

RUBBISH AND RACISM:

THE PROBLEM OF BOUNDARIES IN AN ECOSYSTEM.

"We had fed the heart on  
fantasies;  
The heart's grown brutal  
from the feast."

W.B. Yeats, Meditations in Time  
of Civil War.

In an age of mounting racial tensions and in the presence of an impending environmental crisis, it no doubt appears irresponsible to some for the anthropologist to fly off to a remote corner of the world and continue his study of people who, even if they do survive, will have no effect upon the world's major problems. As research money becomes scarce it seems that both universities and foundations agree that such field work is a luxury which they can ill afford. Anthropologists, of course, have always maintained that their research has been intimately bound up with the total human condition, and if their peoples have been remote and their theories esoteric this has been so only in order to offer a fresh approach to the problems which we all face daily. If anthropologists have been right, then they should have something to offer a bewildered western world concerning the two major crises which confront it: the growth of racism and the threat of environmental pollution.

To date, anthropologists have offered little guidance for these problems. Perhaps they have been reticent to address the issues because they feel that their traditional methodology has not equipped them to discuss "complex" societies. Surely, however, this is beside the point, for it is precisely through the insights which anthropologists have derived from the study of isolated societies that they can confidently offer a new approach to the problems at hand. At the risk of being both pre-mature and "trendy" it is perhaps nonetheless useful to try at this point to sketch an anthropological approach, drawing upon specific field studies of "primitive" societies. In the light of this material, rubbish and racism can be seen as problems resulting from the Western world's resolution of an issue which all societies confront - the problem of establishing boundaries in an ecosystem.

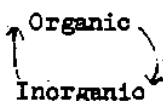
Anthropologists have learned from the science of ecology that it is not sufficient to understand societies as totally self-contained units. Rather they must be understood as elements in a larger functioning system, an ecosystem. As ecologists have defined it, the study of the ecosystem involves the examination of the relationships between living communities (plant, animal or human) and their non-living environment. Ecosystems exist on different scales. A back yard garden or a tropical fish tank can be examined as ecosystems. Indeed anything which involves an interchange between biotic and inorganic matter, from a drop of pond water to the entire biosphere can be understood as an ecosystem.

The important point to remember in an ecological study is that its focus is upon the relations between elements in a system rather than upon the elements themselves. Thus, an ecologist is not concerned primarily with the physiology of a caterpillar, but rather with the fact that the caterpillar ingests certain types of leaves, thereby temporarily altering the balance of the environment which surrounds it. The caterpillar as well as the leaf upon which it feeds are seen as elements which occasion specific types of interchanges between non-living elements and the biotic world. In this sense the leaf and caterpillar are not seen as autonomous units, but

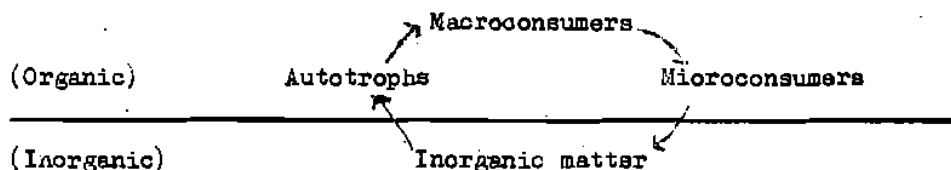
rather as specific processes or more appropriately, states in the overall process of interchange between inorganic and organic matter. In this the leaf or the caterpillar is said to occupy a "niche" in a larger ecosystem.

On a larger scale entire biotic communities can be studied as elements of larger ecosystems. Then the question becomes not what a particular caterpillar does to a particular leaf, but what a community of caterpillars will do to a tree or indeed a forest, and finally, what deforestation will do to the soil. Human societies, like any other biotic community, can be studied in a similar fashion, and as ecologists have pointed out, no matter how impressive their other achievements, human societies can do no more than occupy a particular "niche" in an ecosystem.

The central fact about the ecosystem is that it is cyclical: in a schematic form the cycle can be understood as simple circular exchange between inorganic and organic material, something like this:



In reality, of course, the process is not this simple because inorganic matter does not spring spontaneously into living material. A more useful model is one which represents the cycle in terms of the intermediary conversions which occur. In simplified form the cycle can be broken down into four analytical components: 1) inorganic matter; 2) "autotrophs" or primary producers (i.e. plants; plants in the presence of sunlight convert inorganic elements and compounds into biotic material); "macroconsumers" (chiefly animals who feed upon plants and each other); and 4) "microconsumers" or saprobes (microbes which convert the organic compounds in dead animals and plants back into inorganic elements and compounds.) Schematically the cycle can be drawn as follows:



The system as a whole is the object of study for the ecologist, and within this context no element in the system has any intrinsic autonomy. Each element is merely a stage in an overall process which has no identifiable end or beginning but repeats itself in a continuous cycle. In an ecosystem, then, there are no intrinsic boundaries. It is not clear from the study of the processes themselves just where one process in the system merges into another. Nor is it apparent which series of processes should be grouped together and bounded off from other processes which proceed or follow them. Any boundaries which are ascribed to the system are artificially imposed by the observer in order to make sense of the realities before him. Since these artificial boundaries are conceptual fantasies or fictions, their placement within an ecosystem is arbitrary. As a noted ecologist has put it, "Since the ecosystem is primarily a unit of function, just where one draws a line between one part of the gradient and another is not particularly important." (Odum:1967:10).

Anthropologists have drawn attention to similar types of arbitrary boundary-making and classification in other realms of human experience. Field work has revealed, for example, that the light spectrum has no intrinsic divisions or colour categories - at least none that are capable of being observed by the human eye.

The number of colours which a given society sees will depend upon how they "cut up" the spectrum, and although Americans may see six colours, people of the Bassa culture in Liberia experience only two, while peoples of the Shona language group in Rhodesia see four. The discovery of the phoneme in linguistics provides evidence of a similar process in the human experience of language. The phonemic system of a given language is imposed as a category grid upon the acoustic experience of that specific culture, and a continuum of sound is divided into significant units which are arranged in intelligible patterns to provide meaning. The phonemic system of two different languages may differ, however; and while "r" and "l" represent two different sounds in English, they are experienced as one significant unit of sound in Japanese.

It is not necessary to go exclusively to cross-cultural situations to appreciate that boundaries are only operative fictions. Anyone who has examined the graphic works of the Dutch artist, M. C. Escher realizes that boundaries are conceptual fantasies. In several pictures entitled "Metamorphose" Escher transforms birds into fish and then into reptiles without the observer being able to ascribe satisfactory boundaries to any of these elements as autonomous entities. If the graphic work is considered as a whole the observer is led to make such mental equations as "birds are fish are reptiles", or more accurately, "fish are really birds on the way to becoming reptiles". Some of the "unfinished" stone sculpture of Rodin presents the same conceptual problems. One can say that the sculpted head stands out from the marble which is surrounding it, but only if one created the conceptual fiction that the two are in some prior sense separate. When considered as a whole, however, it is equally true to say that a hunk of marble exists, part of which looks like a head.

The same point has been elaborated with even more puzzling examples. E. Ashby in a book entitled, Design for a Brain, illustrates the problem of interrelated elements in a system:

"As the organism and its environment are to be treated as a single system, the dividing line between "organism" and "environment" becomes partly conceptual, and to that extent arbitrary. Anatomically and physically, of course, there is usually a unique and obvious distinction between the two parts of a system; but if we view the system functionally, ignoring purely anatomical facts as irrelevant, the division of the system into "organism" and "environment" becomes vague. Thus, if a mechanic with an artificial arm is trying to repair an engine, then the arm may be regarded either as part of the organism that is struggling with the engine, or as part of the machinery with which man is struggling... The chisel in a sculptor's hand can be regarded either as part of the complex bio-physical mechanism that is shaping the marble, or it can be regarded as part of the material which the nervous system is attempting to control". (Ashby: 1960: 40).

If this illustration seems a little far fetched, perhaps a more mundane example will be more useful. Everyone accepts without such amazement the fact that by eating food we are enabled to live, yet most of us stop for a moment's reflection when this same fact is affirmed in the title of a recent American film, "You Are What You Eat". When we stop and think, the film title tells us only what we understand as common sense and elementary biology, but something lingers on as odd about the statement.

The problem, of course, is that we know this statement to be true, but we do not believe it, or more precisely we do not believe in it. We know that what we ate yesterday is a part of us now and will be separate from us at some point in the future, but none of us acts as if this were true. If we did, the sentence "I was a daisy"

would make perfect sense to us, but clearly it does not. We affirm that this sentence is nonsense despite the fact that we all realize after a moment's reflection that in fact the stuff we are made of at this point in time was undoubtedly at an earlier stage some form of vegetation - perhaps quite literally a daisy. In spite of all we know, all of us need to believe in the fiction that invariable boundaries actually do exist which separate what we eat from what we are from what our remains become.

At the core of this problem is a paradox. While boundaries have no intrinsic meaning for the scientist whose focus is the whole cyclical ecosystem, a society, which occupies a particular "niche" within the total system, has no meaning without them. Just where one draws a line between one part of the gradient and another may not be particularly important for the ecologist qua scientist, but it is of vital importance to men in society.

Much of modern anthropology can be understood as an elaboration of this theme - societies are bounded systems. Following the lead of Lévi-Strauss, structuralists have revealed that belief systems and myths are pre-eminently concerned with boundaries - delineating them, clarifying them, reinforcing them when weak, and above all professing belief in them. In addition to Lévi-Strauss's works on primitive thought his three volumes of Mythologiques are a demonstration of the way in which mythical stories are in fact logical statements, preoccupied with the problem of boundaries. Mary Douglas's book, Purity and Danger, is an amplification of the same approach applied to the concepts of pollution and taboo. As she phrases it, "...rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience". They do this by establishing boundaries, and ascribing objects and actions to proper categories. The ideas of pollution, rubbish and dirt present themselves as "matter out of place". "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is not such thing as absolute dirt; it exists in the eye of the beholder.... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment." (Douglas:1966:12,48). The work of Victor Turner draws upon the ideas of Lévi-Strauss and the analytical concepts of A. Van Gennep and concerns itself with the way in which all collective rituals are public declarations of the society's acceptable boundaries. The implications of these theoretical works receive elaboration in several recent field monographs, including Peter Rivière's Marriage Among the Trio, Louis Haron's Hawks of the Sun, and David Maybury-Lewis's Akwa-Shavante Society. Taken as a whole the work of these authors amply illustrates the universal fact that societies assign boundaries to separate themselves from their surrounding environment.

It is not sufficient, however, merely to ascribe boundaries; we need in addition to believe in them. In order to do this the boundaries must be considered in some sense "given", for it is normally impossible to make our self-generated fictions into the substance of belief. We need to believe that these boundaries are actually explicit in reality itself, in spite of the fact that as ecologists looking at a system as a whole we know that boundaries are not intrinsic in a cyclical system but rather imposed by the observer in order to provide meaning. At the basis of society, then, there is a confidence trick. We need to believe in the boundaries within what we know to be a boundariless system. We need to hoodwink ourselves into thinking that the categories which we assign to the things of nature are in fact ones which are self-evident in "the nature of things".

The problem of delimiting the society's boundaries is not only one of distinguishing what it is from what it eats. In addition to marking itself off from its natural surroundings, a given society also must distinguish itself from surrounding communities. To put this another way, a society is not only concerned with distinguishing what is natural from what is cultural, but also who is in from who is out. The inside/outside dichotomy is the social corollary to the

nature/culture distinction. It also seems apparent from field work evidence that in practice societies fuse these two separate dichotomies, and tend to use them interchangeably to describe concepts of boundary. Things of nature are in some sense outside, and things of culture are understood to be inside; while those people who are outside are said to be in the realm of nature, and those who are inside are seen to be part of the culture category. When we hear a statement like, "you are a baboon" we all know that an anatomical description is not implied. The speaker is likening us to something in the realm of nature probably because we have done something which is outside the boundary of acceptable behaviour.

Although the necessity to delineate both social and natural boundaries is a universal problem which faces any society, not all societies solve it in the same way. The criterion which serve to judge which elements are said to be part of nature as opposed to culture or inside instead of outside clearly vary from one society to the next, and it is part of the anthropologists's task to describe the variety of bounding systems evident in human experience. Some people regard lizards with particular reverence while others consider them only a nuisance. Some peoples abhor excrement and will go to great lengths to avoid all contact with it, while others not only burn the excrement of oows for fuel but also heap it over their heads at prescribed times. The darkness of the undisturbed rain forest is approached with considerable apprehension by some peoples, while others feel at ease within it and regard it as the source of all that is good. Clearly, the varieties of behaviour associated with the same type of object indicate that societies bound themselves in different ways.

Once again, one does not need to resort to cross-cultural comparisons to understand this. Both literary critics and historians have pointed out that within the English language word meanings have changed over time. This has been particularly true of the concept of "nature" itself. As Raymond Williams remarked:

Like some other fundamental ideas which express man's vision of himself and his place in the world, nature has a nominal continuity, over many centuries, but can be seen, in analysis, to be both complicated and changing, as other ideas and experience change. (Williams:1970:1419).

C.S.Lewis spends fifty pages of his book Studies in Words detailing the different meanings which the word "nature" has acquired through usage. What is evident in comparing different cultures is affirmed in the history of any one culture as well: societies bound themselves off from nature and from one another in a variety of ways.

This observation, of course, begs the further question: what is it that determines a society's choice of particular boundaries? Mary Douglas has argued persuasively that the definition which a society has of its environment is nothing more than a reflection of its social structure. As she points out, any conception of environment "...exists as a structure of meaningful distinctions". Furthermore, "...the discriminating principles come from the social structure". She goes on to point out that when the discriminate categories of any system are crossed or confused by matter out of place - that is to say when something is said to be "polluted" or "polluting" - then the anxiety which this creates should really be understood as a deeper anxiety about the structure of the society itself. "If the study of pollution ideas teaches us anything it is that, taken too much at face value, fears about rules of nature tend to mask social rules". According to Mary Douglas, then, we must learn to understand "...each environment as a mark and support for a certain kind of society". (Douglas:1970:1274-5).

Raymond Williams adopts roughly the same kind of explanation for the historically variant meanings for the word "nature" in the English language. The meaning of the word changes, he argues, as the social structure of the society changes. Thus, in the medieval world the concept of "Nature the absolute monarch" presents itself, with all the rigid hierarchy of the chain-of-being which one could expect from a feudal social structure. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nature has been transformed into "...a less grand, less imposing figure: in fact a constitutional lawyer". Under circumstances of rising competition involved in the industrial revolution the concept underwent yet another metamorphosis. "From the underlying image of the constitutional lawyer men moved to a different figure: the selective breeder; Nature the selective breeder". (Williams:1970:1420)

Without denying the validity of the approach used by Mary Douglas and Raymond Williams, it is true that it has only limited value in providing an explanation of the bounding choices which societies make. In effect an explanation of this kind is little more than a sophisticated tautology. Following Mary Douglas we come to the conclusion that a society defines certain things to be outside its boundaries because of what is inside them. The circular character of the argument is apparent.

It is possible to escape this kind of tautology by seeking an explanation for the bounding phenomena of a given society as a function of the ecological niche which it occupies. This approach involves the assertion that varieties of bounding-systems develop to provide societies with categories of meaning under widely differing ecological conditions. The question, then, as to why a society develops particular boundaries is answered by saying that these boundaries have emerged as symbolic statements about the ecological niche which that society has experienced over time.

Ethnographic examples can help make this clear. The Mbuti Pygmies of the Congo, numbering approximately 40,000 live in the Ituri Forest, bordered by Uganda to the east and the Sudan to the north. They depend for their subsistence upon hunting wild game and gathering edible plants within the forest. Game tends to move away from permanent human settlements, and sources of edible wild plants are rapidly exhausted within the immediate environs of a settlement, so the BaMbuti migrate as forest nomads in search of food. Colin Turnbull reports that:

after about a month, as a rule, the fruits of the forest have been gathered from all around the vicinity of the camp, and the game has been scared away to a greater distance than is comfortable for daily hunting. As the economy relies on day-to-day quest, the simplest thing is for the camp to move to a totally new one, perhaps ten or twenty miles away, perhaps farther." (Turnbull: 1965:286-7).

In such a subsistence system it is the undisturbed forest which provides the richest resources for the BaMbuti, and it is not surprising to find that in their symbolic representations the "deep forest" or the "dark forest" is portrayed as benevolent. Indeed the image of the benevolent forest is the most pervasive and powerful element of Pygmy symbolism. The BaMbuti call themselves "people of the forest", and every aspect of their system of belief seems to reflect the intimate identification which they make between themselves and the forest. As one informant, named Moke, explained to Colin Turnbull:

The forest is a father and mother to us, he said, and like a father or mother it gives us everything we need -

food, clothing, shelter, warmth...and affection. Normally everything goes well, because the forest is good to its children....(Turnbull:1961:87).

Even when things go poorly, the forest is not considered malevolent. Instead it is said to be "asleep". As Moka phrased it:

"...When something big goes wrong, like illness or bad hunting or death, it must be because the forest is sleeping and not looking after its children. So what do we do? We wake it up. We wake it up by singing to it, and we do this because we want it to awaken happy".(Turnbull:1961:87).

When death occurs the BaMbuti do not regard the forest as hostile either. Rather, the words of their song reflect the fundamental harmony which they feel with the forest which surrounds them. "There is darkness all around us; but if darkness is, and the darkness is of the forest, then the darkness must be good". (Turnbull:1961:88).

The Ituri forest is also occupied by varying tribes of Bantu origin, including the Bira, the Lese, the Mangbetu and the Mamvu-Mangutu. Although their physical surroundings are virtually identical to those of the BaMbuti, their modes of exploiting the environment differ considerably and consequently the type of niche which they occupy in the ecosystem stands out in marked contrast to that of the BaMbuti. The subsistence economy of the Bantu groups relies upon swidden agriculture. The collective work of the group is directed towards cutting down forest growth, burning it off in order to form cultivatable fields, planting their crops, and tending them until the time of harvest. The planting process repeats itself annually until one cleared plot of land becomes exhausted. When this occurs the cultivators are obliged to shift their activity to a new area of undisturbed forest, leaving the exhausted land to recuperate in fallow. In the newly chosen forest area the process of cutting, burning, planting, tending and harvesting begins again.

Unlike the BaMbuti, the Bantu agriculturalists subsist by constantly battling the forest. Swidden agriculture depends upon a raw materials-to-rubbish continuum based upon systematic predatory expansion into uncut forest, and as a result it encourages a warrior's attitude towards the environment. Nature is seen as something which exists outside of culture in order to be subdued and exploited by man. As the Bantu agriculturalists carve out their livelihood in continuous opposition to the encroaching forest vegetation, it is not surprising that on a symbolic level the forest is feared and regarded as the source of all that is uncivilized and evil. As Colin Turnbull observed: "The forest ...is thought of by them as hostile for its refusal to support their modest crops while it nourishes the luxuriant vegetation of the forest and its immense, towering trees. The hostility is thought of as a conscious act on the part of the forest itself, and of the spirits which inhabit it ....."(Turnbull:1965:288). The ecological niche which is implied by swidden agriculture can be seen, then, to give rise to a system of conceptual bounding which differentiates the Bantu peoples significantly from the BaMbuti who occupy roughly the same habitat.

Swidden agriculturalists throughout the world bound culture off from nature in much the same way as the Bantu. Nature is seen as alien and potentially hostile, and the proper relationship towards it is assumed to be one of conquest, subjugation, exploitation and abandonment. The self-image of these societies is based upon an overall conceptual framework of "culture" vs. "nature". The Trio of South America practice swidden agriculture, and as Peter Rivière reports their whole symbolic system is an elaboration of this underlying conflicting dichotomy.

Perhaps the most important distinction which the Trio make is that between forest and village. The village is the world of humans, a sanctuary in which animals kept as pets, even those which are normally hunted, will not be eaten if accidentally killed. The forest is the world of spirits and strangers, and uncertainty. But these two worlds are not separate and independent; the jungle forever encroaches on the village, and the Trio by cutting and burning his field is not merely performing an essential agricultural activity, since these acts symbolize for him a far greater battle. (Riviere:1969:vii-viii)

A similar attitude prevails on the outer islands of Indonesia where swidden agriculture persists, and it is grounded, as Clifford Geertz points out, in "...an historically rooted conviction that there are always other forests to conquer, a warrior's view of natural resources as plunder to be exploited..." (Geertz:1963:27). It is not an exaggeration to say that the image of society for these peoples is something like a digestive tract with raw materials being consumed at one end and waste products and rubbish deposited from the other. The very concept of rubbish, therefore, appears as the operational conclusion of a society whose self-image depends upon the plausible fantasy that the realm of man is to be bounded off from the realm of nature.

Racism is the operational conclusion for the same type of society when analyzed in the perspective of social relations. Nature is to culture as "savagery" is to "civilization", and any society which defines the first dichotomy antagonistically with reference to its physical environment is bound to contain within it the seeds of racist thinking in social relations. This occurs in the process of fusing the natural and social dichotomies with boundary-making in social space. For example, the word "savage" can be either an adjective or a noun. In the sentence, "The world around us was nature's savage domain", the word describes what the speaker perceives to be an attribute of "nature" as opposed to "culture". In addition, however, the noun form of the word can be used to stand for those people who are "outside" as opposed to "inside" an acceptable social boundary: "All around our community there were savages". The nature/culture and outside/inside dichotomies are assimilated to one another - they become co-terminous; and in this process of fusion, both distinctions become instances of an overarching "savage"/"civilized" dichotomy, the very basis of racist thought.

Evidence from swidden agricultural societies makes this clear. Anthropologists have long observed that the relationships between those considered inside such societies and those outside are by definition antagonistic. Those outside are suspected of sorcery, witchcraft, and every sort of conceivable subversion with reference to the society's welfare. Furthermore, such evil doings are taken to be evidence that these peoples are depraved by nature. Their very existence constitutes a threat to the society's well-being. Hence, as with the physical environment, one's only proper relationship towards those who are outside is one of conquest and subjugation in an effort to offer them civilization of which by definition they have previously been deprived. The aggressively superior attitude of swidden agriculturalists such as the Ibo of Nigeria has long been noted, and in this context it can be seen to be a logical extension of the way in which they bound themselves in a particular niche of an overall ecosystem.

Societies do, of course, occupy different kinds of ecological niches, and as a result the ways in which they bound themselves lead to different kinds of conclusions. Problems of rubbish and racism may be the inevitable outcome of swidden agricultural societies,



based as they are upon systematic predatory expansion, but alternative modes of bounding are present among peoples whose ecological niche does not allow them to sustain the illusion of antagonism towards nature. The contrast between the BaMbuti and the shifting agriculturalists has already been mentioned as an illustration of this. The pygmies depend upon a delicately balanced symbiotic relationship with the forest, totally unlike the raw-materials-to-rubbish continuum which nourishes the shifting cultivator. In addition, the sedentary agriculturalist or peasant occupies an ecological niche which differs as a total system from both the hunting and gathering of the BaMbuti and the swidden cultivator, even though individual elements seem similar.

The peasant, like the swidden cultivator, derives his subsistence from agricultural production, but unlike the swidden agriculturalist, this production depends upon a delicately balanced symbiosis with a fixed piece of land over time. In this latter respect, his conceptual relationship towards the natural world is much more akin to that of the BaMbuti than to that of the swidden cultivator. He cannot afford to sustain the image of an inherently antagonistic nature which he can perpetually conquer, exploit and abandon. Since as a sedentary cultivator he cannot move to new lands when old ones become exhausted, he can survive only by replenishing nature as well as exploiting it. Irrigation systems, terrace buildings, fertilizer distribution and crop and field rotation are all techniques used by the peasant to replenish nature for what he extracts. While all of these may not be present concurrently, or in any one sequential pattern, some restorative mechanisms involving human labour are needed. In this sense, both man and the land are cooperative elements in one inter-related nature, rather than two distinct realms pitted against one another in perpetual antagonism. Man provides for nature who in turn provides for man.

This sedentary symbiosis inscribes itself in the symbolic systems of peasant peoples. They often consider themselves "people of the land" and express their relationship to the cultivated earth in much the same personal terms as the Mbuti do towards the forest. Natural forces are frequently personified as deities, and these deities are in turn arranged in a variety of hierarchies. As farming is subject to combinations of natural forces, man himself is understood to be subordinate to the gods who control these forces. The appropriate attitude of man towards the gods is one of submissive humility, and the relationship is continuously recalled through the enactment of ritual appeasement or propitiation. As the anthropological study of ritual reveals, rites are not conceived naively as mechanical operations to bring about rain or stop the floods, etc., but rather as dramatic reiterations of the appropriate symbolic order. Man is subordinate, and it is his duty to cultivate the land; the gods are superior, and it is their duty to produce the rain. It is this type of symbolic order which receives repeated affirmation particularly in the agricultural rituals of peasant peoples. The concept of duty is inherent in such a hierarchically arranged system of cosmic roles and it pervades all aspects of the individual's understanding. One has a duty to undertake his assigned role in the larger cosmic system. This is expressed in India as "dharma". Dharma is variously translated into English as "duty", "role", or "the moral order", but as I understand it, it literally means "the supporter". If one is acting appropriately one is said to be following dharma or acting in support of the entire moral order. Everyone is said to have his dharma, but this varies according to his station, and the dharma of a Brahmin is understood to be markedly different from the dharma of a sudra.

The cyclical rhythms of the agricultural process receive particular symbolic statement among peasants. Calendars developed

among sedentary agriculturists to mark the passing of the yearly cycle are based either on solar or lunar movements. Rituals regularly reenact the processes of sowing, reaping and sowing once again. Scholars like Eliade have even suggested that the concept of afterlife is the extension into the human sphere of experience which peasants witness annually in the renewal of life. One need not accept all of Eliade's evidence or reasoning, but it still seems true that sedentary agricultural societies seem quite consistently to develop concepts of an afterlife, some of which are quite elaborate indeed. In such systems one's whole life is symbolically a cycle, for as one reaches death, one is "born again".

In the realm of social relations, sedentary agriculturalists mediate the inside/outside dilemma through systems of ritualized hierarchy. The peasant's entire life, and even his afterlife, is comprehensible to him only in terms of a hierarchy. Usually one's position in the total hierarchy is ascribed at birth; and while it is true that one can change from one status to another, this can only be done when one is symbolically "born again", either through a proscribed ritual or through reincarnation. The Indian caste system with its attendant beliefs of reincarnation illustrates this clearly. One is born into a given caste and must live out one's earthly life in that hierarchical position. Upon death, however, one is symbolically reborn, and it can occur that one changes caste either rising or falling in the human hierarchy or becoming some other kind of being altogether. Taken as a total system, then, the caste system is not rigid. Rather it represents over time a constantly oscillating symbolic expression of the cyclical relationship of man and the natural world expressed at any one time in the principle of hierarchy. To equate the caste system of India with the concept of racism is from this perspective clearly ridiculous. As Louis Dumont has observed, "it is hard to imagine a greater misinterpretation". (Dumont:1970:214). Racism, based on the antagonistic dichotomy savagism/civilization, is a feature only of societies which bound themselves off from nature. In a society in which nature and culture are not opposed, social differences are phrased in the metaphor appropriate to a system of cyclical inter-change—that is to say, hierarchy. Since the total system is recognized to be a cyclical one, the boundaries which exist between castes are in no way like the boundary which delineates the savage from the civilized in a system of perpetual expansion. Racism and the caste system belong, quite literally, to two different worlds of discourse.

In the light of ethnographic evidence, we can see that the Western world and America in particular are faced with more than merely technical problems in dealing with rubbish and racism. The historical experience of modern Europe and America is rooted in the same type of ecological niche as swidden agriculturalists—that of systematic predatory expansion. As a result a whole system of self-understanding has been erected upon the fantasies of nature vs. culture and savagism vs. civilization.

Historians have long affirmed the importance of the frontier in American history, and some have even held it to be responsible for the development of a uniquely American character. The first and by now classic statement of the "frontier thesis" came at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago during July 1893 when Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his speech:

"Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development". (Turner:1920:1).

After these opening words, Turner went on to elaborate:

From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance...The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the frontier. (Turner:1920:37).

Turner himself was never very explicit about how it was that the frontier actually accomplished these phenomenal feats, but he never really thought that to be his task. The frontier for Turner was a kind of mystic vision. The content of this vision mattered little; the important fact was that Turner believed in it. And so did other Americans—the Turner thesis provided a framework for their self-understanding. The thesis managed to articulate what other Americans felt strongly, and it provided a coherent picture of their own historical experience. For a long time in American historiography it was not necessary to examine the idea; it was sufficient to believe in it.

The critics of the twentieth century finally did attack the Turner thesis, but their criticisms are best understood as correctives, adjustments, extensions or amplifications rather than contradictions of Turner's basic observations. Perhaps the most substantial and most widely accepted corrective is the one offered by David Potter in his book People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character. Potter feels that Turner was too carried away with the mystic quality of his vision to identify what elements of the frontier experience were the most powerful in determining the American character. For Potter the frontier contained the key to the American achievement—abundance. It was not the frontier itself, but the abundance which it represented in the early American experience which accounted for the American character.

In short, abundance is partly a physical and partly a cultural manifestation. For America, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the frontier was the focus of abundance physically because the land was virgin and culturally because the Anglo-Americans of the time were particularly apt at exploiting the new country....(Potter:1945:164).

Since abundance was a function of both the environment and the technology applied to it, the source of American greatness did not evaporate when the physical frontier disappeared. Instead, an expanding industrial world became the new source of abundance. In this sense industrial expansion functioned as a new frontier.

....though physically the frontier remained the site of virgin land, cultural changes gave to people an aptitude for exploiting new industrial potentialities and thus drew the focus of abundance away from the frontier. But this change of focus itself perpetuated and reinforced the habits of fluidity, of mobility, of change, of the expectation of progress, which have been regarded as distinctive frontier traits. (Potter:1954:164).

According to Potter, then, the industrial revolution is not a break with the expanding agrarian tradition in America, but rather an extension of it. Turner's thesis and Potter's corrective complement

more than contradict one another. Analytically, of course, this becomes apparent as well, for the expanding industrial system occupies the same kind of ecosystem niche as that of the expanding agriculturist. Both depend for their self-understanding upon an immutable distinction imposed between nature and culture and schematically both are constructed in the same fashion like a digestive tract with raw materials entering at one end and rubbish being deposited at the other. The American economy, like the swidden agriculture of outer Java, is founded upon what Geertz has termed "an historically rooted conviction that there are always other forests to conquer, a warrior's view of natural resources as plunder to be exploited..." (Geertz: 1963: 27). Rubbish then, is most adequately understood not as an incidental technical problem for the western world, but rather as a built-in feature of the society itself—something whose abolition would pose considerable problems to the western world. It may well be that rubbish has to be eliminated, but in order to do so, America will have to undertake an entire restructuring of its historically derived categories of meaning.

American history indicates that the development of racism is similarly a consequence of predatory expansion. Turner unwittingly affirmed this when in reference to the frontier he wrote, "In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave - the meeting point between savagery and civilization". (Turner, 1920: 3). In a later work, entitled Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind, Roy Harvey Pearce traces the historical development of the concept of the Indian as "savage". As his painstaking research indicates, the image of the Indian as a savage emerges from a history of conflict.

When frontier New Englanders suffered at the hands of Indians they inevitably interpreted their sufferings as God's warning to New England through Satan... Thus for those who lived in the frontier settlements to the west and south and to the north in Maine, it came to be, simply enough, destroy or be destroyed; this was yet another skirmish in man's Holy War against Satan, now on a new-world battlefield (Pearce: 1953: 22-23)

There is no doubt that Americans believed in such imagery. Politicians as well as clergy often used it throughout American history. Nor was racial prejudice confined to the American Indian. As the speech of Senator Thomas Hart Benton in 1846 indicated, attitudes towards black races were merely extensions of racist categories Americans had derived from their own experience:

It would seem that the white race alone received the divine command to subdue and replenish the earth.

For my part, I cannot murmur at what seems to be the effect of divine law. I cannot repine that this capital has replaced the wigwam—the Christian people, replaced the savages—white matrons the red squaws—that such men as Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson have taken the place of Powhattan, Opechoneanough and other red men howsoever respectable they may have been as savages. Civilization, or extinction, has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the track of the advancing Whites, and civilization, always the preference of the whites, has been prosed as an object, while extinction has followed as a consequence of resistance. The Black and the Red Races have often felt their ameliorating influence. (Cited in Pearce, 1953: 239-40).

Racism does not disappear with the end of the physical presence of frontier, for as Potter has indicated, the frontier experience transforms itself almost without interruption into the structures of expanding industrialization. Although racism may originate as the solution to an inside/outside dichotomy within a system of predatory agrarian expansion, it has no difficulty in surviving as a phenomenon in a society based upon industrial expansion, for as we

have seen the transformation from one type of society to the other involves no fundamental change in the kind of niche which is exploited within the ecosystem. Racism, every bit as much as rubbish, is a built-in feature of western society, and in a similar way its elimination would involve a fundamental overhauling of western categories of self-understanding. It is not sufficient to conceive of either of these problems as ancillary flaws to an otherwise impressive societal achievement.

Doubtless there are some who see evidence of changes in western attitudes on these two subjects. Indeed our technological achievements may be leading us to the type of cyclical comprehensions characteristic of a feudal society or the Indian peasant. The self-contained space craft is an attempt to reproduce an artificial ecosystem, in which the carbon dioxide, body heat and waste products of the astronauts will be re-cycled to provide oxygen, food and water. New concepts of boundary are needed to convince the astronauts to eat the food they produce. Similarly, the "untidy" styles characteristic of youth seem to indicate a healthy experimentation with artificial boundaries. Michael Thompson has even gone so far to say that these events are indices of what he calls "The Death of Rubbish". I hope that he is right, and I look forward to seeing someone announce the death of racism with similar confidence.

For the time being, however, I must confess that I remain unconvinced of what Thompson claims is the clear trend of the future. The imagery of the western world and particularly America is still grounded in predatory expansion. President Kennedy won the election in 1960 on the promise of a "New Frontier" and President Johnson found it useful to describe his welfare programs to the electorate as a "War on Poverty". It may well be true that youth is experimenting in a hopeful way with boundaries, but radical youth, with its imagery of struggle, revolution, war on the "pig", etc., does not seem to have transcended the nature/culture and savage/civilized dichotomies; instead, they have only changed the content of the respective categories. If these categories persist there seems to be little hope of overcoming the dilemmas which racism and rubbish present, even though it may be possible to undertake a slight rearrangement of those things which are inside as opposed to outside.

As for the space craft dream, I fear that the precepts which it should teach us will escape our grasp. No doubt the technical problem of re-cycling will be solved, but I can hear our technicians and politicians congratulating themselves already, without a hint of irony, on the fact that this will open up "new frontiers of space". One could hardly conceive of a more complete misunderstanding of our own technical achievement. Frontier imagery leaves us with no way of coping with the problems before us. If the elimination of rubbish and racism is our goal, then changing our minds is the first step.

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