

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 17
Integration - II

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

In discussing the integration of the indian with people in Ecuador, I have met with a surprising lack of interest in the proposition that the approach best calculated to produce the desired changes is a human one, both on the part of the men and women who will be the agents in this change, and on the part of the indian with whom they must work. The greatest lack of sympathy in this respect is expressed by the mestizo, stemming, I would think, partly from an inability to think of the indian in terms other than one's own, i.e., as a mestizo might say, there's no reason why the indian shouldn't respond as I did to the opportunity to better himself, to shed his native dress, adapt his hair style to the prevailing mode, and to take to the requirements of earning a living as these are defined by "civilized people." There may also be a prejudice against altering the indian's status which would put him on a par with the mestizo, for it is an inequality of status which the mestizo has sought with regard to the indian. More pertinent perhaps is that the mestizo envisions the liberated indian as his competitor in an economy already sparse enough in opportunity for increased income, and its corollary, increased social prestige.

The mestizo is apt to regard the indian as an inferior being, a child to be tutored by his betters, and when he is not advocating the doctrine of why bother to change this being's way of life, he is proclaiming that before tampering with the rural situation it would be better to concentrate upon political and economic stability for the nation as a whole. He cites the problems which Señor Fulano (CRT - 16) outlined, and insists that they, rather than the psychology of the indian, are the blocks to his country's self improvement.

At first glance, the sierra indian offers negative evidence against this view. He is mostly illiterate, filthy, superstitious, and evinces little obvious desire for a change in the current state of things. Yet, judged by our standards, he has little to give up if he were to become as the white. He has no art, no literature, no painting; little technology which he can call his own; he lacks

handicraft traditions to a surprising extent; his entertainments are reduced to drinking and dancing. He is part of a sketchy social structure, a loose, nearly nonexistent local government, and a parallel but equally skeletal apparatus of religious functionaries. In short, there is a dearth of richness in what is contemporarily indigenous, which is startling to the observer from another culture.

To conclude on the basis of one's own background that the indian is either an animal, incapable of desiring a better life, or that he is highly susceptible to change because of the paucity of his culture, is inaccurate. There are, and I have met them in three countries, indians who are little more than bundles of conditioned reflexes, operating from day to day on a level only slightly above the unconscious. How large or how small a part of the total Andean population they are is a moot question, and one which is probably unimportant in a practical sense - for these undetermined men will follow the leader, and it is among the leaders that factors in the question of the future of the Andean indian ought to be sought.

It was on a cold, dusty day in the high Andes, in a village circled with mountains over which delicate shades of brown and purple moved, mountains which did not seem to care if man lived or died on their flanks as long as they could get about their proper business of earthquakes, landslides and rockfalls, that one indian told me of a concept which has since become a symbol to me of the problem of trying to understand the Andean indian.

Old and wrinkled, highly respected in his village, he was calm and confident in all his actions, and hospitable to the stranger. He said: "You come to us to see what we are like, and we do not object. But the older people sometimes laugh among themselves at your questions and your notebooks, which, you say, will allow you to form a judgement of us. They say that it doesn't matter how many pages you add to your collection, for the words are not people, and people have made up the words to explain themselves to you. They are not always truthful, and when they are you hear that which you might have seen without questions.

"A priest, who came to us once many years ago, told me that each one of us makes a mask, like the dancers in the conjuntos, to present to the world. This mask, he said, is what makes me seem different from my brothers, and it is as hard to the touch of another as the stone of that mountain. It is, however, the source of contact between men, and, perhaps, of conflict between them. While he was here he said that he wanted to get behind this mask and speak directly to the person, for then he could talk of God in the proper

way. But he left us finally, saying that only God could go behind the mask, man could not.

"This is why the old people sometimes laugh: they wonder if you have become like God that you pretend to see us as we are with only your questions and your notebooks."

On that day, one of those empty overwhelming days in the Andes, when a person feels crushed by the weight of the landscape and loses any desire for activity, I put away my notebook and well sharpened pencils, and wondered about the implications of the old man's statement.

I have since had occasion to wonder if the apparent indian, the brown man one meets in the Andes, isn't wearing a mask devised to meet the alien world which is all about him: a mask of indifference, apathy, stupidity and hostility, behind which moves an individual as full in his thoughts and preoccupations as any of his white-mestizo contemporaries. Certainly much depends upon an interpretation of the "full life," but once a definition of this has been constructed in indian terms, then the answer to the question seems to be in the affirmative.

What is the indian's conception of the full life? A question I have asked indians often, and which has produced a wide range of answers. "A man is satisfied if his stomach is full, his wife a hard worker, and his children healthy, and if there is enough time to talk with others." "A man should grow so that he wants to work his fields, so that he provides for his family, so that he can contribute to the Church and the fiestas." "A man should be honest and hard working; if he is, he will have a pleasant life, and the respect of those about him." "I used to think that hard work and integrity were enough to make a man happy, but now I think that a man must have education to satisfy himself. I don't want my sons to drift off to the city and leave the land, but I will send them to school so that they may have the advantage of what the white knows." "What we need is education, machines, tools, the help of educated people to raise our standard of living. We need to know why it is better to bathe than go dirty, how fertilizers will make the land produce more. We need to have everything the white has, without becoming like him. We should all read, write and vote, and have the best of your world and ours." "The good life will only come when the capitalists are thrown out of the country, and the people take command. We have been tricked and forced into living half a life for too many years."

The majority of answers I have collected, however, offer a

conception of the full life which centers around material comfort - fields which produce the family's food, domestic animals to vary the diet, a well built house and enough clothing, cash to participate in fiestas and other entertainments -, and a desire, evidently new for many of the informants, to amplify a man's knowledge through education in school - an education usually rather narrowly confined to reading, writing and the like. For most, this education has a practical value: it can be used to increase one's income and make the attainment of material comfort easier. A few, however, regard education as the key to what one indian referred to as the "things of the spirit."

Indicative too of the indian's version of the full life is the way in which he spends his money. It goes mainly in entertainments, sometimes for clothing, occasionally for a sewing machine or radio (which may never be played, but represents being well off nevertheless), and, if a family has a bad harvest, it may have to be used to purchase food. Otherwise it is saved. The hordes of dirty bills in the Andes would make a miser's heart glad. These expenditures are reasonably practical in terms of an illiterate agricultural community, although the indian may be criticized for not investing in a better house, which is most often answered with "This one suffices"; not spending his money on modernization of farm equipment, which is putting the cart before the horse, for the isolated indian rarely knows anything of such equipment, and, where he does, prefers to await a practical demonstration of its utility (rarely possible), rather than accepting it on the word of a stranger.

It seems not unlikely that the life of the sierra indian, which is poor compared with our own, does satisfy him, and that the possession of such amenities as traditions of art and technology are not absolutely necessary to a society's well being. By the same token, his simple culture cannot be read as an indictment of the indian as a human being, nor the conclusion that this man is not much above the level of the animal.

His preoccupations are those shared by men in all parts of the world, and his ambitions as potent even if directed towards "lesser" goals. Even here, some indians could be commended for behaving in a "civilized" fashion. An indian from Otavalo has it in mind that one of his sons attend the University. Another that his children grow up independent of the farm so as to be able to follow other professions. These are exceptions, but important to anyone interested in changing the indian's life, for such men, with such ambitions are natural points of entry in indigenous communities for innovators. The bulk of indians rarely go this far, however, and are content to fulfill the goals of their own culture. For this reason, to comprehend the indian the observer has to try to look at him from inside the indigenous culture rather than interpreting

him in terms of ideas drawn from another society.

If a man's culture should prove satisfying to him, then he must in turn invest it with values not necessarily apparent to the outsider. In the case of the Ecuadorian indian, poverty, dirt and illiteracy do not debase the indian's interpretation of his life as many persons maintain. At the same time, since the customary indian behavior is partly traceable to the impact of an exploiting group upon a large uneducated rural population, it receives further support in its aspect of defense mechanism. And always, no matter what other reasons are offered for the indian's preference for his own society and mores, there are matters of habit and familiarity to encourage him in his behavior.

For these reasons, I think an argument can be presented that the problem of integrating the Ecuadorian (and the Peruvian) indian remains a human one, having to be met on at least two fronts. The first is in the area of values. What is being offered to the indian may have no value for him, or conflict with ones he holds. The introduction of ideas of sanitation and education should be accompanied by an explanation of the values of such things as the innovator sees them, followed by an explanation of the way in which the recipient benefits.

The second lies in the area of prejudice - not only the expected prejudice against the new and untried, but also those inherent in the indian's opinions and attitudes about the white-mestizo world which he tends to assign to the goods and people which come out of it. In a small town in northern Ecuador, a technical assistance group has established a kind of consulting office for the dissemination of handicrafts techniques. It has been largely unattended by local indians. The reason seems to lie in the supervisor of this office, a local mestizo. He was a natural choice from the point of view of the agency, for he enjoys a certain amount of prestige among the townsmen. To the indian, however, he is a symbol of a world which has never presented its best face to him, and they will have no dealings with an office headed up by such a man.

The idea of accepting the indian as he values himself leads to a certain sympathy with his position, which, in the hands of local partisans - most of whom seem to have just discovered Rousseau's noble savage idea - often degenerates into a concept of an idealized indian, the repository of values far superior to those of his exploiters, living in a natural golden light, untouched by "civilized" problems.

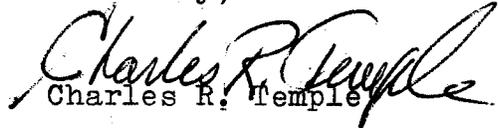
This conception errs in the other direction. An individual

indian may be lustful, avaricious or cruel; he may be neurotic or deeply unhappy; he may practice various forms of sadism or masochism; or he may waste his days in idleness and drinking.

I have met sons who mock their fathers, mistreat their mothers and cheat each other - all violations of the indian code. A man whose *idée fixe* was to avenge himself on another man for an insult given five years before; another who lent money to his fellow citizens at exorbitant rates of interest, and who seemed to prefer that his loans remain unpaid; he enjoyed the sense of power which his position gave him. Another who did his best to convince me that his fellow villagers were cheats, liars, adulterers, lazy and stupid - as it turned out, he himself was all of these things.

In short, the indian in Ecuador, and elsewhere in the Andes, is quite as subject to common faults and vices as anyone else, and this, too, seems pertinent to the problem of integration.

Sincerely,


Charles R. Temple

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