

CRT - 27
The Ambivalent Response

Hotel Colon
Cochabamba
Bolivia
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Having elected, through conviction or necessity, to support change in the life of the Bolivian indian, many Bolivians active in the current program of social reform find themselves hampered in their actions and given to doubt about their premises because of the ambivalent response which the concept "indian" evokes within their thinking. Perhaps it does not follow that the reformer has to feel perfectly at ease about the subject of his efforts but, as a minimum attitude, it does seem that he should be convinced that the reformed is capable of reacting well to the advantages offered him. Several Bolivians I have spoken with characterize the indian as "a stupid animal, hardly worth five minutes' consideration." Yet, these same men are participating in the preparation of the indian's "bright future."

Perhaps, also, for some the indian here has become an integral part of the reform program of the MNR only because it is expedient and necessary to take him into consideration. If his rehabilitation assists other objectives - economic independence for the nation, for example - then it becomes vital to work for him although a given individual may have little faith in the indian as such.

The key concept which has been adopted in indian social change - one which "had to be sponsored" as I was told once - is that of environmental determinism. The argument is simple. For many centuries the indian has been forced into a position in which he has had little or no opportunity to display any native intelligence or initiative. As a result, he has assumed a mask of apathy, indifference and hostility for the outside world, and has suffered a kind of cultural depletion, losing not only his right to self-determination but those outlets for human activity which the educated man takes for granted - such as educational and economic advance and creative expression. This situation, however, is strictly dependent upon the pre-1952 relationship between the indian and all others. Given freedom and assistance in developing himself, the indian will prove to be as complex and important a human being as anyone else. His faults lie not in his genes but in the environment created for him by the Conquistadores and their descendants.

Still, a concept is a concept, and there is a great gap to be bridged before it can be invested with the emotional warmth of an imbued prejudice. The MNR personnel are mainly men who are not indian in the sense of having been raised "indian," although they may have an indian ancestor, and who grew up in a society which devalues the indigene, not only because he is a peasant farmer who works with his hands but also because he is thought of as lacking intelligence and ambition. Several comments I have heard - last year and this - suggest further

that even the indian who has become a leader within the MNR does not regard his fellows as particularly valuable. I asked a Bolivian about this and he answered, "Of course he feels that way. Look, he has become a leader, a success, accepted by the 'whites' who before ignored him. He now wonders if perhaps he isn't a curious exception to the general rule that indians are incapable of self improvement. So, he ends up feeling superior to them and before long despising them in turn."

Public utterance differs greatly from these private feelings, and in the speeches and writings of the MNR people the indian undergoes an apotheosis which would suggest that the faith of one and all is grounded in him. The effusive personal contacts which mark every visit to an indian community give the impression of real personal warmth on the part of the MNR representatives. The word compañero which, having no invidious connotations, has become the common form of address within Bolivia has made it linguistically possible to indicate the party's doctrine of equality with its implication of personal as well as economic equivalence.

But, behind these words and gestures stand very human beings whose private and public performances may not be in harmony. Especially harassed is the man who tries to deny his inherited prejudices about the indian in order to allow his ideas of reform and social justice free play. One such, whom I met recently, confessed that he was still unable to settle this conflict to his satisfaction even after four years of working with the indian.

"I grew up in a small town in a family which was gente decente. There was at least one indian grandparent in the background but no one ever mentioned that. Within my home, the indian was always spoken of in critical terms - when he was spoken of at all. I had no reason to change this idea until I got to the University. I was accustomed to seeing the indian as dirty, often drunk, and always whining for help of some kind from the gente decente of the town.

"In the University, I was exposed to reform and radicalism of every kind, and before long social justice for the indian became mixed with political and economic reform. This was easy away from the indian and it wasn't too hard to award him all the proper virtues of an exploited peasant, denied his 'natural rights.'

"Then came the MNR and 1952, and suddenly we were confronted with the practical application of theories developed in opposition and at a time when there wasn't much hope of putting them into action. For the first two years I was rabid in pursuing the indian's cause, and, like everyone else, sighed but accepted the abuses his freedom encouraged. The common phrase was, 'Well, what can you expect from someone beaten down for centuries?'

"But, one day, perhaps because I was just tired of trying to explain that everything had to be done legally and patiently, I told an indian who had been bothering me for several days to go to hell. I felt guilty about this for a few weeks and then found myself wondering why I shouldn't have that privilege too since the indian could now tell

everyone to go to hell when he wanted to. It wasn't far to a return to the pre-University emotions: the indian is an animal.

"Yet, this doesn't fit with any of the concepts I picked up in school, and I am rationally convinced that the indian I have to deal with today is the product of hundreds of years of deliberate beating down. Still, some of the kick has gone out of the game. Some days I'd like to throw it all up and let the indian work it out for himself."

How widespread the ambivalent response is within the MNR I don't know but I have noticed that in private conversations there is less talk of the indian's new role. This may be due as much to the clear problem of economic survival facing the country as to disenchantment with the indian, but it creates its effect in the long term thinking of many people. There is also the emergence of a nagging attitude toward the indian - his little battles with constituted authority are cited again and again as deterrents to the success of what the MNR is trying to do for him and for Bolivia. Then, too, there is an unsettling fear that the indian may not play the game, that he will misinterpret his freedom as a mandate to take what he can for himself, and that this will neither help the nation's future nor promise political stability.

It may be that the honeymoon with the indian is drawing to a close where it existed (for not all MNR leaders were enthusiasts for the indigenous population), and that, ironically, he may become again the whipping boy for Bolivia's failure to achieve economic independence and successful governing if this should come about.

Sincerely,


Charles R. Temple

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