Robert Redfield, Anthropologist

Although most of his friends and colleagues knew he had been suffering from leukemia for several years, the death of Robert Redfield, on 16 October 1958, brought a sense of shock and loss to them and to scholars and scientists throughout the world. A man who spent most of his leisure reading aloud or listening to music with his family and close friends, Robert Redfield left behind very many who expressed in terms of affection what they felt about the qualities of his mind and spirit. Those who participated with him in seminars and conferences throughout the years of his fatal illness, like those who had known him earlier, were impressed with the incisive brilliance of his mind.

Redfield was trained for the law at the University of Chicago. He practiced briefly but became interested in anthropology in the course of a short trip to Mexico he and Mrs. Redfield made in 1923, and through the influence of F.-C. Cole and R. E. Park. He received a doctorate in anthropology from the university in 1928 and later was named Robert Maynard Hutchins distinguished service professor of anthropology. He served as dean of the division of social sciences, chairman of the department of anthropology, and president of the American Anthropological Association. In 1954 and 1955, respectively, his colleagues in America and Britain awarded him the Viking Fund Medal and the Huxley Memorial Medal in recognition of his scholarship and achievement in anthropology.

His was a genuine inquiring mind; he knew the value of theoretical construction and generalization and the importance of verifying such constructions by marshaling evidence that may be confirmed by others. The dialectical play of Redfield's mind showed itself characteristically in some of the seminars he gave at the University of Chicago. One series of these, on "human nature," alternated with another on the "comparison of cultures." In the former series his main interest was to discover the common human being, while in the latter it was to find the distinctive differences in the ways of mankind. Of the last two papers he wrote, in the summer of 1958, one, for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* was on "Man, nature of"; the other, on "Art and icon," intended as a lecture to be given at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City, brilliantly balances the claims of a relativistic and ethnological approach to primitive art against those of a universal esthetic.

These qualities of the great scientist are evident in Redfield's contributions to anthropology, contained in a series of books written in a clear and adroit style which would in itself have served to distinguish him. The most important of these are: *Tepoztlan, a Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (1930); *Chan Kom, a Maya Village* (written in collaboration with Alfonso Villa Rojas) (1934); *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941); *A Village That Chose Progress* (1950); *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (1953); *The Little Community* (1955); and *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956).

Perhaps the most distinctive and pioneering of Redfield's scientific contributions is the one he made to our understanding of change in folklike peasant and tribal societies.

In the 1920's, when Redfield first became interested in peasant societies, sociologists, especially those around Chicago, who were inspired by Robert Park, were beginning to study the city, and social anthropologists under the inspiration of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were undertaking functional field studies of relatively isolated tribal groups. Tepoztlan and Chan Kom belonged to neither of these types; they were "intermediate communities" with some of the characteristics of both the primitive tribe and the city. The fact that such intermediate communities resembled the peasant communities of Europe, the Near East, and the Orient, as Redfield noted in *Tepoztlan,* at once gave his studies a direct relevance to the life lived by the great majority of mankind. The particular kinds of change in these communities to which he directed attention—those stimulated by contact with modern Western urban and industrial civilization—continue to be important today. Moreover, his interest in studying these changes as "an example within convenient limits, of the general type of change whereby primitive man becomes civilized man, the rustic becomes the urbanite" immediately linked his observations on contemporary communities to the generic processes of the human career (*1*, pp. 13, 14).

As carried out in the Yucatan studies, the method which Redfield developed for the study of the changing "folk" societies and cultures consisted in an almost simultaneous comparison of four contemporary communities—a tribal village, a peasant village, a town, and a metropolitan city—within a single culture area. These Yucatan studies adapted an approach that was essentially functional and synchronic to the study of social and cultural change. The main interest of the studies was in "the recurrent elements of a describable process" —in those general interrelations of social and cultural characteristics that could be closely correlated with the change from a tribal to a peasant village, from a town to a city.

The conclusion that resulted from the application of this method in Yucatan Redfield reformulated in a more general form to take account of the Guatemalan material and of primitive societies. "In the absence of a money economy," he wrote, "isolated homogeneous societies tend to have well organized cultures and to be sacred and collectivistic," and "increase of contacts, bringing about heterogeneity and disorganization of culture, constitutes one sufficient cause of secularization and individualization" (*2*, pp. 339, 369).

Redfield's concepts of the "folk society" and of a "folk-urban continuum" find their chief significance in relation to this general formulation. They are constructions which enable one to ask questions about the degrees of "folkness" associated with tribal, peasant, and urban societies and cultures. Redfield redefined the concepts of "folk" and "primitive" in terms of degree of isolation, homogeneity, sacredness, and other characteristics.

Redfield did not himself assert the conclusions of the Yucatan studies in universal form. He offered them as hypotheses to guide further research and was quite prepared for the possibility

that the correlation he had found in Yucatan was limited by special circumstances, and "that the association among some of the various characters is more necessarily close than among others, and that besides the long-isolated society with its attendant characters, on the one hand, and the less isolated, heterogeneous society with its characters, on the other, we may recognize subtypes, or types in which various kinds of compromises or combinations of character are found" (*2*, p. 358). Later research by both Redfield and others has qualified the Yucatan conclusions in just this manner, revealing special circumstances and new subtypes (*3*).

In 1948 Redfield revisited Chan Kom, and in the restudy of Chan Kom he tried to understand the changes that had occurred there over 17 years as "the biography of a community, of a people who conceived a common purpose, and of what they did to realize it." It is probably this restudy which impressed upon Redfield the importance of finding a place for aspirations, moods, and reform movements in an anthropological theory of social and cultural change (*4*).

One of the most significant qualifications of Redfield's earlier theory was one he himself added. This was the idea that in studying changes in peasant society and culture one should consider not only the stimulus of modern Western civilization but that of the indigenous non-Western civilizations as well. This led him increasingly to consider the interrelations of different levels of social and cultural organization, manifest in special kinds of networks, centers, and "hinge groups" which mediate between them. The folk-urban polarity gives way to a more inclusive concept of a civilization as an enduring "historic structure" in which little and great traditions, little and great communities, are constantly interacting.

In one respect this later development is a return to the beginning. For even in the Tepoztlan study it was already clear that Redfield was interested in changes going on in Tepoztlan not for their own sake but as examples of generic processes (*1*, pp. 218–223; *5*). The difference is that in his later thinking about

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civilizations Redfield sees a greater need for the methods and time perspectives of the archeologist and the historian. The earlier side-by-side comparison will continue, "but we shall also develop schemes of comparison that put together in the same class those societies and cultures that have corresponding positions in the same civilizational system or perhaps in different civilizational systems" (*6*). This new kind of comparison will involve the ordering of peoples into tribal, peasant, and urban communities in the context of history.

This view of civilizations as great structures in history, as "systems of cultures in persisting characteristic relationship," was very much on Redfield's mind to the end. During the last 10 years he was actively concerned in his lectures and writing with the problem of how to characterize and compare the great civilizations. In a personal letter dated 13 September 1958, he speaks of his intention "to write a small book on Civilizations. . . . It would consist of perhaps ten essay-like chapters, something like—but in the end probably not much like—the following:

"I. A Civilization as an Object (a formed thing of the mind)
"II. Cultures and Civilizations: Class and Subclass
"III. Criteria (class and continua)
"IV. Structures in History (Societal or Cultural)
"V. Community, Region, Class, Estate
"VI. The Cultivation of Tradition and Self-image: Knowledge
"VII. The Cultivation of Aesthetic Discrimination
"VIII. The Cultivation of Moral Judgment
"IX. The Creativity of the Civilized
"X. The Civilization of the Untraditional."

What might have gone into this book we can only guess from Redfield's last articles and lectures. For most of us it will remain the kind of "ideal" that Robert Redfield's life and work represent, and that he meant when he wrote: "An ideal is a picture of the place you will never quite, but always strive to, reach. Its attainment happens in little pieces of the striving. We shall never have a world of perfectly rational and fair-minded men, just as we shall never have an educational system in which everyone learns to think with the excellences of intellectual conversation that I have imagined. But the great good is contained within the small; the civilization of the dialogue is set forth, however humbly, in any one small piece of honest intellectual exchange, with my neighbor, with my book. A new beginning toward the unattainable is forever right at hand" (*7*).

MILTON SINGER
University of Chicago

References and Notes

1. R. Redfield, *Tepoztlan, a Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1930).
2. ———, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1941).
3. See especially S. Tax, *Sci. Monthly* 48, 463 (1939) and *Am. Anthropologist* 43, 27 (1941); H. Miner, *The Primitive City of Timbuctoo* (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 1953) and *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 17, 529; and O. Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlan Restudied* (Univ. of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1951), p. 440.
4. R. Redfield, *The Little Community*, chap. 7; see also ———, *Human Organization Clearinghouse Bull.* 17, 20 (1958).
5. See R. Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1953), pp. 42–44; also ——— and M. Singer, *Econ. Develop. and Cultural Change* 3, 53 (1954) and R. Redfield *Sci. Monthly* 37, 110 (1933).
6. ———, *J. Roy. Anthropol. Inst.* 85, 29 (1955).
7. ———, "The Educational Experience" in *The Redfield Lectures* (Fund for Adult Education, Pasadena, Calif., 1955), pp. 39–40.