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SIMPLER SOCIETIES IN AN INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD

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It would be easy to stress an obvious contrast between modern technological civilization with its great measure of control over environment, and those traditional societies whose simpler tools and techniques leave them more subject to natural forces. But from the beginning, I should like to try to avoid making this contrast too sharply. It would be misleading to think of all traditional societies as comprised in a single type—call it pre-industrial, primitive, or what you will—as against modern industrial society. For in the first place, there are great differences among traditional societies themselves with regard to their indigenous technological development—between the Eskimo, with their rich and varied assortment of tools and weapons, for example, and the Bushman of the Kalahari desert, whose material culture really is meagre in quantity and simple in design. Even here then, two technologically simpler peoples are equipped on very different scales to grapple with very harsh environments. And secondly, though our more-or-less uniform type of modern technology has spread almost throughout the world, it has

Editors' note: Text of a talk recorded for BBC Radio's Third Network on Tuesday 6 April 1965 and broadcast on Monday 12 April 1965. Only very minor changes have been made to the copy of the text surviving in the author's papers, including those on it in the author's own hand. The note and references have been supplied. Acknowledgement is due to the BBC (Rights Archive) for permission to publish this material here. The talk was the second in the final group of thirteen talks in a series 'concerned with social man in a changing environment' and entitled 'Man and his Environment'. The previous talk, given by Professor C. H. Waddington on Monday 5 April 1965, to which Lienhardt makes passing reference, was entitled 'Man and his Future Environment'.

not spread evenly throughout any particular society. Hand cultivation, let us say, is still the means of subsistence for the parents and brothers of many who may be driving tractors or operating lathes. Hence arise many interesting problems in a society's relations to its environment, problems which can be properly understood only by studying them in all their differences of local detail.

In the first talk of this section of the series, Professor Waddington placed human societies in the context of other organized groupings of animals, all seeking survival in the habitat and with the resources at their disposal. But human societies differ in structure more than societies of other single animal species. Here we are no longer dealing with Man simply as a social animal, a creature belonging—in Professor Waddington's words—to 'any population in which the members are in some sort of organized relation with one another'. Now, we are considering socially differentiated communities, each conscious and proud of its own specifically human cultural inheritance, each not merely reacting to environmental circumstance, but making its own evaluation of it. For members of a human community do set a positive store by their own environment and their special modes of adaptation to it. After all, what seem necessary comforts to one type of community may be matters of indifference to another. So many traditional pleasures and accepted virtues—so much of the artistic and religious heritage of a society, for example—are bound up with its own particular culture and form of social organization, which turn partly on its response to its own environment.

It has often been thought that the hard life of many societies of nomadic herdsmen—the Bedouin Arabs, the Somali, the pastoral Nilotes of the Southern Sudan—might be alleviated by schemes designed to permit a more sedentary existence. This certainly is a prerequisite of a modern form of government, and hence probably of more effective participation in modern world affairs. But while many members of these societies may see the advantages of such a change—money, for example, is now necessary for them—they remain unhappy about its implications. They are morally committed to an uncentralized form of political organization, impatient of government. And this perpetuates and is nourished by a pastoral mode of life with its own particular choice of environmental possibilities, its own emphasis on cattle or camels. They enjoy their own way of life, as may be instanced from a short modern Somali poem. It is called 'The Best Dance' (see Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964: 144):

> The best dance is the dance of the Eastern clans,
> The best people are ourselves,
> Of this I have always been sure.
> The best wealth is camels,
> The *duur* grass is the best fresh grazing,
> The *dareemo* grass is the best hay,
> Of this I have always been sure.

It is one of the problems presented by modern technological power that the way of life it makes possible, and to some degree inevitable, is more uniform than

the communities into which it is introduced as yet are, or wish themselves wholly to be. So though it is true that the extent to which any social group exploits its environmental possibilities depends in general upon its technological inventiveness, purely social values come to play a great part in determining the particular choice and use of natural resources. In the early days when the Plains Indians of America, whose lives had come to revolve round the hunting of buffalo, were urged to turn to an agricultural way of life, they had profound social objections to the irreligious act of tearing open the surface of the earth, regarded by them as a mother. And the Indians of British Columbia, well-known for their elaborate political and ceremonial organization, built a culture of considerable material wealth and comfort on fishing and collecting wild harvests, to the virtual exclusion of other potentialities of their country.

Physical environment, where little can be done to alter it, does of course have a great influence on the movements and groupings of populations. Where, as in the Southern Sudan during the dry season, only a few rivers continue to supply water and pastures, large populations are forced to converge on their banks. These large populations must accept some common values, if this concentration is not to result in total anarchy. On the other hand, in the wet season in the same part of the world, only a few ridges are left above the floods. The peoples are then forced to disperse into the isolation of small communities, each cut off from the rest by the floods and conducting its own affairs separately for many months. This seasonal rhythm of aggregation and dispersal, directly related to the environment, is consistent with the political organization and values of these societies. They are able on occasions, as in war, to build up into large united tribes; but these tribes have no permanent leadership, and are divided and subdivided into autonomous sections whose own local loyalties often bring them into mutual opposition.

Here environmental circumstances impose a certain pattern of distribution on the population, and naturally this is reflected in the political organization. But the connection is of a very general nature. The particular structure of any one of the tribes of this area could not be explained without considering other factors—historical and social factors—besides the environmental ones. And still less will habitat and economy together explain other social institutions—marriage rules, for example—for there is great variation in these, among peoples whose physical circumstances and mode of life are basically similar.

However straitly tied to the natural conditions of its habitat a society may be, then, its own social tradition emphasizes values and choices, a selective use of resources in relation to socially defined needs and ambitions grounded in sentiment and custom. The Lele of Kasai, in the Congo, fairly recently described in a book of that title by Dr Mary Douglas (1963), practise hand cultivation in a forest park environment. They live in village communities with a form of social organization depending in many ways on privileges accorded to those who are senior in age. As Dr Douglas shows, this involves a certain lack of co-operation, and even hostility, between different generations in the same village, while villages themselves were often in conflict. A state of insecurity prevailed, also reducing

agricultural productivity. The older men in these villages, despite all the prestige and deference accorded them, had little real authority; and the Lele were in fact more interested in the prestige of age than in economic prosperity. They were content therefore with a much poorer material way of life than other neighbouring societies living in comparable physical circumstances. Dr Douglas shows how many interrelated social institutions and values influenced the Lele's refusal to use their environmental possibilities in what would seem to us a more rational way.

But also something more complex than social inertia, or even attachment to a customary way of life, is involved when we consider the uses of environment developed by any human society. The system of descent and inheritance among the Akan of Ghana, whereby property is inherited through the mother from her brother, results in many families having rights in scattered plots of land. At first sight, this would seem to be a source of inconvenience for the farmer, whereas the consolidation of single estates—which inheritance through the father would make possible—appears a more rational system. But apart from the traditional Akan regard for inheritance through the mother—bound up with many spiritual beliefs and values—the effect of this dispersal of properties was to widen every individual's range of social contacts, and hence to connect Akan societies with one another. Purely 'rational' use of the environment may prevent the achievement of such social ends.

So much for the value set by traditional societies on the customs and beliefs intimately bound up with their own use of their own country. With modern technology, as I have said, a much more uniform and universal man-made environment becomes possible; and conflicts arise, between habits and values that societies are partly reluctant to relinquish and their material ambitions, which greater technological power might fulfil. Dr David Pocock, among others, has observed this in India, which has been rapidly industrializing since 1947.[1] The traditional Indian rural family is agriculturally based, sharing its land and meeting expenses out of a common purse—the joint family, as it is called. When the pressure on land becomes too heavy, members are encouraged to seek employment in some industrial centre, and for a time they still contribute to and are helped from the family resources. But within a generation, with the difference in the cost of living between the town and the country, the townsman must have his own budget; it becomes apparent too that the industrial worker who lives apart from his family enjoys a higher standard of living than those who commute to and from the industrial centre and whose wages are immediately absorbed into the resources of the family on the land.

Choices then have to be made. In India, as in many other parts of the developing world, education is seen as a major avenue to self-betterment. Expenditure on education in the budget of a townsman can only be at the cost of the traditional, family-oriented expenditure. Further, a man who has raised his children in

1. *Editors' note:* It is not known if Lienhardt had in mind here a particular book or article. Even with Professor Pocock's assistance, however, it has not proved possible to supply one.

an industrial town has still finally to face the expense of various traditional ceremonies. In the village he would be obliged to invite many people and spend, proportionately, much of his wealth. In the town he has not the facilities for this, nor have his relatives the time and money to travel. In this situation, some still perform the ceremonies in their own villages in the old way; others, taking advantage of practical difficulties, tend to opt out of the traditional system, and increasingly circumstances favour this latter choice. Those whose lives are governed by the factory siren and the shift system do not have the slack periods of minimum activity which the agricultural calendar provides, and in which ceremonies are performed. Here, then, the use of environment which industrialization has made possible radically affects, and must affect more and more, the form and values of the older social and family organization. And even where cleavages between urban and rural life are not so marked—where several small-scale industries employ workers nearer to the villages, in which they continue to live—the factory's time schedule begins to affect the farmer also, for he is often obliged to curtail ceremonies or hold them at untraditional times to suit the convenience of the industrial workers in his family.

And here perhaps we are able to learn from the simpler societies something about any society's relation to its environment—something which we might not so readily observe without having them for comparison. That is, that men's understanding of the passage and use of time is closely linked to their relation to their environment. Where a people are dependent for their livelihood upon the rhythm of the seasons, time is reckoned by what occupation is currently undertaken—spring is when we sow, autumn when we harvest, summer when we collect wild fruits, winter when we fish, and so on. Days, still less hours and minutes, are not significant units for work. And in such circumstances, there are naturally periods of greater and lesser activity, periods of plenty and periods of scarcity. Among several peoples of East Africa, for example, there is so little occupational variation between the two months at the height of the dry season that they are often not distinguished from one another by name. When the season demands it, people work hard and live frugally. But when food becomes plentiful and there is less necessary work to do, they give themselves to feasting and to ceremonial. The rhythm of the machine in our industrial civilization will not permit this, and those members of the simpler societies who become part of that world must also, and often with difficulty, become accustomed to the abstract system of time reckoning which it demands.

This different approach to the value of time does perhaps generally distinguish the simpler societies from our own. For both ways of life, the rhythm of work and play is decided by the way in which the environment is exploited; but for members of the simpler societies, that rhythm is more varied and its pace less uniform. And the price they have to pay for entering into the kinds of relations with the world which modern technology demands, and attaining the kind of advantages it seems to offer, is increasing conformity, conformity now no longer to the local, social demands of a small society in its specific habitat, but to a world society. We all

find it difficult to grasp the full implications of this change; but the more we try to work them out, the more consciously they are faced, the more intelligently we can try to adapt ourselves to them. It would be sad if simpler societies were merely in their turn to exchange their adaptation to a natural environment they could but feebly control, for adaptation to a machine-made environment which they can control still less.

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