

PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS ON THE CHALLENGES OF RETHINKING POST-COLONIAL AND POST-SOCIALIST REALITIES

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Foundational Issues

All of the following is offered as a Euche (Yuchi) indigenous person: as such it represents my thinking, and a good number of other indigenous North American scholars' ideas about the challenges Native people have teaching about a history (colonial, in this case) and contemporary reality which in many cases remains burdened with this past - what one might call a living colonial legacy.¹ It remains to be seen to what extent indigenous thinking on so-called "postcolonial" issues arising from experiences in the Americas and North America in particular are applicable to colonial experiences in other parts of the world. Of course, the same concern goes ten-fold in considering the relevance of the following remarks to postsocialism² realities.³ I look forward to comments, criticisms, and good discussions about all of the following. I offer the following thoughts honestly - if not always clearly or concisely. And most importantly, I do not worry about being corrected - I hope for it, if I am mistaken.

¹ With respect to colonial and post-colonial history in America, I count the works of Vine Deloria, Jr. and Ward Churchill as informing and representative of views very close although not identical to my own. I could also count the work of colleagues Cornel Pewewardy and Michael Yellowbird as complimentary to my analysis. See especially Deloria, Vine Jr. 1969 and 1973, Churchill, Ward 1998 and 2002.

² See Footnote #1, Page 3 of this issue.

³ In order to understand where my position on this point comes from see Deloria, 1973 and Deloria, Vine Jr. and Wildcat, Daniel, 2001.

Colonialism and other grand concepts

Colonialism as a political-economic construct or idea is easily defined - in objectivist or absolutist terms.⁴ I am not a nominalist, but the problem remains that we conveniently use terms like state, capitalism, socialism, colonialism, and now globalization because they in some very meaningful ways converge or conform to socially constructed and reproduced realities we humans experience. Of course, these concepts and their attendant institutions, cultural features (in the broadest sense), behaviors, and practices are results of a past history, present experience and, interestingly, future expectations, goals or visions.⁵ It is not surprising that human endeavors, when conceptualized as fundamentally shaped by past, present, and future realities (if you will), are easily and mistakenly thought of in terms of a linear logic, the roots of which are found in the

⁴ Nearly all standard English dictionaries define colonialism as the political and/or economic control over a land/place by a foreign nation/power. Even admitting a post-modernist theory of control by mass media or communications, it seems the political economic relations continue drive mass or pop culture media and technology.

⁵ I take this claim as essentially ontological in character - regardless of how extended or truncated one's view of history, but see no necessity, as will become quite clear, for linear logic or structure, as will be imposed on time as experience.

fundamentally Enlightenment idea of progress.⁶

Problems with this logic notwithstanding, the crucial and most costly error to human dignity and the health of the planet came when it was presumed that the “universal” Truths found within the Western Tradition were the TRUTH; consequently, it only remained for those possessing the Truth to share it with others - so that “the others” could be enlightened and free also. Of course, sharing quickly became imposition, and objection to imposition of the Truth or euphemistic equivalents - progress, enlightenment, civilization, industrialization, etc. - could not, and unfortunately in too many places on the planet still cannot be tolerated. Protests by those unwilling to be put immediately on the right road or path of progress were inevitably met with violence and forces of destruction; protests by natives, and defense of long-standing cultures and their supporting institutions were interpreted as *ex post facto* demonstrations of the natives’ - the others’ - primitive and uncivilized “backwardness.”

States and Empires as well as the ideological systems supporting such institutions certainly existed before 1500, but what appears unique about the emergence of European colonial activities over the next 500 years was the extent to which European colonial enterprises were supported in part by a surprisingly well-formed and unique Western worldview (Sale 1991). Sale does a good job characterizing its main features, e.g., materialism, humanism, a fearful view of nature and, of course, natives. What I would add as a critical feature of this

Western worldview is the way in which numerous colonizers came to understand or at least rationalize their actions as part of what Kant later called a “universal” history, and Hegel philosophized as “world-historical” moments.

Welcome to the metaphysical foundation of modernity. The shared and seldom questioned assumption of modern, i.e., Western, political/economic ideas and conceptual models is the linear temporal conception of history. The problem, as Deloria pointed out thirty years ago, is that “manifest destiny” is more than a godly injunction. In the consciousness of Western humankind, self-confidence about the moral necessity of ushering in whatever was deemed as “next” became justification in the grandest and most abstract moral sense for all manner of practical atrocities against peoples and places across the globe. When God or History, and ideally both, are on your side, the license peoples, states, and armies invoke is frightening. It might be valuable to seriously consider how we think and talk about history once we discard the mistaken notion that a person, people, party, or state can possess such a Truth. Although I could not disagree more with Anthony O’Hear’s conclusion in *After Progress: Finding The Old Way Forward* (1999), I do appreciate the fact that he raises a very critical question for post-colonial and post-socialist thinkers: Where do we go, so to speak, after progress?

At this point most academics expect me to take a postmodernist turn - they will be disappointed. I prefer to take an unmodernist or non-postmodernist Indigenous turn: one neither forward nor backward along some abstract time-line, but a return to a spatial conception of history. Our human experience certainly exists on/in a time-space continuum - I do not deny that; however, if we begin with the phenomenal world and our human (social and collective) experiences - we can think of history as a function of space or place. A spatial conception of history suggests we must “ground” our thinking about history in the environments and landscapes from which experiences emerge. The spatial conception of history I advocate is not a refutation of the

⁶ The mistakes of thinking of history as the unfolding of a linear logic are demonstrated throughout Deloria’s work and in the post-modernist theorizing of Michel Foucault, see 1977, *Discipline and Punish, Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon and “Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias” at <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

significance of time; a spatial history merely suggests that when one asks, “what time is it?” it is reasonable to respond by asking, “where?”

I am not advocating an old-fashioned environmental determinism but rather what geographers Salter and Hobbs (2002) would identify as environmental possibilism. The key here is to develop a set of conceptual tools that grasp the bio- and cultural- diversity of the planet and begin to move rapidly away from two of the most dangerous and deeply rooted ideas in the Modern Western Worldview: first, the notion that a single “tradition” – that the Western Tradition or so-called Western Civilization emerging from one relatively small place on the planet can possess the knowledge by which all peoples and places can be objectively judged and evaluated along some universal time-line of “progress” or development; and second, the modern mythology/methodology that conceptually separates culture from nature. On this point there may well be agreement that these two beliefs have contributed significantly to postcolony and postsocialism problems.

Within a spatial conception of history one no longer searches for the one right path or model, but rather expects sustainable democratic futures to be emergent from peoples and places. In other words, knowledges are understood as residing in the symbiotic relationships between peoples and places. This interaction is what I choose to call the nature/culture nexus or more precisely, the nexus between particular environments and particular peoples and their “history” (Deloria and Wildcat 2001).

In the Americas, indigenous scholars tend to speak of the postcolonial period as one requiring de-colonization. A recent American Indian Studies conference was entitled ‘Decolonizing American Indian Studies.’⁷ The

intent of the decolonization discourse in the Americas is clear - move beyond and outside of the worldview and conceptual framework of the colonizers: a worldview generally regarded as Western or Eurocentric. While this recognition is a necessary first step, it very quickly indicates where the real work lies - in the construction and/or reconstruction of different worldviews and modes of analysis, ones that liberate the colonized (and let us not forget the colonizers) from the “traps” that preclude real successes in extending respect and human dignity through social institutions.

While I do find postmodernist critiques of the West and modernity useful, they generally do not go beyond negativities; in some cases they end up in a silly form of nihilism and at worst a very dangerous form with respect to power. We can keep some of the useful insights regarding postmodern critiques regarding gender and technology, to name but two, and reject many of the postmodernist conclusions. So where do we go from here? The following are several issues I would ask readers to critically evaluate - again I wonder to what extent they shed light on postsocialism issues.

Ontology - Exploring non-modernist paradigms

I would suggest we think of a continuum between two extremes (see figure 1); at one end is what I will call the Western scientific view of reality, and at the other end an Indigenous Native American view of reality.

The trap this continuum allows one to avoid is John Dewey’s either/or fallacy. Analytic systems thrive on dichotomies or dualisms. The problem is that the simplifications such dichotomizing produces often get mistaken for reality itself. As I constantly remind theorists, our models, concepts, and theories are not reality - as silly as it seems to have to say this - it seems often forgotten. The world is indeed made up of “things” but is also made up of processes and relationships which, while

⁷ The Conference, entitled *Decolonizing American Indian Studies*, was sponsored by the Center on Institutional Cooperation and American Indian

Studies Consortium. It was held at the Newberry Library, Chicago, IL, on September 19-20, 2003.

not dissectible or necessarily discreet, are

quite real.

Figure 1

Ontology

Western

Indigenous

<----->

material atomism

phenomenal relations

Reality fundamentally consists of things **vs.** Reality fundamentally consists of relations

Modernist Western epistemology seems deeply rooted in the Aristotelian job of developing categories into which the “things” of the world can be placed. Reality consists of objects, known objectively. Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton verified the existence of a mechanical dimension to the physical world, although they never excluded the existence of other dimensions. Of course, the on-going debates about the scientific status of the social sciences - the divide between the so-called “hard” sciences and “soft” sciences is a function of the extent to which reality itself is exclusively identified with **universal** physical laws that explain the mechanical features of the Newtonian clock-work universe.

In contrast to the dominant Western view of reality, the great many indigenous peoples (across many places and cultures in North America) I have had the good fortune to work with seem less attentive to “things” than to the relations or relationships and consequently the processes they are part of. This point is important since reality is not easily categorized as objective or subjective when one begins with the view of what one stands within.

There is a marvelous anecdote that has been carried down by First Nations peoples of Canada about a tribal elder called to a provincial court to testify on a natural resource issue. The story goes this way. The elder is sworn in to testify and is asked to “tell

the truth and nothing but the truth.” The elder is quiet for a long time and he is asked if he understands the question. The elder nods yes, and announces to the judge he cannot do what is asked of him. The judge asks why? The elder replies, “you asked me to tell ‘the truth and nothing but the truth,’ and I cannot do that. I can only tell you what I know.” This anecdote speaks volumes about the kind of humility with which one ought to approach the topic of the “Truth.” It follows from this illustration that native thinkers such as the individual above are prone to be suspicious - and rightly so - of those with The Truth.

What does this have to do with new approaches to teaching postcolonial and postsocialism realities? Possibly it suggests that we think of conceptual tools and practices that allow us to understand these realities in their unique features - features best appreciated holistically.

Finally, I often hear indigenous persons, especially educators, speak of “walking in two worlds.” I understand their point - but I think they are mis-speaking. If you try to walk in two worlds, you will become schizophrenic! We human beings walk in one world - but not the neatly categorized reality conceived by the modern Western thought; rather, it is a complex multi-dimensional world - a diverse world from which diverse experiences and worldviews emerge. Simply because reality is not reducible does not mean we cannot speak

about it - we can, but with humility and considerable circumspection.

Epistemology - the Epistemic approach to Knowledge

To facilitate a comparative approach to the construction of knowledge, I think of a West-Indigenous epistemological continuum that looks roughly like this (see Figure 2):

Figure 2



¹ Living in an intertribal setting at Haskell Indian Nations University, I am amazed at how often I have heard tribal elders express very similar views and, more importantly, conduct themselves in a manner consistent with what Harris calls the four “R’s”. I heard Harris make her summary at a conference hosted by the University of Kansas and Haskell Indian Nations University entitled *Indian Leaders Conference: Red Power and Tribal Politics* during September 14-16, 2000.

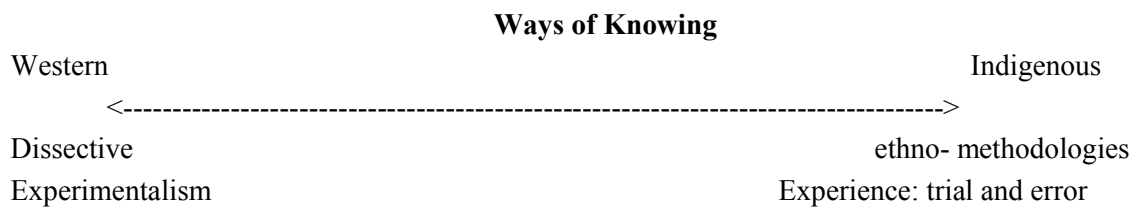
categories, while in non-modernist, tribal worldviews, knowing is mostly identified with acknowledgement of complexity, processes, and relationships. Of course all humans possess both kinds of knowledge to some degree - but for comparative purposes,

the continuum between both kinds of knowledge is useful to think about.

Methodology - Experiment vs. Experience

Lastly, a continuum between modern Western and tribal methodologies for knowing might look something like this (see Figure 3):

Figure 3



Here I put a premium on exploring critically, and reflecting on the experiential dimension of the problem(s) we are addressing. This is why I have said biography and, equally important, family, clan, tribal, and community histories are good, albeit often difficult starting places when indigenous people begin to understand the colonial and postcolonial histories in which they are immersed.

Experience, as every parent knows, cannot be completely controlled for even our children. Maybe this explains why we constantly work around or avoid experiences in modern scientific methodologies. Experience makes things too messy for our science. Unfortunately, the world can be a messy place.

Where We Go From Here: What we Teach

In postcolonial discourses, I am an advocate of **indigenization** as opposed to decolonization. Decolonization is essentially a reactive process and rightly so: its point of departure is colonization. But reaction can go many directions and take many forms. More importantly, the discourse often falls into a critical stance - shaped by the "reality" it seeks to critique - accepting the conceptual reality that may be the very problem, e.g., legal-rational and political-

economic discourses that preclude thinking about history in very different ways.

I have no idea how an **indigenization** process might play out in postsocialist or "de-socialist" discourses. Nevertheless, in the Americas the outright persecution and frontal attacks on native knowledge and ways of knowing, e.g., the "total institution," and resocialization project of the off-reservation boarding schools has left many indigenous scholars looking for ways to see where our own cultures might lead us. Given the attempt to take our histories and cultures away from us, some native people in the Americas today are reclaiming, returning, reconstructing, and creating indigenous ways of living for implementation today. In this sense - a sense - of theft by one people from another in the most existential manner imaginable, I wonder if there is anything comparable in the postsocialist situations around the world.

Countless dangers inhere in this approach and here too there may be cultural and ethnic parallels in postsocialist environments: return conceptualized temporally, romanticism, ethnocentric chauvinism/nationalism, and more concern with re-fighting old battles than moving on to new futures. We need imagination or visions that allow students to recognize that before we come up with the answer(s), we

must have confidence that we are indeed asking the right questions. I think we are off to a good start. I am leaning more and more towards thinking about history “ecologically” like my ancestors did for generations - as one useful tool. How shall we live and what does “history” teach us - good questions we should not take lightly.

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