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# Evolutionism, Relativism and Putting Native People into Historical Context

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### Article abstract

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# Evolutionism, Relativism and Putting Native People into Historical Context

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What is the relevance of the seemingly antithetical views of cultural evolutionism and cultural relativism for the study of native history? Despite the important role of epidemic diseases in weakening the capacity of native people to oppose early European domination, the technological gap between the two groups of societies, together with associated differences in social organization and values, played a significant role in making European domination possible. Native cultures were not adapted to coping with European ones. Yet the human capacity for rational calculation was not affected by cultural differences. Native people, both as individuals and as groups, displayed no less ingenuity than did Europeans in responding to the challenge of cultural contact. Despite severe deprivation they have gradually articulated the knowledge and sense of direction required to compete for a fairer share of North America's resources.

*Quelle est la pertinence des perspectives apparemment contradictoires de l'évolutionnisme culturel et du relativisme culturel pour l'analyse de l'histoire autochtone? Bien que les épidémies aient affaibli les capacités des Autochtones à s'opposer à la domination européenne dans les premières années de contact, le fossé technologique séparant les deux groupes de sociétés ainsi que les modèles sociaux et les valeurs culturelles liées à ces développements technologiques ont aussi joué un rôle significatif rendant la domination européenne possible. Les cultures autochtones n'étaient pas préparées à faire face aux cultures européennes. Cependant, les différences culturelles n'affectent pas le pouvoir d'analyse et de calcul rationnel. Les Autochtones, tant comme individus que comme groupes, ont montré autant d'ingéniosité que les Européens dans leurs réponses aux défis posés par le contact culturel. Malgré des obstacles sérieux, ils ont graduellement articulé des connaissances et le sens de direction requis pour concurrencer et obtenir une part plus juste des ressources de l'Amérique du Nord.*

In this paper I will examine some propositions about the relationship between native peoples and those of European origin that are still highly controversial among anthropologists in order to evaluate their significance for the study of native history. In particular, I will compare the doctrines of cultural evolutionism and cultural relativism. These once antithetical views of humanity and its history have co-existed in an uneasy fashion within North American anthropology since evolutionism revived

in the 1950s in the form of neo-evolutionary theory. Yet only recently have anthropologists and philosophers begun to examine the relations between these doctrines in a critical manner (Hollis and Lukes, 1982; Meiland and Krausz, 1982; Gellner, 1985; Sperber, 1985). Discussing these concepts also requires considering the role in influencing human behaviour played by culturally specific beliefs and by psychological properties believed to be shared by all human groups, including human reason.

### *Cultural Relativism*

Cultural evolutionism is an older organizing doctrine in anthropology than is cultural relativism. It developed during the eighteenth century as part of a growing concern with human progress. At first the philosophers of the Enlightenment believed that all human groups possessed the intellectual capacities that would permit them to contribute to and benefit from cultural development. They also believed that because of the uniformities of the human mind, all human groups would progress through the same general stages of development. In the course of the nineteenth century cultural evolutionism became tainted by a racism that denied this hope to most non-Western peoples, including the North American Indians, who were assumed to be doomed to extinction as European civilization spread around the world (Lubbock, 1865). In either form, cultural evolutionism viewed technologically less-advanced peoples as illustrations of the more primitive stages through which Europeans had evolved prior to the dawn of history. By studying Bushmen or Eskimos, Europeans hoped to gain a relatively detailed understanding of the technology, social organization and beliefs of their own ancestors. This was because these peoples were believed to have progressed only a limited distance along the same path that had given rise to modern industrial civilization. Thus, at the same time that native peoples were denied any significant history of their own, they became the means by which Europeans could learn more about the earliest phases of their own development. Yet, investigating the ways of life of primitive peoples became the task of anthropologists. Thus, among the academic disciplines, history evolved as an affirmation of European accomplishments from ancient to modern times, while anthropology was assigned the study of "people without history" (Wolf, 1982). Apart from the information that anthropology was thought to be able to provide concerning the earliest phases of European development, the two disciplines were destined to remain mutually exclusive of one another until quite recently (Harris, 1968: 142-215).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the

younger generation of American anthropologists rejected cultural evolutionism, which they came to believe had produced an ethnocentric ranking of cultures that had no scientific basis. In its place, under the influence of the German-born anthropologist Franz Boas, they adopted the doctrine of cultural relativism, which rejected the idea that an absolute scale of knowledge and values existed that was applicable to all societies and in terms of which these societies could be judged in relation to one another (Herskovits, 1972). While this outlook can be traced back into classical times, it was first popularized in the modern era by the sixteenth-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne when he stated that "each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice... for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in..." (1978: 205). The development of relativism was encouraged by the writings of the philosophers Johann Herder and Immanuel Kant and flourished as part of the German romanticism of the nineteenth century. Boas had become familiar with it in the course of his university education.

Today philosophers term relativistic views with respect to knowledge "cognitive" relativism and relativism about standards of behaviour "moral" or "ethical" relativism (Meiland and Krausz, 1982: 3). Boas and his students, who were interested in studying and documenting whole cultures, did not draw such fine distinctions. They argued that each culture evolved to satisfy the needs and wishes of a particular people and that as a result of this process it developed its own distinctive way of understanding the world as well as its own values. The relative degree of development or the morality of any aspect of human behaviour can therefore be evaluated only in terms of the needs and ethical principles of a specific society or group, not with reference to any universal standard, however scientific that standard may be claimed to be. Boas saw truth and knowledge as relative not with respect to individual persons but to whole societies or systems of thought; hence it is possible for a person to hold some beliefs or values that contradict the conceptual scheme to which he or she adheres. Philosophers now call this "objective" relativism, as distinguished from "individual" or "subjective" relativism (Mandelbaum, 1982: 35).

Relativism had a very great impact upon anthropology. For the first time native cultures were routinely studied holistically and an effort was made to understand how individual elements combined to create satisfactory ways of life for specific peoples. Differences between particular cultures were now of interest instead of only those features that cultures which appeared to be at the same level of

development shared in common. Through their advocacy of cultural relativism, Boasian anthropologists led many Euro-Americans to see reason, beauty, and moral values in the traditional cultures of native North Americans rather than to regard them simply as illustrations of primitive stages in human evolution (Benedict, 1934). In promoting these views, Boas agreed with the elderly Canadian anthropologist Horatio Hale, under whose supervision he had worked in British Columbia (Gruber, 1967). In *The Iroquois Book of Rites* (1883), Hale had presented the oral literature of the Iroquois as evidence of noble insights, political wisdom and literary skill that he believed long pre-dated any European influence. Cultural relativism's most important and lasting contribution to anthropology has been as an antidote to ethnocentrism.

Historians have long entertained a similar concept with their realization that each period of Western civilization must be understood on its own terms (Pocock, 1962); a position that is generally referred to as "historical relativism". Historical relativism assumes that human actions change, at least in part, because beliefs and values change. Experience has taught me to appreciate the importance of this view. When writing *The Children of Aataensic* (Trigger, 1976), I found that trying to understand the mentality of seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries required almost as great an act of anthropological imagination as did understanding the perceptions of the Hurons of that period. Not all admirers of the Society of Jesus agree that I have been successful in this endeavour (Campeau, 1983: 36). Nevertheless, such individuals must look to their own work; for even a present-day Jesuit scholar understanding his predecessors of the seventeenth century involves a major historical effort. Yet, much as historians may realize the need to perceive native cultures from within, the vast historical gap between modern Euro-American culture and traditional native ones creates even greater problems when it comes to explaining why native people behaved as they did.

Marshall Sahlins (1981), for example, has suggested that the Hawaiians' murder of Captain James Cook, during a fracas over the stealing of a cutter, may have been intimately connected with their annual reenactment of the rivalry for kingship between their agricultural deity Lono and the god Kulaniopuu, who was associated with warfare and human sacrifice. When Cook first visited Hawaii late in 1778, the islanders identified him with Lono, who was scheduled to reappear at that season. When, however, he returned the following February, after Lono was supposed to have gone for the rest of the year, he was killed so that his bones, in keeping with

Hawaiian religious custom, could be appropriated by the king, who represented Kulaniopuu. I am not qualified to judge this interpretation of Cook's murder. Yet, without a detailed understanding of Hawaiian mythology and religious practices, it would be impossible even to posit such a motive for it. Although the anthropological understanding of native cultures is always imperfect, and therefore cannot offer total insights into the perceptions that are associated with native behaviour, without these insights historians cannot begin to fathom the role played by beliefs that are entirely different from their own. As a result, they may impute their own culturally-determined motives to native peoples in situations where they are wholly inappropriate.

### *Cultural Evolutionary Critique*

Yet, even many anthropologists who are fundamentally sympathetic with cultural relativism are troubled by its more dogmatic rejection of evolutionism. They find it significant that throughout human history, smaller, technologically simple societies have succumbed to more populous and technologically complex ones, while the opposite does not occur. Wherever environmental conditions have permitted, expanding agricultural societies have displaced, absorbed, or annihilated hunter-gatherer ones and hierarchical civilizations have exploited their less advanced neighbours. In modern times an expanding industrial economy allowed Europeans to dominate most of the world and to settle large parts of it, including North America. This suggests the need for at least a partially non-relativistic perspective, if the regularities shaping human history are to be understood. Neo-evolutionary perspectives assume that technologically advanced societies possess far greater potential to transform the world than do less advanced ones. Thus, when the interests of technologically more advanced societies clash with those of less advanced ones, the less advanced societies either are compelled to become more complex or succumb to the domination of their more evolved neighbours. The greater the evolutionary gap between such societies, the greater is the chance that the smaller-scale ones will be overwhelmed (Sahlins and Service, 1960).

The neo-evolutionary position raises problems of major importance for North American history. Over a period of 350 years European settlers seized possession of most of the continent and came to dominate its surviving native inhabitants, who today are an oppressed and deprived minority (Hall, 1984). During the same period Europeans also gained control of Mexico, South America, Australia, and most of the islands of the Pacific. Are all of these

events examples of cultural evolution at work shaping relations between groups at different levels of cultural development? And does this explain why the European domination of Africa and Asia was less thorough and enduring?

Before we can answer this question, we must note that there is an important biological as well as a cultural dimension to this problem for North America and many other parts of the world where European colonists have largely supplanted native populations. In recent years anthropologists have accepted that a precipitous decline and a more recent recovery of native population have been major factors influencing relations between European newcomers and native Americans (Denevan, 1976). Epidemics of smallpox and other European communicable diseases that were hitherto unknown in the New World were recorded in the Caribbean and Mexico beginning early in the sixteenth century (McNeill, 1976). These were diseases against which native people had little immunity; hence the mortality rates were often extremely high. Such epidemics are generally assumed to have truncated the relatively advanced societies that are documented archaeologically for the southeastern United States prior to the sixteenth century (Wright, 1981). Northward extensions of these epidemics (Dobyns, 1983), as well as illnesses carried directly across the North Atlantic Ocean by European fishermen (Miller, 1976), could have destroyed large portions of the native population of northeastern North America long before the first historical records of epidemics in the seventeenth century.

The American anthropologist Henry Dobyns (1966) has argued that there was a decline of over 95 percent in the overall native population of North America, which he estimates to have amounted to 9.8 million people prior to 1492. He also suggests that most of the decline in eastern North America must have taken place between 1520 and 1650. Yet, it is not clear when epidemics of European diseases began in each region, at what rate the population declined, how much of the total population disappeared, and what impact these epidemics had prior to the earliest historical records. It is still possible that major epidemics in northeastern North America did not begin prior to permanent European settlement along the east coast. Indeed, contrary to many weakly substantiated claims that have been made concerning major population declines in that region in the sixteenth century, the preliminary results of Dean Snow's (1985) systematic study of archaeological settlement patterns in the Mohawk Valley suggest that there was no significant diminution there prior to 1633. Determining actual rates of decline will require extensive archaeological research. This

research will have to focus on changes in size and numbers of villages and on human skeletal evidence, which in some cases may reveal causes of death (Jackes, 1983) as well as changes in mortality rates.

It is clear that epidemics did destroy a large percentage of the native population across North America. Few anthropologists would now suggest that less than fifty percent of the population perished during the early years of European contact in any area. The epidemics also resulted in a loss of indigenous technological skills, scientific knowledge, and religious lore when large numbers of specialists died before they could transmit what they knew to their successors (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 19: 127). Hence, in terms of both manpower and cultural resources, native people were less well equipped to resist European domination after these epidemics than they had been previously. This made it easier for European colonists to gain an ascendancy in their dealings with the Indians.

There is currently a tendency to believe that demographic decline was by far the most important factor influencing the encounter between Europeans and native Americans (McNeill, 1976; Martin, 1978; Dobyns, 1983). Yet, there is the danger that paying too much attention to diseases may lead ethno-historians to minimize, once again, the role that deliberate European actions played in disrupting the lives and circumscribing the freedoms of native people, as well as to minimize the importance of cultural differences in making their subjugation possible. The ethical neutrality of microbes offers a temptation to simplify and distort the past that could prove to be no less misleading than was the smug European ethnocentrism of earlier times. What is needed is a more balanced evaluation of demographic and other factors.

Cultural considerations are also important in explaining European dominance. Traditionally most of this ascendancy has been attributed to the superior technology of Europeans. Indeed, for over a century, the spread of European settlement has been portrayed as an unequal contest between Iron Age and Stone Age cultures (Parkman, 1867; Hunt, 1940). Numerous studies have emphasized that traditional patterns of ritual and exchange may have played a major role in determining what impact European goods initially had on native societies (Sharp, 1952). Yet, it is also clear that native peoples throughout the world quickly recognized European knives, axes, and other metal cutting tools to be superior to stone and bone ones (Salisbury, 1962). As soon as adequate quantities of these tools became regularly available, Indians tended to rely on them and often ceased to manufacture their native equivalents. By 1623, the Montagnais who lived near

the St. Lawrence River no longer made birch-bark baskets or stone adzes. Instead they were purchasing copper kettles and iron cutting tools from the French. They continued to construct birch-bark canoes but also bought longboats from the French since they could travel more safely in these on the lower St. Lawrence (Sagard, 1866: 27, 251). Native people also sought to buy guns. Although the advantage of these early firearms over the bow and arrow in terms of fire power and accuracy does not appear to have been clear-cut (Given, 1981), their thunder-like noise and ability to pierce traditional native armour made them formidable weapons.

No native group mastered the art of forging iron in the first centuries of European contact, although they applied skills they had traditionally used to work native copper to modify and reuse iron tools that they had acquired from Europeans. This meant that once they had lost the knowledge of how to manufacture stone or bone tools or had adopted subsistence patterns that required metal ones, they became dependent on Europeans. Because of this, native groups, including those that were actively engaged in resisting European encroachment, had to rely on neighbouring native groups, rival European powers, or the very Europeans they were opposing to supply them with needed goods. Even those interpretations that are most strongly influenced by cultural relativism cannot deny that in the long run the technological gap between Europeans and Indians, and the Indians' inability to close this gap by mastering iron-production, played a major role in subordinating them to Europeans. Superior technology also provided Europeans with overseas mobility, military technology, and scientific knowledge that greatly advantaged them in their dealings with native people.

Much less attention has been paid to the equally important role played by contrasting relations of production and social and political organization in subjecting native groups to European control. Most of the native societies of eastern North America, at least those that survived into the seventeenth century, were relatively small-scale entities characterized by considerable internal equality, personal self-reliance, and individual consent as a prerequisite for implementing public policy. The basis for this personal independence was that every adult man and woman in these societies was capable of performing the same basic tasks as every other man or woman, which made extended families largely self-sufficient (Sahlins, 1972). While the inhabitants of communities shared their possessions in times of need and in ritual exchanges, this independence of households permitted factionalism and made it difficult for whole societies to pursue highly specific goals for long periods. Even

though native peoples sometimes formed larger tribal groups and confederations in response to European encroachment (Brasser, 1971; Tooker, 1978: 418-422), they were generally unable to forge political entities that were able to withstand European pressure for long periods.

European societies were much larger and had a far more complex division of labour, as well as a more hierarchical and centralized social and political organization in which some individuals had the right to command and others the duty to obey. This made it possible for governments and entrepreneurs to coordinate the efforts of large numbers of people to carry out specific longterm projects. Among these projects was the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the New World. Successive colonizers were able to learn from their predecessors in their efforts to determine the combination of European settlement, specialist skills, trade with native people, acquisition of native lands, and military force that would best realize their goals and maximize their profits. With this superior knowledge and planning came self-confidence, which was also a factor ensuring the success of European enterprises (Quinn, 1977: 106-107; Porter, 1979). Thus, when conflicts developed, the ways of life that native people understood and valued put them at an organizational, as well as a technological, disadvantage in dealing with Europeans.

Religious beliefs also favoured Europeans. Native religions stressed relations between human beings and a natural world that was believed to be infused with supernatural power; the essence of which has been brilliantly captured by Brian Moore in his book *Black Robe* (1985). While native spirits tended to form loose hierarchies, resembling those of individual prestige in native societies, the concept of authority and the subordination of one individual to another was absent from both native social life and religious beliefs (Biggar, 1922-36, 3: 142, 157-158). Native rituals routinely involved the sharing and redistribution of material possessions and reinforced the egalitarian ideals of native societies by identifying human generosity with the bounty of the natural world, upon which all human beings depended for their survival. The refusal to share surpluses was associated with witchcraft, since both actions sought to harm human beings. Stinginess was therefore stigmatized as a flagrant form of anti-social behaviour (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 30: 19-21).

European religion stressed the value of the individual but simultaneously reinforced a hierarchy of obedience to father or husband, magistrate, king, and God, that at first was impossible for native people to comprehend. In the opinion of Christian theologians the concept of obedience to God was a

prerequisite for all true religion (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 28: 49). As a product of profoundly inegalitarian societies, beginning with those of the ancient Near East, Christianity reinforced and animated the hierarchical social organization that made long-term, centrally-directed projects possible. Christian missionaries sought through persuasion and theological means to fit native people into a hierarchical social order. While Europeans generally viewed missionary activities as altruistic behaviour that sought to benefit native people spiritually, their covert function was to inculcate the sense of subordination that was necessary to integrate these people into the lower echelons of colonial society.

The conviction that societies at similar levels of technological development will also have generally similar social organizations and religious beliefs, even if they have evolved totally independently of one another, lies at the heart of an evolutionary view of culture. This belief assumes that the parts that make up a social system are highly interdependent and that technology, ecological adaptations, or the relations of production play a major role in shaping entire ways of life. The conclusion that societies with simpler technologies are in their totality less able to resist domination by more evolved ones, which is fundamental for understanding history from a cultural evolutionary viewpoint, follows syllogistically from this deterministic position. Both views appear to be substantiated at least in a general way by the colonial history of North America and other parts of the world, insofar as the features of native societies that permitted them to be overwhelmed are not simply technological but include their social organization and religious beliefs. Yet, neo-evolutionists do not completely rule out a relativist perspective by asserting, as nineteenth-century unilinear evolutionists did, that more complex societies are also necessarily more humane, moral, or pleasant to live in. Neither, however, do they espouse the contrary myth of the noble savage. Cultural relativists are thus acknowledged to stand on solid ground when they maintain that no judgments of this sort can be made that are free from ethnocentric prejudice.

### *Universalist Objections*

On the other hand, cultural relativists often make far-reaching assertions about the nature of human behaviour that, if true, would constitute major obstacles for any historical interpretation of alien cultures. All relativists claim that each people's conceptualization of the world is culturally determined, that each historically separate culture creates its own conceptual universe, and that what is

accepted as rational in one society may appear as irrational in another (Sperber, 1985: 35-40). They argue that because phenomena are perceived and evaluated differently in different cultures, human behaviour can be understood only after the historian or anthropologist has become familiar with the perceptions, beliefs, and values of each specific culture. Extreme relativists further conclude that no reality is shared by all human beings and that no knowledge or beliefs can ever be justified in terms that are independent of context (Barnes and Bloor, 1982). They believe that the malleability of the human mind is sufficiently great that cultures can vary without any constraints other than satisfying a limited number of functional prerequisites imposed by physical needs, such as, for individuals to have adequate food, clothing, shelter, protection from human and animal predators, and psychological reassurance and for societies to procreate and rear enough children to assure their continued existence (Aberle *et al.*, 1950).

Cultural relativism has produced a curious separation between anthropology and the psychology of intellect in the twentieth century. Anthropologists, with the notable exception of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), have generally ignored the study of the mental mechanisms that all human beings as a species share in common, assuming that these mechanisms can shed no light on the content of cultures. Conversely psychologists have assumed that the study of cultures sheds no light on mental mechanisms apart from revealing the diversity of learned behaviour. Recently some anthropologists have become aware of this gap and their critiques of the divorce between anthropology and psychology may be leading the anthropological study of human behaviour in new directions (Sperber, 1985). In due course we will take account of their views.

The views of cultural relativists must be differentiated from the distinction that some evolutionary-oriented scholars have drawn between primitive and modern thought. The advocates of primitive thought include some of the few anthropologists, apart from Lévi-Strauss, who in the past have paid attention to the psychology of intellect and who have studied modes or patterns of thinking rather than its content, which is what is of concern to cultural relativists. Both primitive thought and cultural relativism, however, share the belief that the cognitive processes of traditional American cultures were very different from our own and therefore conclude that an understanding of the motivations of native people is relatively inaccessible to the historian. Because of this it is worth examining both concepts.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1911), Henri Frankfort (*et*

*al.*, 1949), and most recently Christopher Hallpike (1979) have argued that the thought processes of non-literate third world peoples are deficient in verbal abstractions and pervaded by analogical or mythopoeic analysis rather than by logical reasoning. Instead of subjects and objects being clearly distinguished, they are perceived as linked by a common power or energy that can be evoked by puns or popular etymologies. This power can be controlled and human relations with the natural and supernatural can be manipulated by means of rituals, spells and incantations. It is also alleged that this form of thinking closely resembles that of young children in Western societies.

Most anthropologists vigorously reject the view that the thought processes of native peoples are more child-like than Western ones. They maintain that most of what has been interpreted as evidence of primitive or pre-logical modes of thought merely results from a different conceptualization of the constitution of the world. Nature is viewed as pervaded and controlled by spirits that relate to each other and to humanity in the same fashion as human beings deal with each other. Far fewer abstract concepts are needed to describe the operations of such a world than of one in which the behaviour of animals, plants, and inanimate objects is viewed as radically different from that of human beings. What distinguishes such societies from our own is their understanding of the world rather than the nature of thought itself (Childe, 1949).

It is quite obvious that in technologically manipulating nature and dealing with social situations, the principles of cause and effect are clearly understood by all human groups. Religious rituals may accompany hunting, warfare, or metal-working in so-called primitive societies and these rituals may be regarded as essential for the success of such undertakings (Gellner, 1985: 68-100). Yet none of these activities would be possible without detailed knowledge of the practical consequences of specific actions (Davenport, 1960). Likewise, successful interpersonal relations depend on the ability to judge how others will respond to particular actions within the context of an individual culture. There is no evidence that the early European colonists who had close dealings with the Indians doubted that they were capable of rational behaviour; however strange their beliefs may have seemed and however much they may have exasperated these Europeans by their refusal to do what they wished. Altogether the evidence suggests that rationality played a more prominent role in the behaviour of native people than any theory of primitive thought would lead us to expect.

The same conclusion also applies to cultural

relativism. One language may have hundreds of terms for different kinds of yams, camels, snow, or automobiles, while another may get along with none, or only one or two. Such elaboration reflects the relative degree of importance of particular items in different cultures. Yet, linguists and philosophers maintain that any idea that can be expressed in one language can be explained in another, although the difficulty involved in doing this may vary considerably from one language to the next (Davidson, 1982; Hacking, 1982: 58-63; Horton, 1982; Newton-Smith, 1982). It has been argued that many of the most spectacular examples of culturally-determined, and to us seemingly irrational, beliefs have metaphorical rather than literal significance in their own culture. Hence, when the Bororo of Central Brazil affirm that they are red macaws they are making a statement that has religious meaning; not actually confusing themselves with parrots (Sperber, 1985: 37-38). Many other such concepts have a semi-propositional status, which means that their significance is contextually assigned and often only vaguely understood by most users. Because of this, the meanings of words are frequently perceived differently by different members of the same culture. Examples in our own society are terms such as love, democracy, and Communism, which clearly mean different things to different individuals and in various contexts. Both the anthropologists Dan Sperber (1985: 45-46) and Ernest Gellner (1985: 86-87) interpret the fact that ethnologists claim to understand what other peoples believe as evidence that cross-cultural differences may be more superficial than most ethnologists claim. If culturally specific beliefs were as important and persuasive in determining human behaviour as the more extreme cultural relativists believe, it would make ethnographic research much harder than it is, or even impossible.

Sperber further claims that cultural relativism replaced the vertical separation that cultural evolutionists had sought to establish between our own culture and other ones with a horizontal separation. He refers to this as a "kind of cognitive apartheid" (1985: 62) that was designed to maintain the uniqueness, if not the manifest superiority, of Western civilization. It has also been alleged that, although cultural relativism formerly assisted the fight against racism, it has more recently become a doctrine that tends to justify the backward economic status of third world peoples (Harrison, 1982; Geertz, 1984: 267).

Sperber and others deny the relativist assertion that the only limitations on cultural variability are the need to satisfy certain functional prerequisites and the external constraints imposed by the environ-



ment. They argue that human beings, as biological organisms, share certain intrinsic properties that characterize them as a species. Perception, reasoning, communication and emotions are assigned a more important role in shaping human behaviour than most cultural relativists have been prepared to acknowledge. Human nature thus constitutes a further constraint, this time a universal one, on the range of variability in beliefs and morals.

These claims, in turn, have limitations and must not be pushed too far. Anti-relativists are prone to define some universally shared "human nature" or "human mind", often invoking advances in cognitive psychology, computer science, structural linguistics, or evolutionary theory to justify their claims. I include here some allegedly innate tendencies, such as a territorial imperative or a killer instinct (Ardrey, 1961, 1966), which some claim are shared by all human beings. Yet, invariably these more specific constructions can be shown to be unsubstantiated projections of their creators' ethnocentric views. A shared set of sensory abilities, a common range of emotions and specific mechanisms for processing and communicating information, including human linguistic competence, clearly impose limitations on cultural variation, but how and to what degree remains unclear. Nor is it certain to what extent within these limitations human nature changes as societies evolve. Many Marxists, for example, have totally rejected the fixity of human nature. Yet, this is a problem that is as controversial within Marxism as it is outside of it. Marx himself appears to have regarded a limited species-specific and invariant human nature as a useful analytical concept (Fuller, 1980: 230-264; Geras, 1983). It has also been argued that formal logic has been compelled to change since the time of Aristotle to accommodate itself to the new types of data created by the industrial and electronics revolutions (Darwin, 1938; Hacking, 1982: 48-57). This, of course, refers to the logic used in scientific analysis, much more so than in everyday life. Finally, there is the evolutionist challenge to cognitive relativism which argues that as societies acquire greater technological and scientific capabilities, humanity's understanding of the natural world and of itself more nearly approximates an absolute reality (Taylor, 1982; Gellner, 1985). Unfortunately a similar argument with respect to morality is harder to substantiate. All of this serves to demonstrate the danger of pushing either relativism or anti-relativism too far (Geertz, 1984).

### *Relativism, Evolutionism, and Cultural Contact*

What anthropologists and historians, thus, have

to explain is a complex mixture of culturally-specific beliefs, universal rationality, personal self-interest, and idiosyncratic personalities that shape human behaviour within a context of technological and ecological constraints. Cultural beliefs, usually in the form of a slowly changing tradition that is transmitted from one generation to the next, provide the framework in terms of which self-interest is defined. Yet, within this framework, rational calculation (Taylor, 1982) plays a major role in determining how individuals and specific groups of people will behave, while idiosyncratic psychological factors further influence individual responses (Sartre, 1963). For example, in the seventeenth century almost all respectable French men and women professed to believe in Christianity, in the reality of heaven and hell and that baptism and the repudiation of sinfulness were requirements for salvation. Yet, these beliefs did not influence the behaviour of all French people in the same way. Jesuit missionaries collectively were prepared to die in order to convert native peoples to Christianity. They also believed that shedding their own blood would help to win the divine grace that was required to accomplish this task. French Catholic traders shared these beliefs but generally were not prepared to die for them. On the contrary, for the sake of commercial gain, many traders risked their souls by adopting native customs or more commonly by engaging in dishonest business practices and placing commercial gain ahead of converting the Indians. At the individual level, not all Jesuits courted martyrdom with equal zeal, even if all who had to die did so with exemplary courage. Likewise, individual traders for various reasons differed in the fastidiousness with which they observed their religious obligations.

The Hurons, as the product of an entirely different cultural tradition, believed in the solidarity of their matrilinear extended families and also that a man should be prepared to die to avenge the murder of a kinsman by an enemy group. An interlocking set of Huron beliefs maintained that the principal way for young men to gain personal prestige was to capture enemies, whom the Hurons could either adopt or kill and eat in a religious ritual. Most young men clamoured for war in order to have the opportunity to win such prestige. Older men, especially the more influential chiefs, tended to oppose it in an effort to curtail its destructiveness and perhaps also to keep young men in their place (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 10: 225-227; 14: 39). Some Huron chiefs maintained amicable relations with their counterparts in foreign tribes and continued to exchange diplomatic gifts and negotiate with them even when relations between their groups were severely strained (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 10: 229; 22:

309-311). In wartime, these chiefs would be accused by rivals of receiving bribes from the enemy and being potential spies but they were protected from harm by their clansmen. Thus, whether to wage war was a major source of disagreement between young and old men and among chiefs of different clans. Individual temperaments also must have influenced behaviour among native people just as they did among Europeans. Yet very little can be learned about variation at an individual level among native peoples from most historical documentation.

The different degrees of development of seventeenth-century European and native North American societies created some interesting contrasts in general patterns of behaviour. Individual Europeans, when they had an opportunity to do so, sought to acquire wealth as a means of enhancing their personal power and status. The church and state upheld the right to possess property and the law protected it, often with brutal penalties, against theft and vandalism. Leisure was also a prerogative of the rich. The conspicuous display of wealth in the form of clothing, jewellery, houses, and servants was essential for maintaining rank.

Among the Hurons and other tribes of north-eastern North America people also sought to amass surplus goods, but their aim in doing so was to give these goods away. Since much redistribution took place as part of rituals intended to heal the sick and ensure harvests, those who failed to participate were viewed as seeking to harm their countrymen. Generosity was a source of prestige and the more a man was able to redistribute foodstuffs and goods obtained through trade with neighbouring tribes, the more he was able to win public acclaim and influence political decisions. Those who held chiefly offices and their families were expected to amass more goods than others so they could give more away. Yet, they kept for their own use no more possessions than anyone else (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 10: 231). Nor was there the disruptive status rivalry noted among the native peoples of coastal British Columbia during the nineteenth century (Averkiewa, 1971). The major chiefly offices of each local clan tended to be hereditary in particular lineages. Other individuals gained personal prestige by supporting their clan chiefs.

Cultures, as historically transmitted patterns of life, channel human behaviour and play a major role in defining individual interests. Depending on the culture, these can focus on such diverse concerns as political prestige, monetary profit, or religious martyrdom. Yet these factors, as we have already noted, are activated in terms of individual decisions, at which level idiosyncratic psychological factors also play a role. Cultural patterns therefore do not

determine human behaviour but are part of the environment that individuals seek to manipulate in terms of their personal strategies for success or survival. Viewed from another perspective, cultural patterns are like the rules of a game. At a more general level it seems likely that the search for prestige and influence, or alternatively to minimize losses and humiliation (Gellner, 1985: 68-82), is universal, whether it occurs within the context of a household, tribal council, or royal palace. Yet, the activities by means of which success is achieved are culturally determined. Reason, by contrast, is employed to evaluate situations and decide the best course of action for an individual. While reason does not set the rules of a game, it determines how well it is played.

The dialectical relation between culturally specific beliefs and a universal capacity for reasoning assumes a particularly interesting aspect when cultures that have very different origins and are at different levels of technological development interact with one another. In many instances Indians are reported to have regarded the first Europeans they encountered as gods or the returning spirits of the dead (Porter, 1979: 185, 234). European ships were interpreted as moving islands, their masts as forests, their sails as clouds, and their guns as thunder (Rand, 1894: 22; Thwaites, 1896-1901, 5: 119-121; Wood, 1634: 77). European glass beads, metal kettles and trinkets were avidly sought because they were believed to be endowed with supernatural life-giving power like the crystals, native copper and sea shells that the native peoples of eastern North America had been burying with their dead for several thousand years (Hamell, 1983). If the Europeans seized and carried off native people or strange diseases broke out after their visits, this reinforced the idea that they were spirits associated with the underworld and the realms of the dead (Quinn, 1979, 3: 152-153). All of these reactions were based on traditional native views about the supernatural.

Yet, as contact between the two groups became routine, the behaviour of Europeans was quickly seen to fall within the range that native people associated with mortals. Europeans were observed to suffer from illnesses and injuries and even to die from them. They experienced severe problems coping with new environments and some of them took a long time to learn how to handle a canoe or to walk on snowshoes. Many also failed to master native languages easily (Wrong, 1939: 138). All of these shortcomings identified Europeans as human beings.

Once the Indians ceased to regard Europeans as supernatural beings, they often became highly critical of their behaviour. They suggested that the Europeans' slowness to learn new ways was the result

of their feeble intelligence. Among the Hurons, this view was reinforced by a traditional association between hairiness and feeble-mindedness, which encouraged the Hurons to indulge in their own form of racial theorizing (Wrong, 1939: 139). The Indians criticized the customs of Europeans, especially their talkativeness, lack of decorum and greed. They were also shocked by the callous manner in which Europeans treated one another. This included corporal punishment and travellers abandoning sick companions to the care of strangers (Wrong, 1939: 194-195).

These observations tended to limit the supernatural powers that the Indians were inclined to associate with European technology, writing and the ability to predict — and therefore in the Indians' minds to control — eclipses. The Indians possessed charms and rituals that allowed them to hunt, fish and make their way through the forests better than Europeans did (Tooker, 1964: 120-122). Therefore, if Europeans possessed magic that permitted them to manufacture iron axes and glass beads, it was merely the specific nature of their spells that made Europeans different from Indians. The Indians also assumed that the Europeans remained immune or quickly recovered from the new illnesses that were killing them because they knew but were unwilling to share the rituals that cured these diseases. Thus, while native peoples continued to interpret Europeans in terms of their own cultural preconceptions, their principal frame of comparison shifted from the supernatural to the human realm. Europeans became simply another people, and then several different peoples, from a hitherto unknown land beyond the ocean. All of this was an operation based on observation and rational interpretation.

Once a few Indians had visited Europe as willing or unwilling guests and returned to tell of their adventures, native people knew still more about Europeans. Indian visitors were amazed at the populousness of Europe and its riches. They delighted to tell of wonders they had seen, such as people travelling in cabins pulled by moose. Yet, they were also appalled by what they perceived as the injustices of European society: its unequal distribution of wealth, the right of one man to order another about, the need of some people to beg to stay alive and the public torture and executions of countrymen rather than of prisoners of war (Sagard, 1866: 320). Some of the stories brought back to North America seemed too extraordinary to be believed, especially if the visitors were young men, who were not thought to be particularly reliable witnesses. What was believed increased the Indians' awareness of how alien the behaviour of Europeans was to their

own and therefore how important it was for them to resist European domination.

This information also helped Indians to deal more effectively with Europeans. For example, the narrative of Jacques Cartier's voyage of 1535-36 reports that after Taignoagny and Domagaya, two boys from Stadacona whom he had kidnapped off the Gaspé Peninsula and forced to spend the previous winter in France, told their people that the trinkets he was trading with them for food had little value in his own country, the Stadaconans began to demand more in exchange for their provisions (Biggar, 1924: 187-188). Without the information provided by these boys, the Stadaconans would have had no way to judge the value that the French attached to their own merchandise. Whether the Indians learned about Europeans by visiting Europe or observing their behaviour in North America, the more they discovered about them, the more effectively they were able to cope with them. If, in the long run, this knowledge was not sufficient for Indian societies to escape domination by Europeans, the failure must be attributed to their demographic decline and to the great difference in evolutionary status between the two groups, rather than to the inability of native people to observe and learn how to deal with Europeans.

### *Cultural Change*

Contact between Indians and Europeans initiated a process of transcultural evaluation that was challenging for both sides. French priests feared that the freer sexual habits of adolescents in Huron and Iroquois societies, as well as the lack of hierarchical control that characterized all native groups, would undermine the moral self-discipline of French traders and workmen who went to live among them. Hence, the Jesuits tried to exert maximum control over the behaviour of such men (Trigger, 1976: 404-405, 470-471, 575-576). Indians also challenged the assumptions on which Christian religious beliefs were based. They demanded to be told, for example, on what evidence priests could claim to know about the existence of heaven and hell. While Indians were impressed by the power of writing to transmit messages, few were inclined to believe that scriptural authority as a source of information about the supernatural was superior to dreaming, which was their own principal means of communicating with the spirit world. Hence, they would reject Christian teachings, as being based on evidence that was inferior to their own, or else challenge Christian exclusivity by stating that the French should hold to their beliefs and let the Indians keep theirs (Thwaites, 1986-1901, 8: 147).

At first the non-exclusive nature of native religious beliefs rendered Christian dogma and practices less disturbing to the Indians than the Indian rejection of Christian teachings was to the missionaries. To the Indians, baptism initially appeared to be merely another curing ceremony and the Recollets and Jesuits to be powerful French shamans. Only the priests' claims that the traditional Indian villages of the dead did not exist and their demands that natives should cease to perform traditional ceremonies ran counter to native beliefs and these were rejected out-of-hand as unreasonable (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 13: 171-173). From the start the French clergy responded to this unexpected resistance to their teachings by viewing Huron religious beliefs and the arguments they advanced against accepting Christianity as being inspired by the devil (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 23: 151-159). This theological response was essential if the French were to avoid having to consider objectively the intellectual challenge that Indians were offering to the basic assumptions on which Christian beliefs were based.

In the long run, however, Christianity subverted the integrity of Huron society far more than Huron religious beliefs ever threatened Christian faith. Huron society, as we have seen, was based on sharing and the traditional religion played a major role in encouraging redistribution and preventing the development of economic inequality. Individuals whose acquisitiveness made them reluctant to participate in secular and religious forms of sharing feared that they might arouse other people's resentment, which the Hurons believed could cause them to fall victims to illness and other forms of bad luck. They also feared that they might be accused of being witches. Hence, when any Huron was especially fortunate in hunting, fishing or trading, he shared with others what he and his family did not need (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 8: 123). French priests, in their opposition to "paganism", forbade their converts to participate in any traditional Huron rituals that sought to cure the sick and promote the general well-being of the Huron people. These rituals frequently involved the redistribution of material wealth. Because the Jesuits opposed such beneficent acts in the name of their religion, most Hurons identified Christianity as a form of witchcraft (Trigger, 1976: 715-719). This view was reinforced by the widespread belief that Jesuit sorcery had caused the epidemics that had destroyed more than half of the native population of the St. Lawrence lowlands between 1634 and 1640. Thus the French and Hurons, despite the evolutionary gap that separated them, were equally disposed to interpret what they did not like about each other's religious

beliefs as evidence of witchcraft and demonic influences.

Yet to some Hurons, Christianity offered a way to break loose from traditional social controls and become more acquisitive (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 23: 129, 173). This was not the only motive, or even the only economic motive, for becoming Christian, and not every convert sought to escape the responsibilities that were part of traditional Huron culture. Nevertheless, Christianity provided an escape from traditional controls that some Hurons must always have found irksome (Clastres, 1974); just as some Europeans deeply resented Christian strictures on their sexual behaviour or their pursuit of profits. Eventually, however, as the spread of Christianity was further encouraged by preferential economic treatment by the French and the Hurons' need for closer alliances with them, it became a powerful corrosive undermining the economic equality that had been the basis of Huron and neighbouring societies. While missionaries might laud native generosity as being akin to Christian charity, in their zeal to destroy "paganism" they zealously expunged the traditional ideological motivations for such behaviour. In the absence of effective Christian missions, the Five Nations Iroquois, despite their economic dependence on Europeans, were able to preserve economic equality for many more decades.

Many French men, especially youths such as Etienne Brûlé and Pierre-Esprit Radisson, and other employees of the trading companies, who were drawn mainly from the lower classes, were attracted by the freer and more egalitarian customs of the Indians among whom they lived and worked. They adopted many aspects of Indian dress and behaviour and some of them married into Indian families according to native customs. It has been suggested that these men were positively attracted to native societies as an escape from the subordination, harsh discipline and humiliations they experienced among their own people. Denys Delâge (1985: 304) argues that such encounters with egalitarian societies represented an intolerable danger to the dominant European classes. To be sure, Recollet and Jesuit missionaries both deplored what they believed was the dissolute behaviour of such men and regarded it as a major hindrance to their work of conversion; while administrators, such as Champlain, despised them as degraded individuals who in many respects were worse than born "savages". As early as 1626 regulations were adopted to control the movement of French men into native societies (Trigger, 1976: 404-405). Yet, it is doubtful that any Europeans in a position of authority believed their way of life to be seriously threatened by this behaviour.

In the early phases of colonization, when there

was considerable potential for vertical mobility in the nascent colony of New France, French traders would eventually abandon their native wives and children and return to "civilization", where they married French women and the money they had earned while living among the Indians allowed them to achieve higher social status. Those who stayed in New France became businessmen, landowners, and government officials, and some joined the ranks of the nobility (Trigger, 1985: 196-197). Even the Métis, who emerged as a separate group farther west in later times, were fitted in as modestly privileged individuals between the Indians on the one hand and European traders and administrators on the other. The discipline and privileges of the hierarchical societies of Europe were duplicated to a considerable degree in the colonial establishments of the New World and these societies attracted European traders who had adapted to native ways by offering them valued vertical mobility in the class societies into which they had been born. For Europeans who could achieve it, such mobility was prized more highly than escape into a primitive egalitarian society. A return to civilization also allowed them to seek spiritual salvation by atoning for the sins of their former irreligious lives and regularly receiving the sacraments of the church. All of this suggests that explicitly formulated loyalties and ideological controls and not just technological superiority gave Europeans a significant advantage in interacting with native peoples. In stating this, I am not denigrating the native cultures of the seventeenth century, which were as adapted to the circumstances in which they had evolved as European societies were. What native societies were not adapted to was coping with European ones. At this point relativist and evolutionary models become complementary rather than alternative modes of historical interpretation.

No rules have been formulated that prescribe the relative degree or kind of attention that must be paid to culturally specific beliefs and to reason in historical or ethnohistorical studies. Because of that historical interpretation remains an art rather than a science; although it is by no means an uninformed art. Culture and reason are so intertwined that they cannot be disentangled in real life situations. Moreover, the relative importance of each may vary according to the sort of problem and the specific groups being investigated. Yet the more one knows about the beliefs and values of the people being studied, the easier it is to understand the role that was played by reason and calculation. Especially in studying non-Western peoples, ethnocentrism is an ever-present danger limiting an historical understanding of human behaviour. Yet, an interpretation

that attributed all behaviour to cultural norms and ignored the role of rational calculation would be equally misleading, and even more demeaning to its human subjects.

A final major consideration is that while a cultural pattern is shared by the members of a particular group, reason is a characteristic of individual human beings. Thus, while members of the same ethnic group will tend to share many of the same beliefs and values, interest groups and individuals can react to new situations in different ways according to how they perceive it will best serve their own interests. This observation is especially important for understanding individual native reactions to colonization. Cultural contact can be intellectually liberating in the sense that, as the knowledge that two groups have of one another increases, this may enhance an awareness of alternative ways of doing things and erode the importance of accepted customs as guides for behaviour.

We have already noted that expanded cultural choice had a greater impact on native societies than on European settlers. This happened partly because native peoples lacked the highly developed repressive controls and mechanisms for maintaining identity that were required to defend their own value systems against European aggression. In the long run, native self-confidence and ethnocentrism were also undermined by European domination (Trelease, 1960: 172). The result was to exacerbate existing cleavages in native societies and to create new divisions. A native trader could continue to seek prestige by redistributing his surplus goods as his ancestors had done, but he could also declare himself to be a Christian and adopt a more acquisitive pattern of behaviour. Yet, at the same time that natives, as individuals, were being presented with an unprecedented range of cultural choices, the constraints that growing numbers of European settlers were imposing on native societies also increased. The result was to multiply the disintegrative pressures on these societies and to lessen the chances of a united response to European incursions. Native responses tended to fragment and, therefore, became more ineffectual.

Individual reactions varied from attempts at total assimilation, often made next to impossible by colonial racism, to frequently ineffectual total rejection of European ways. Most native groups adopted significant aspects of European culture, including metal tools and, at a later stage, Christianity. Yet collectivities such as the Micmacs struggled for centuries to maintain their coherence, distinctiveness and sense of the past despite their adoption of significant aspects of European cultures,

economic disruption, repressive colonial administrations and the insistence of Europeans on treating them as a dying people (Upton, 1979). The choices that individuals and groups had to make to ensure their survival were varied and most often the negative pressures were such that even native people who understood European ways failed to achieve their goals.

As native groups were thinned by disease and displaced by warfare and European settlement, they fragmented and recombined in many different patterns. As they did so some ethnic identities were lost or altered and new ones forged. A pan-Indian identity also developed as native peoples grew increasingly aware of their common plight and they became the common objects of Euro-American plans for their future, which often bore little relationship to their own circumstances and aspirations. Native cultures continued to change as new technologies became available and their economic and political situation deteriorated as Euro-American society grew more powerful. Yet, the dynamism of the native response to European colonization totally refutes the view that native people, either as individuals or as groups, lacked the capacity to change and adapt to harsh new conditions. It is unacceptable to describe changes in native cultures as involuntary responses to European domination, while at the same time interpreting changes in Euro-American culture as a manifestation of its success.

### *Conclusion*

Ethnohistory reveals native people under increasingly desperate circumstances resisting European domination. Some individuals and groups succumbed to forces beyond their control but others tenaciously exploited the limited opportunities available to them to find a place for themselves in a world where some knowledge, and to a lesser extent acceptance, of European ways was a prerequisite for success of any kind. It is no more anomalous that Indians have changed their style of life since the seventeenth century than that Euro-Canadians have done so; nor do such changes imply a loss of identity. Group identities have persisted insofar as native people have found them an acceptable vehicle to defend or enhance their interests. Native history becomes a chronicle of individuals and groups struggling to survive and preserve what they can of their beliefs and identities in the face of seemingly overwhelming obstacles. Yet, in recent decades, this struggle has become increasingly successful as native people through their own efforts have articulated the knowledge, organization and sense of direction required to compete once again for a fairer share of

North America's resources. In this fashion people once assumed to be without history are becoming an increasingly important factor in the mainstream life and history of North America.

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