TRANSFORMING THE BLACKFOOT: TRADITION, INNOVATION AND ACADEMIC EXERCISES

Alice Beck Kehoe
Marquette University, Milwaukee

"Our primitive contemporaries":

> the primary local unit of culture is numerically small isolated geographically ... patterns set in a rigid frame ... cut off from its own past tradition soon passes into myth ... the elders are in the saddle ... They stand for established routine, a fearful avoidance of the new ... The individual here is but a miniature reproduction of the group culture ... Nor does this exhaust the factors which stand for conservatism ... Here every breath of cultural life is dominated by natural things and events ... Under such conditions the economic adjustment is taken almost as a fact of nature. It may be sorely inadequate, but it works after a fashion and is accepted as final (Goldenweiser 1946: 407-410).

In this paper, I shall examine the premises upon which the contrast between tradition and innovation is constructed. Given these premises, outlined in the quotation above, "tradition and innovation" can no longer be justified as a framing device for anthropological analysis.

Pioneer anthropologists such as Durkheim and Morgan worked deductively from Enlightenment conjectural universal histories (Meek 1976) to support their nations' ideology - in Lewis Feuer's words «myth written in the language of philosophy and science» (Feuer 1975: 17; cf. A. Kehoe 1981, 1983, 1985, 1993). Control of material and labor resources appeared to be essential to industrial capitalism. Clerics and political philosophers recognized that foreign races are human, that humans have certain inalienable rights, and that these concepts raised dissonance with wanton conquest and exploitation for capital development. Nineteenth-century apologists labeled conquered populations either «degenerate»

(Chamberlin & Gilman 1985) or «primitive» (Kuper 1988; Vincent 1990: 103), the former explaining inferiority as the wages of sin, the latter as bestial crudity. Whether morally fallen or never risen, the conquered had forfeited the exercise of human rights. Anthropologists were applauded when their construction of "primitive society" bridged the contradiction between human condition and political status.

As Barnes and Shapin argued (1979), nineteenth-century intelligentsia mystified the social valorization of technology by touting "natural" forces. Enlightenment histories yielded a scale of civilization rising from natural wilderness to the artifices of cities. Herbert Spencer reduced it to «the one absolute certainty that [one] is ever in the presence of an Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed» (*Synthetic philosophy*, quoted in Macpherson 1900: 214-215). Morgan focused on the human «common principle of intelligence»

> which has wrought out civilization by assiduous application from small beginnings; from the arrow head, which expresses the thought in the brain of a savage, to the smelting of iron ore, which represents the higher intelligence of the barbarian, and, finally, to the railway train in motion, which may be called the triumph of civilization (1985: 553).

The fundamental premise was that a universal innate "Nature" formed populations. A corollary premise postulated that civilized men are gifted with the capacity to reason and act judiciously. Finally, these gifted men are premised to have been selected to be God's stewards, obliged to shoulder the White Man's burden administering the inferior races.

From a scale of civilizations, to a four- and then three-stage schema, to a dichotomy between primitive and civilized: John Wesley Powell laid it out in his First Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology he founded «to organize anthropologic research in America» (Powell 1881: xxxiii).

> When civilized man first came to America the continent was partially occupied by savage tribes, who obtained subsistence by hunting, by fishing, by gathering vegetal products, and by rude

garden culture in cultivating small patches of ground. Seminomadic occupancy for such purposes was their tenure to the soil.

> On the organization of the present government [United States] such theories of natural law were entertained that even this imperfect occupancy was held to be sufficient title ... The difficulties subsisting in the adjustment of rights between savage and civilized peoples are multiform and complex. Ofttimes the virtues of one condition are the crimes of the other; happiness is misery, justice, injustice. Thus, when the civilized man would do the best, he gave the most offense ... The attempts to educate the Indians and teach them the ways of civilization have ... disappointed their enthusiastic promoters ... The great boon to the savage tribes ... has been the presence of civilization, which, under the laws of acculturation, has irresistibly improved their culture by substituting new and civilized for old and savage ... The industries and social institutions of the pristine Indians have largely been destroyed, and they are groping their way to civilized life. To the full accomplishment of this, three things are necessary:
>
> 1st. The organization of the civilized family, with its rules of inheritance in lineal descent.
>
> 2d. The civilized tenure of property in severalty must be substituted for communal property.
>
> 3d. The English language must be acquired, that the thoughts and ways of civilization may be understood (Powell 1881: xxvii-xxx).

Fifteen years later, the extended researches of the staff he supervised had only intensified his conviction that:

> the primitive man thinks in a series of symbols which seem incongruous, extravagant, even bizarre, to the civilized thinker; and therein lies the chief difference between primitive and civilized modes of thought ... difference so profound that few civilized men ever comprehend the mental workings of the uncivilized man, while it is doubtful whether any uncivilized man ever comprehends the mentation of his cultured brother (Powell 1896: xxiii).

Powell's premises were quite literally the guiding assumptions for studying North American Indians.

These premises persisted through the mid-twentieth century, when Paul Radin published:

> One of the fundamental traits of these major civilizations [Egyptian, Sumerian-Babylonian, Hebrew, India, Christianity and Mohammedanism] was their essential instability, the frequent socio-economic crises through which they passed ... Contrasted with these major civilizations, there have always existed other civilizations, those of aboriginal peoples, where societies were fundamentally stable, where no basic internal socialeconomic crises occurred ... Here we have an amazing antithesis which is of fundamental importance to remember if we wish to understand the civilizations of aboriginal peoples and to see them in their proper perspective (1953: 7-8).

In the 1990s, this hoary paradigm is not only not repudiated, it is still rewarded. The 1994 Robert F. Heizer Prize for the best article in the field of ethnohistory was awarded by the American Society for Ethnohistory to David Nugent (1993). In this paper, originally a Master' thesis, Nugent professed a suitably sophisticated contemporary perspective:

> The argument I will make in this article is critical in nature. It questions the applicability of conceptual categories relevant for one social context - 19th-century industrial capitalism - to the analysis of others (1993: 336-337).

He states he recognizes the questionable validity of the practice of premising non-Western societies to be «pristine ... as if they existed outside time or place» (1993: 336).

Nugent chose for his subject the Blackfeet (*sic*; he clearly refers to the confederated Blackfoot nation, *Nitsitapii*, rather than the *Aamsskaapipiikáni*, South Piegan, of the Blackfeet Reservation). He claims that

> Between 1730 and 1830 new divisions emerged within the formerly homogeneous social categories of age and gender ... Social relations were transformed, and the resultant structure of property relations became increasingly redistributive (1993: 342).

Unhappily for Nugent's thesis, the few data we have for the Blackfoot in the early eighteenth century strongly suggest an already established redistributive political economy. Nugent bases his thesis on the unexamined premises that 1. up to the beginning of European documentation in the mid-seventeenth century, the Blackfoot were a pristine primitive society, and 2. as Major Powell (1881: xxiii) put it, «the presence of civilization ... under the laws of acculturation, has irresistibly improved their culture by substituting new and civilized for old and savage».

In a note, Nugent explains that his «reconstruction of Blackfeet society» as «reciprocal» prior to the nations' acquisition of horses in the 1730s, is «inferred [from] principles of socioeconomic organization found among hunter/gatherer societies for which information is more nearly complete» (1993: 355) (the publications of Lee on the Basarwa, Turnbull on the Mbuti, Woodburn on the Hadza, and the 1968 Lee and Devore *Man, the hunter*). That is to say, Nugent "equates" the protohistoric Blackfoot of the Northwestern Plains with modern small, marginalized tropical communities whose members have consciously avoided incorporation into the peon class of their dominant nations (Gardner 1991: 545-546). Nugent's deductive methodology tacitly embeds the nineteenth-century dichotomy between civilized (mercantile/industrialist capitalist) societies and the primitives.

What do we know of Blackfoot society at 1730 and at 1830? For the first period, we can draw information from Europeans' records, in this case the brief account written by Henry Kelsey, from archaeological data, and from indigenous (oral) history (Ewers 1958: 15-16). Kelsey is generally believed to have contacted Blackfoot (*Archithinue*) at the farthest point in his 1690-92 trip; his own oddly selective journal records only the eight weeks leading to his contact with the Naywatame Poets, probably Hidatsa (Russell 1993: 76, 84; "Poet" is *pwat*, Cree term for Siouans). There is no written record of direct observation of Blackfoot until 1754 (Ewers 1958: 24), approximately twenty years after they had begun using horses (1).

We can extrapolate from Kelsey's journal the information he plausibly collected during a visit to the Blackfoot in the territory just west of the nations he sat with in September, 1691. Again and again, Kelsey describes "feasts" given to conduct

formal business between visitors and residents of a camp, and in his concluding general observations, he outlines how the "master" of a tent engages a caller and assistants to prepare for a feast, and how the pipe is offered to open the feast (1993: 231). Kelsey's descriptions are virtually identical to nineteenth-century customs of Northwestern Plains nations, implying continuity not only in details of offering the pipe but very likely in social organization, too. This hypothesis is congruent with archaeological data such as those from Nipawi, for centuries a rendezvous (Kehoe 1978). Kelsey unmistakably describes redistributive leadership in 1691, and the identification of activity areas in a sixteenth-century Nipawi camp fits such a societal structure (Gibson 1993).

Archaeological data from actual Blackfoot territory supports strong continuity between the protohistoric and horse-using epochs. The Blackfoot were most probably resident in their protohistoric southeast Alberta-southwest Saskatchewan area by the fifteenth century, attested by ceramics and their historic type of «medicine wheels» (Duke 1991: 126). Ethnographic testimony to the central importance of bison pounds as the basis for the economy is reflected in the archaeological record (Kehoe 1973). Archaeology also suggests that surplus production for trade may have characterized societies impounding bison since the Avonlea Phase two millennia ago (i.e., coeval with Hopewell in midcontinent) and particularly during the Old Women's Phase that includes the centuries of Mississippian occupations in midcontinent (Kehoe 1973: 196-197; Brink 1990). It is probable that the *pemmican* production by which the Blackfoot supplied the historic fur trade posts and brigades (Judy 1987: 138) had been developed earlier to trade to prehistoric Missouri River towns. Contrary to Nugent's statement (1993: 355), bison robes did not become a major trade item in the 1830s, but after 1859 when steamboat transport down the Missouri from Fort Benton reduced the cost to market. Nugent ignores the older *pemmican* trade.

Much has been made of the historic situation of rich, senior men owning large herds of horses including highly trained buffalo runners, and younger or poorer men borrowing horses, incurring the obligation to repay with a generous share of the returns or by labor. This social structure parallels, or more

precisely is a variant of, the aboriginal situation in which spiritually powerful elders invoked the bison herds into the pounds with *iniskim* fetishes and prayer, sending a young man out to locate the herd and draw it into the pound by singing a magical song that sounds like a bleating bison calf. In each case, a few powerful elders deployed younger men for the manual procurement. Young men honored their elders with large gifts of meat, most particularly showing respect to their parents-in-law in this manner - ideally, parents-in-law were supported by their sons-in-law and daughters - (The myth of Kutoyis, Clot-of-Blood, illustrates this precept by inversion, the monstrous son-in-law starving his parents-in-law and forcing the old man to drive bison into the pound [Kehoe 1992]).

Older men's power was spiritual, demonstrated by their achievement of longevity and prosperity enhanced through good luck and good management. Power was enacted in rituals, making visible to the community individuals' vocations and capacities. Young men who secured horses in raids turned the booty over to the elders not because a business contract had been made, not because a "gerontocracy" exploited the young, but because it had been the elders' spiritual power that enabled the young men to successfully carry out the raid. This was, structurally, not different from the elders' enabling a bison pound to be successfully operated.

A minor parallel to the nineteenth-century situation can be seen in the use of dogs as pack animals before horses were available. The Blackfoot referred to the pre-horse era as the "dog days", alluding to the subsequent substitution of horses for dogs. Again, archaeological data illustrate continuity, attesting to the maintenance of two breeds of dogs of which one was clearly bred for size and strength (Bozell 1988). Pack dogs surely carried sacks of *pemmican*, and could have been used in caravans to transport sacks from processing grounds near pounds to streams feeding into the Saskatchewan or Missouri systems, as Brink (1990) hypothesizes. Testimony to the capacity of pack dogs comes from the interesting observation that size of *tipis*, inferred from *tipi* rings, does "not" generally increase after the acquisition of the horse (Wilson 1983: 134), contrary to the assumption made before archaeological data were amassed. Dog

travois apparently were capable of transporting hide lodge covers as large as most of those of the historic period.

I do not dispute that horses and guns changed Blackfoot life over the eighteenth century. Horses' speed greatly increased Indians' range of operations, and guns were acknowledged to weight the balance of power between indigenous nations in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What far more drastically affected Blackfoot in the period discussed by Nugent was the smallpox epidemic of 1780-81. Mark Judy (1987: 136) points out that estimates a few years later claimed three-fifths to one-half the nation died in that epidemic, and furthermore, mortality may have been especially heavy for women of childbearing age. Such population loss made it seem imperative to obtain guns, to protect Blackfoot territory and camps, and highly desirable to raid for young women and children to replenish the bands. The reputed rise in polygyny during the nineteenth century cannot be evaluated until we know the percentage of captives or daughters of captives among the junior "wives" of a man's household, data neglected by our early-nineteenth-century sources. It would seem that any analysis of a society that lost nearly half its people in one terrible year should focus on the effects of that radical event. Nugent does not mention smallpox or note 1780-81.

Conclusion

That same 1780-82 smallpox epidemic devastated Northwest Coast nations. Commenting on earlier anthropologists' failure to focus on that holocaust, Cole Harris (1994: 617) notes that under this light «ideologies and values that European transatlantic expansion had so powerfully reinforced lose authority».

Jettisoning centuries of ideological premises buttressing one's own cultural framework is not a pleasant task. American Indian ethnography appears to be declining in interest among anthropologists, and one factor may be the challenge it now raises to the discipline's traditional guiding assumptions. First Nations' resurgence from their nineteenth-century nadir forces

more careful attention to actual data, and less cavalier dropping of standard older published material into theory pigeonholes. Logical formulations, whether Enlightenment philosophes' four stages of history or Karl Polanyi's reciprocal-redistributive contrast, can no longer be permitted to take precedence over conscientious ethnohistory.

After completing his Master's degree, David Nugent (1988) went to Peru for his dissertation research. In his prize paper, Nugent ignored data on the protohistoric period, ignored gender research based on ethnographic familiarity with the Blackfoot (*e.g.* Kehoe 1983, a volume from which Nugent cites a library-research paper), ignored models of recent political-economic analysis of Plains Indian societies although one (Moore 1991) is published in the same volume in which Nugent summarized his dissertation material. The Heizer Prize Committee of the American Society for Ethnohistory evidently consulted no one familiar with current research on Blackfoot. Awarding the prize to a graduate student's armchair exercise in traditional analysis once more reinforced those ideologies and values of European/American Manifest Destiny.

Notes

1. Gerald Conaty (1995) prepared a critique of Nugent's paper at the same time this paper was being written. He makes the same points concerning the lack of historical documentation of the Blackfoot prior to the 1750s, and Nugent's ignorance of Blackfoot criteria of social status, particularly the importance of manifesting spiritual power through longevity and the attraction of wealth that can be distributed. Conaty's paper significantly complements this paper.

Bibliography

Barnes, B. & S. Shapin (eds.) 1979. *Natural order*. London: Sage.

Bozell, J. R. 1988. Changes in the role of the dog in proto-historic Pawnee culture. *Plains Anthropologist* 33, 119: 95-111.

Brink, J. 1990. *Bison butchering and food processing at Head-SmashedIn Buffalo Jump, Alberta*. Paper presented to the 48th Plains Conference, Oklahoma City.

Chamberlin, J. E. & S. L. Gilman (eds.) 1985. *Degeneration*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Conaty, G. T. 1995. Economic models and Blackfoot ideology. *American ethnologist* 22, 2: 403-412.

Duke, P. 1991. *Points in time*. Niwot: University Press of Colorado.

Ewers, J. C. 1958. *The Blackfeet: raiders on the Northwestern Plains*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Feuer, L. S. 1975. *Ideology and the ideologists*. New York: Harper and Row.

Gardner, P. M. 1991. Foragers' pursuit of individual autonomy. *Current Anthropology* 32, 5: 543-558, 566-572.

Gibson, T. H. 1993. "Whom Kelsey met: lifestyles and technology of the late-Seventeenth-Century Cree", in *Three hundred prairie years*, edited by H. Epp, pp. 595-112. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina.

Goldenweiser, A. 1946. *Anthropology: an introduction to primitive culture*. New York: F. S. Crofts.

Harris, C. 1994. Voices of disaster: smallpox around the Strait of Georgia in 1782. *Ethnohistory* 41, 4: 591-626.

Judy, M. A. 1987. Powder Keg on the Upper Missouri: sources of Blackfeet hostility, 1730-1810. *American Indian Quarterly* 11, 2: 127-144.

Keene, A. S. 1991. Archaeology and the heritage of man the hunter. *Reviews in Anthropology* 16: 133-147.

Kehoe, A. B. 1978. *François' house, an early fur trade post on the Saskatchewan*. Regina: Ministry of Culture and Youth.

-- -- 1981. Revisionist anthropology: aboriginal North America. *Current Anthropology* 22, 5: 503-517.

-- -- 1983. "The Shackles of tradition", in *The hidden half*, edited by P. Albers & B. Medicine, pp. 53-73. Washington: University Press of America.

-- -- 1985. "The ideological paradigm in traditional American ethnology", in *Social contexts of American Ethnology, 1840-1984*, edited by J. Helm, pp. 41-49. Washington: American Ethnological Society.

-- -- 1992. "Clot-of-Blood", in *Earth and sky*, edited by C. R. Farrer & R. A. Williamson, pp. 207-214. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

-- -- 1993. "How the ancient Piegans lived", in *Research in Economic Anthropology*, edited by B. Isaac, vol. 14: 87-105. Greenwich CT: JAI Press.

Kehoe, T. F. 1973. The Gull Lake Site. *Milwaukee Public Museum, Publications in Anthropology 1.*

Kelsey, H. 1993. "Henry Kelsey. His book", in *Three hundred prairie years*, edited by H. Epp, pp. 218-235. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina.

Kuper, A. 1988. *The invention of Primitive Society*. London: Routledge.

Macpherson, H. 1900. *Spencer and Spencerism*. New York: Doubleday Page.

Meek, R. L. 1976. *Social science and the ignoble savage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meyer, D. 1993. "People before Kelsey: an overview of cultural developments", in *Three hundred prairie years*, edited by H. Epp, pp. 54-73. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina.

Moore, J. H. 1991. "Kinship and division of labor in Cheyenne society", in *Marxist approaches in economic anthropology*, edited by A. Littlefield & H. Gates, pp. 135-158. Monographs in Economic Anthropology, No. 9. Lanham: University Press of America.

Morgan, L. H. 1985. *Ancient society*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Nugent, D. 1988. *The mercantile transformation of provincial urban life: labor, value and time in the Northern Peruvian sierra*. Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University.

-- -- 1993. Property relations, production relations, and inequality: anthropology, political economy, and the Blackfeet. *American Ethnologist* 20, 2: 336-362.

Powell, J. W. 1881. Report of the Director. *First Annual Report, Bureau of Ethnology, 1879-80*: xi-xxxiii. Washington: Government Printing Office.

-- -- 1896. Report of the Director. *Thirteenth Annual Report, Bureau of Ethnology, 1891-92*: xxi-lvii. Washington: Government Printing Office.

Radin, P. 1953. *The world of primitive man*. London: Abelard-Schuman.

Russell, D. 1993. "The puzzle of Henry Kelsey and his journey to the West", in *Three hundred prairie years*, edited by H. Epp, pp. 74-88. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina.

Vincent, J. 1990. *Anthropology and politics.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Wilson, M. C. 1983. "A test of the Stone Circle Size-Age hypothesis: Alberta and Wyoming", in *From microcosm to macrocosm: advances in Tipi Ring investigation and interpretation*, edited by L. B. Davis, pp. 113-137. Plains Anthropologist Memoir 19.

Wolf, E. R. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Summary

After tracing the premises upon which the contrast between tradition and innovation in native cultures was constructed back to the long persisting dichotomy between «primitive and civilized peoples» in anthropological studies,the A. focuses her attention on D. Nugent's essay on the Blackfoot. Through the examination of this 1993 R.F.Heizer award winning paper the A. proves how incorrect analysis and inadequate research may still contribute, in academic circles, to keep misleading and out-of-date assumptions alive.

Sommario

Dopo aver ricondotto le premesse sulle quali poggia l'opposizione tradizione/innovazione fra i nativi alla - a lungo - persistente dicotomia tra «popolazioni primitive e civilizzate» negli studi antropologici,l'A. focalizza la sua attenzione sul saggio di D. Nugent sui Blackfoot. Attraverso l'esame di quest'articolo - vincitore del premio R. F. Heizer per i saggi antropologici per il 1993 - l'A. mostra come analisi e ricerca inadeguate possano ancora contribuire a tenere vivi,nei circoli accademici,assunti fuorvianti e superati.