Power, Powerlessness and
the Failure of "Political Realism"

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Probably the most urgent problem today facing the various peoples of the Fourth World is how to maintain the integrity of their lifeways in the face of the continuing assaults on them by larger, industrialized and industrializing societies. Driven by economic and political incentives, several governments have undertaken direct attacks on Indigenous Peoples or begun economic development projects, the results of which so degrade the environment that traditional subsistence adaptations have become impossible.

For example, in Guatemala the government's need to focus the attention of its urban population away from a faltering economy has in this decade led to a repressive campaign against that country's Indian majority so vicious that it approaches genocide and so devastating that it makes impossible the pursuit of traditional ways of life. The economic development of the interior of Brazil and Venezuela threatens to so degrade the tropical forest that it already has forced extensive changes in the way Indigenous People in the area are able to live. And the continued haphazard exploitation of the resources of this area may soon threaten us all. Precisely what roles anthropologists might play in preventing such human waste and environmental devastation is a challenge that every anthropologist must face.

One of the traditional roles that anthropologists have played is to give voice to the value of the cultures of Indigenous Peoples. This role is valuable, but it is clearly not in itself an adequate way for us to help to meet the challenges facing the Fourth World. The more active advocacy and "watch dog" roles played by anthropologists through organizations like Cultural Survival and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs help to make the work of anthropologists more useful in this struggle. But, in the face of continued and increasing, sometimes covert, campaigns against Indigenous groups, even these efforts appear inadequate.

In this brief essay we want to point out yet another role that anthropologists might play in this work: to help to show that the rationale which leads to this kind of assault is misguided and untenable. Anthropologists can do this by challenging the conceptualization

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of power and powerlessness held by many leaders of the industrial and industrializing countries and manifest in the view described as "political realism" (see Kim 1983). This challenge would make a specific contribution to the struggle facing Fourth World peoples. At the same time it might contribute to the more general task of promoting global interdependence and peace while cultivating a respect for the variety of human lifeways.

Political realism

The view of the world called "political realism" that underlies most contemporary discussions of national and international affairs is based on a host of unwarranted assumptions about the nature of the world, about how people responsible for policy decisions ought to view their ability to know that world, and about the nature of power (cf. Kim 1983).

Others have discussed in detail many of these assumptions (see, e.g., Mansbach and Vasquez 1981; Kim 1983; Beeman 1983; Myrdal 1969), and we here highlight only a few which anthropological work in the Fourth World, and elsewhere, can help to show as false and ultimately destructive.

Underlying many of these assumptions is a deep belief that our actions in international and national affairs should be based on objective social scientific knowledge (Myrdal 1969). One consequence of this belief is that decision-makers develop an attitude of "scientism". Hallmarks of this attitude are a dependence on quantitative indices of general social welfare and as measures of the state of a society's economic health; a belief that judgements about social policy issues must be made in a detached fashion; and that policy decisions must be "rational".

A corollary of this view has been that the proper unit of concern is the nation-state. Thus, it has developed, especially during the last two-and-a-half decades, that nation-states have come to be taken as the proper level of analysis. Beeman (1983), for instance, nicely demonstrates how during the Iranian hostage crisis United States foreign policy decisions operated on the assumption that the world consists only of nation states.

A result of all of this is that the kinds of information that are taken as legitimate in discussions of relations within and between societies has become overly narrow and restrictive. Certainly, disregarded at both the local and international levels are issues of the meaning and of the symbolic significance of traditional, Indigenous views of inter-group relations (Myrdal 1969; Simon 1983; Rubinstein 1984). In this

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kind of process the reasons for using particular approaches to decision-making, for valuing particular forms of evaluation, or for relying on particular kinds of measurement to index programmatic success are separated from the inquiry and forgotten. These approaches, forms of evaluation, and indices then come to be thought of as important in-and-of themselves.

When this process takes place, in any field of inquiry, the result is an overly narrow perspective (Rubinstein et al. 1984; Simon 1983). Yet, it is this kind of process that has influenced discussions of political and economic power and powerlessness, and which provides the rationale for polities undertaking activities that are harmful rather than helpful to Fourth World communities. Kim (1983:9) summarizes this situation.

> "the concept of 'power' in mainstream realism is excessively narrow and limited. This realism respects only material and physical power and is contemptuous of 'normative power', . . . It denies the existence of the world normative system. This conception has influenced both rightist and leftist dictators . . ."

Power and powerlessness

Frequently discussions of the relationships between the Fourth World communities and industrialized societies focus on the very real and large disparities in wealth, access to advanced technologies, and on the vast differences in health, care and economic opportunity. For the most part these discussions use, either implicitly or explicitly, notions of power and wealth as seen from the perspective of political realism.

In such discussions, power is taken to refer to the range of measurable economic, demographic, military, technological or other such outcomes that can be affected by one group in its relations with other groups of people (cf. Thibault and Kelly 1959; Kim 1983; Gulliver 1979). Used in this way, power is the ability to coerce other individuals or groups to change their behavior in some intended direction (Zartman 1974; Dahl 1969). The result of this kind of reasoning has been to lead people to think only in terms of measures of power like concession rates, better (bigger) economic or military payoffs, and the like (Gulliver 1979).[2]

When policies are developed on the basis of "political realist" assumptions, groups that control the disposition of material resources – be those resources economic, health, or education related – tend to be thought of as powerful. Groups that do not control these resources are taken to be powerless.

By taking the distinction between power and powerlessness to rest only on those actions with measurable results, the domain of activities

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that are considered to legitimately represent power is artificially narrowed. This narrow view ignores the entire range of traditional conceptions of power, and indeed renders "political realism" substantially unrealistic. This alternative is much like what Kim (1983:44) calls *normative* power, which "is the ability to define, control and transform the agenda . . .".

By explicating how this other dimension of power works through studies of the interaction of Fourth World communities with other groups, anthropologists can help to undercut the rationale frequently used to support the repression of those and other Fourth World communities.

The following section of this paper shows how the realist and normative conceptions of power clash in the interaction of the United States Government with Native American communities. This illustrates how normative power can work even in the face of apparently superior (as measured by realists) power, and provides the basis for the critical points raised in the concluding section of this paper.

Normative power and American Indians

Based on the assumption of the preeminence of material power, United States and Canadian federal relations with American Indians have reflected the view that, because they would be acculturated to and absorbed by the larger society, Indian groups would disappear (Tax 1957; Bigart 1972; Manuel and Posluns 1974). As a result the economic, educational and general social policies of these governments consistently reflected the attitude that Indians were powerless groups.

Indeed, the assumption the powerlessness of the disappearing Indian has at times been given explicit voice, as with the 1950's policy of Termination of Indian Reserves (Manuel and Posluns 1974:166–167). Although these policies in general have increased the material powerlessness of Indians, the indianness of their communities persists (Thomas in press), and many Indians still hold the traditional view that real power is not material power.

The alternative, American Indian view of power is based on a world view that is grounded on a faith that the world is theirs, that it remains theirs, and that it will continue to belong to them long after whites are gone. Stanley (1977:239) describes this general view:

"... they are firm in their notion that Indians were put on this continent by the Creator and charged with its care ... [they say that] if they are destroyed and become extinct, then that will be the destruction of the whole world."

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Although this normative power is a sacred rather than a material attribute, Indians do not relegate its effects to only the spiritual world. Rather, this power is taken to be important for day-to-day life. Stanley (1977) points out that this normative power is viewed as effective in overcoming obstacles in the mundane world. This power is thought useful, for example in helping Indian people bring court cases to a successful conclusion. And, as Wahrhaftig and Lukens-Wahrhaftig (1977) show, power (as understood from this Indian perspective) is taken to be the basis for the survival and success of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma and North Carolina.

Normative power defines the ways in which people ought to deal with one another rather than how they can, because of greater or lesser material strength, deal with one another. For Indians it marks life as "continuous with the past", and defines ". . . the quality of relationships among Indians, the way Indians perceive the world, the way they behave toward one another and the rest of the world, and their very being". (Thomas in press: 19.)

According to Stanley's (1977:239–241) account of how this normative power is seen by Indians, the various facets of this power are thought to have influences on at least four areas of life. It is: (1) useful in the curing of illness, much as we think of medicines; (2) helpful for overcoming legal and other obstacles in daily life; (3) a means of drawing on the forces of nature to protect individuals and groups; and (4) a power that can help protect and secure the world.

Although power is highly prized, it is not thought of as something that can be gained in a Machiavellian way. According to Wahrhaftig and Lukens-Wahrhaftig (1977:231) the Cherokee conceive of this power as,

> ". . . sacred, not secular. It is an aspect of permanence granted each people of creation. Autonomy and self-government are inseparable attributes of primordial power; these are in the created nature of peoples, for each of the many distinct peoples set forth at creation, of which Cherokees are one, was created self-governing. In Cherokee myth, even animals and plants meet in council to determine their own course of action – often with greater wisdom than humans. Such power *is;* it cannot be gained."

More generally, this power can be said to accrue to a person through the experience of leading a morally good life which is marked by dealing with other people through social relations that are considerate and mutually respectful. It is the *process* of living according to principle, not material force that produce power. "To live according to one's laws is to be powerful" (Wahrhaftig and Lukens-Wahrhaftig 1977:231).

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The hardships experienced by Indians as a result of military defeat, disease, external political control, and other kinds of disasters and deprivations have been accompanied by material powerlessness. In the face of such material hardships the Indian focus on *how* things are done rather than on *what* is done has allowed them to see the continuity of the life of American Indian groups, and thus to retain their normative power.

As the case of the Cherokee demonstrates in particular, this normative power has consequences in the political arena. It is their concept of and respect for normative power that have enabled the Cherokee to build autonomous social, political, and economic institutions despite the repeated exercise of secular, material power by whites (Wahrhaftig and Lukens-Wahrhaftig 1977; Gearing 1958).

In general, normative power is not the inconsequential factor "political realism" supposes it to be. Indeed, the close anthropological examination of the experiences of Fourth World peoples suggests that normative power is an important force which must be understood and counted in any reckoning of the "balance of power".

Anthropological descriptions of normative power and its very real effects can provide one way in which the assumptions of political realism that serve to support the oppression of Fourth World groups can be revealed as overly narrow in perspective and self-destructive in result. Descriptions of the force and workings of normative power will show that these processes, although they cannot be neatly described by some quantitative index, have real and significant results which make a difference in the political arena.

In addition, such descriptions will inevitably teach the practical lessons that policies are never objective, nor arrived at on the basis of "objective knowledge", and that groups of people organized in arrangements other than through the institution of the nation state play real and significant roles in world affairs.

Perhaps most important of all, such descriptions will demonstrate for leaders of industrialized and industrializing societies that in the long run their most highly self-interested actions will be those actions taken from a principled stance of caring, concern, and respect for the peoples of the Fourth World.

Notes

[2] The kind of thinking represented by "political realism" is what led to Stalin's memorable question: "The Pope? How many divisions does *he* have?" The United States and the Shah of Iran probably thought the same question about the Ayatola Khomeini.

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NATIVE POWER

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