struggle, giving it a new dimension - the **national dimension** [original emphasis]. Confronted with such a necessity, the liberation struggle is, above all, a struggle both for the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people **and for the harmonization and development of these values within a national framework** [my emphasis - J.O'B.]. [Cabral 1973a:48]

To play this role, cultures had to be subjected to critique, for "[I]t is important not to lose sight of the fact that no culture is a perfect, finished whole. Culture, like history, is an expanding and developing phenomenon" (Cabral 1973a:50). Warning that uncritical exaltation of traditional culture and blind acceptance of all of its aspects could be as harmful as racist colonial denigration of it had been, he argues (Cabral 1973a:50-51),

> Culture, the fruit of history, reflects at every moment the material and spiritual reality of society, of man-the-individual and of man-the-social-being, faced with conflicts which set him against nature and the exigencies of common life. From this we see that all culture is composed of essential and secondary elements, of strengths and weaknesses, of virtues and failings, of positive and negative aspects, of factors of

progress and factors of stagnation or regression. From this also we can see that culture - the creation of society and the synthesis of the balances which characterize each phase of its history - is a social reality, independent of the will of men, the color of their skins or the shape of their eyes.

The commonalities among cultures stem not from any mystical or racial unity, but from the shared or common aspects of their history. In particular, insofar as they are the cultures of dominated peoples they embody that shared history of domination and of resistance to it (see O'Brien 1977). As they ally in a common struggle against domination, they forge a broader shared history and thereby a wider cultural unity. For Cabral in the movement he led, the goal was the formation of a nation free of both foreign domination and internal relations of domination. The role he envisioned for cultural mobilization was the creation of a national culture, both more and less than the sum of its several cultures.

Beyond the boundaries of the liberated nation-state in formation, Cabral was also aware of and concerned to promote wider international cultural processes. To a greater or lesser extent all who had experienced imperialist domination had important experiences in common, a degree of shared history that must be reflected in common cultural developments within each. To the extent that other aspects of the material life of people everywhere were similar, they must also share common cultural elements. Indeed, Cabral's ideas of mobilizing Africans on a cultural basis was always conceived against a backdrop of his conception of a global culture corresponding to the global political economy created through imperialist expansion:

> It is important to be conscious of the value of African cultures in the framework of universal civilization, but to compare this value with that of other cultures, not with a view of deciding its superiority or inferiority, but in order to determine, in the general framework of the struggle for progress, what contribution African culture has made and can make, and what are the contributions it can or must receive from elsewhere. [Cabral 1973a:52]

It should be clear by now that we are here dealing with a notion of culture that is a far cry from the notions of radical difference predominant within social science. Most importantly, it is not an idealist conception of culture that has been emptied of all political, economic, and social content and reduced to pure, arbitrary difference. Most emphatically the reverse. As such, it is a conception of culture that gives rise to notions of identity that similarly have non-arbitrary content that includes and emphasizes commonalities drawing people together rather than differences that drive them apart. Cabral expressed it as follows (1973b:65-66):

> In the formation and development of individual or collective identity, the social condition is an objective agent, arising from economic, political,

social and cultural aspects which are characteristic of the growth and history of the society in question. If one argues that the economic aspect is fundamental, one can assert that identity is in a certain sense an economic reality. This reality, whatever the geographical context and the path of development of the society, is defined by the level of productive forces (the relationship between man and nature) and by the means of production (the relations between men and between classes within this society). But if one accepts that culture is a dynamic synthesis of the material and spiritual condition of the society and expresses relationships both between man and nature and between the different classes within a society, one can assert that identity is at the individual and collective level and beyond the economic condition, the expression of culture. This is why **to attribute, recognize or declare the identity of an individual or group is above all to place that individual or group in the framework of a culture** [my emphasis - J.O'B.].

This passage goes to the heart of the problem of conceptualizing culture as a potentially inclusive and harmonizing social force. But to establish identity through placement in the "framework of a culture" is to do an about-face from the standard procedure in social science, for which identity lies in separateness and uniqueness. Cabral shows us why a liberating concept of culture cannot be static, contentless and arbitrary, and must be dynamically historical and expressive of the relationships among people and between people and nature.

10. CULTURE AND NATION IN AN ERA OF LEAKY BOUNDARIES

Cabral's thinking about culture was decisively shaped by his political project of building the liberating culture of a nation that had been established as a geographical fact by Portuguese colonialism but which was still to a large extent socially and culturally fragmented. He sought to build a specifically national culture to correspond to the geographical fact created by the Portuguese as a basis for ridding his country of oppression. His choice of the nation as the unit to mobilize (indeed, to create) culturally reflected his perception of the nature of the enemy - the Portuguese colonial state. But Cabral was an internationalist who saw the nation-state as a product of a specific mode of production and the class struggle to which it gave rise, and he saw the national struggle he led as but a phase of a larger global struggle to end oppression and exploitation. As victories were won at a national level, eventually oppressive states would disappear, followed by the disappearance of the nations formed as their basis.

What now of nations as the units of cultural dynamics in an era of crisis of the nation-state two decades after the declaration of Guinea-Bissau's independence and Cabral's assassination? I think this is the political question of the current era, and one that awaits adequate formulation before meaningful answers can even be

attempted. It seems to me that the problem of the nation - any nation, and the phenomenon of the nation as such - and its future viability hinges very much on the fate of the **community** a nation must imagine itself to be in order to constitute a nation. As Anderson (1991:6) has pointed out, all communities larger than small villages in which all know each other are necessarily, as communities, imagined. A nation, according to Anderson (1991:7),

> is imagined as a **community**, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. [Original emphasis]

It is this ultimate fraternity that could define the historical limits of the nation-state: how far can the fragmentation of community, the brutal chauvinism of some fragments against others, and the voracious demands of the nation on members' willingness to die go before imagination shrinks in horror and extinguishes this crucial willingness? Indeed, one aspect of the crisis that initiated the traumatic time-space compression from 1973 was the refusal of millions to die for their nations in controversial wars waged by the United States, Portugal and other states.

While the roots of nationalism as a phenomenon and the roots of many specific nations have been cultural, it seems to me that it is the rootedness of all nationalism in community ("conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship") that is most crucial to understanding its nature. In a sense ethnicity and other cultural identifications provided a handy starting point (historically and rhetorically) for the creation of national communities - most crucially through the mystifying powers of the implied basis of the community in kinship - but there is otherwise no inescapable connection between nationality and ethnicity. The future of the nation state seems most likely to lie with its ability to provide people with imagined communities - whether recruited and defined on cultural or whatever terms - that they are willing to **live** for. The most promising potentials I see for social science to contribute to this project lie in its ability to develop the conception of culture as the embodiment of a people's history - and thus as potentially inclusive - and to join that conception to a deepened understanding of the sorts of collective imagining processes that produce positive, open communities.

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