Book Reviews

A World View and the Impinging World

Tzintzuntzan. Mexican Peasants in a Changing World. GEORGE M. FOSTER. Little, Brown, Boston, 1967. 384 pp., illus. $6.95.

Because anthropologists are, in general, addicted to the practice of seeking out unexamined tribes or communities for their first and succeeding field ventures, the number of restudies of groups that have already been "done" is fairly low. Yet from those that are available in the literature it is clear that the discipline as a whole might occasionally reap some benefits from a reduced emphasis on the search for unexplored cultural territories. Not every graduate student needs an exclusive "my tribe" affinity in order to establish his reputation—or even to find his own identity. And sometimes, as Mead, Redfield, and Firth, among others, have demonstrated, there may be a special fascination in going back to one's old tribe or community for a new look. The book under review is just such a restudy.

Foster returned to Tzintzuntzan in Michoacán some ten years after the publication of his first monograph on the village (*Empire's Children*, Smithsonian Institution, 1948), and he spent a total of eight months in the village in the years between his first revisit, in 1958, and 1966. The contrast between the earlier work and the present one reflects far more than some of the changes that have taken place in the community since 1946. For it illustrates as well changes in style, plan, and purpose which are themselves reflections of a growing interest in theory and generalization in anthropology. Foster's earlier work is an ethnographic monograph in the good and the bad sense of that genre. It gives us the "ethnographic facts" (that is, observations filtered through the screen of the observer's interests, biases, capacities, and perceptions) arranged in an orderly manner under a set of presumedly exhaustive categories.

In the new book, Foster omits much ethnographic material, referring the reader who may be interested to the earlier work. Consequently this later book is more discursive, analytic, interpretative, generalizing, "theoretical," and, especially, more concerned with directed culture change. Also, it is much easier to read. This is not to say that all the old ethnographic categories are absent. But they are neither so detailed nor so seemingly detached from a thesis as they were in the earlier book. In any case, the central theme of *Tzintzuntzan: Mexican Peasants in a Changing World* is made explicit, and various relevant features of Tzintzuntzanian culture, in the past as well as the present, are dealt with as they relate to that theme or premise. Foster's "principal theme," he tells us, has to do with "a particular cognitive orientation and its relationship to contemporary conditions." And that cognitive orientation—iterated frequently throughout the book—is an "image of limited good," the Tzintzuntzeño peasant's world view.

In Tzintzuntzan all behavior is reinforced, guided, or determined by this "image of limited good." The villagers "see their social, economic, and natural universes—their total environment—as one in which almost all desired things in life such as land, other forms of wealth, health, friendship, love, manliness, honor, respect, power, influence, security, and safety *exist in absolute quantities insufficient to fill even minimal needs of villagers.* . . . [Moreover] *there is no way directly within the Tzintzuntzeño's power to increase the available supplies.* . . . This view . . . seems to me to characterize peasants in general, and it is found in other societies as well" (italics in original). From this it follows that in any closed system (Foster says that while the idea of a closed system is "contrary-to-fact" it corresponds to the villager's interpretation of reality) "*an individual or a family can improve its position only at the expense of others.*"

The author has divided his book into two parts: The Traditional Community, and The Changing World. Thus he wants us to note that the idea of limited good "accounts for prevailing values and long-standing behavior forms, [but] we are not describing changing contemporary attitudes and actions." The subtle distinction between "prevailing values" and "changing contemporary attitudes and actions" is not further elucidated. Nor does Foster describe the mechanism by which prevailing values may in practice be overridden or made "unprevailing" by contemporary attitudes or actions.

Now, despite the fact that "health, love, honor, respect, influence, security, safety," and so on are essentially unmeasurable qualities, and also unlikely to obtain or exist in limited quantities—even within a closed system—at *any* time, Foster seems to rest his entire argument regarding peasant fear, envy, conflict resolution, resistance to change, and the like on the substratum of this particular world view or "cognitive orientation." He finds that this view of the world "leads to an equilibrium model for the healthy social organism." Consequently any behavior that threatens the *status quo* because "someone has, or is attempting to obtain, more than his share of some good, is considered disruptive."

The trouble with this "model" as an explanatory device is, of course, that in emphasizing a relatively rigid world view, it implies that all changes may be "disruptive" and must therefore be unacceptable. And if this interpretation distorts Foster's views, he must be held accountable. For while he makes many references to change, and even to some of the specific changes now being sought by many Tzintzuntzeños, he invariably comes back to his central theme: the potent control which is exercised over all actions, behavior, and beliefs by the peasant's image of limited good. Even as he asserts its declining impact in the present, he continues to use it as an explanatory notion in his discussion of change and today's prospects for change.

At one point Foster includes a detailed discussion of the failures in a whole series of CREFAL (Regional Center for Fundamental Education in Latin America, a UNESCO venture)

schemes for community development and organization in Tzintzuntzan. In the course of his analysis he makes it clear that the plans were ill conceived and poorly executed, that the projects failed not because the Tzintzuntzeños were unwilling to accept change (even at the "cost" of outstripping, outshining, and getting ahead of their fellow villagers), but because such relevant factors as skills, demand, and marketing outlets were ignored by the planners. Thus he notes: "A happy future for Tzintzuntzan will depend on sound economic and social planning and on the effective execution of the programs that are decided upon."

In a number of places Foster makes it apparent that he does not belong in the camp of those simplistic analysts who used to assume that resistance to culture change of any kind was inevitable. For example, he points out that "Tzintzuntzeños are pragmatic in analyzing possible benefits and losses from any course of action, and they do not let sentiment, in the form of overriding family loyalty or long-standing grudges stand in their way." And: "With respect to . . . economic motivation, it is clear that there are few Tzintzuntzeños who, seeking a new opportunity to make money, and knowing how to go about it, will not attempt to change their traditional behavior to reach this goal." Yet on the preceding page Foster has described Tzintzuntzan as "a community in which shared poverty is the goal." Elsewhere he refers to Tzintzuntzeños as "among the least change-prone people to be found in . . . Mexico . . . Village culture and society [reflect] a cognitive orientation that views all good things in life as finite." In short, Foster—perhaps because he is strongly influenced by his knowledge of the community as it was as well as as it is—tries to have it both ways: the image of limited good inhibits the impulse to change; it does not. Naturally it would be as absurd for one to deny the significance of world view as an element involved in receptivity to culture change as it would be to deny Tzintzuntzan's present dependence upon and involvement with an economy and a polity that lie outside its own village borders.

As with other peoples elsewhere, the cognitive orientation or world view of the Tzintzuntzeños is historically derived. But world views are, as Foster himself admits, dynamic things. They too are subject to alteration when they alteration find. The cognitive orientation of the Tzintzuntzeños may, at any particular moment, show holdovers from the past and from past circumstances; but it reflects also the "real" conditions of contemporary life, including the social and natural circumstances in which the villagers live and the political controls and economic forces imposed upon them. World views, cognitive orientations, and values are not born in a cultural vacuum. Nor will they remain for long unchanged in the face of radical alterations in the socio-political-economic environment in which a people finds itself. Tzintzuntzeños are now, Foster reports, living in such a changing ambience. In this respect they do not differ radically from North American Indians, South African blacks, or urban American Negroes. But Foster seems to have built a kind of metaphysic into his world view of the limited good which implies, among other things, that the hearts and the minds of men and not their circumstances must be altered before they will accept new values. Or else he implies the reverse.

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Factors in the Shaping of Our Society

Technology in Western Civilization. Vol. 1, The Emergence of Modern Industrial Society, Earliest Times to 1900. MELVIN KRANZBERG and CARROLL W. PURSELL, JR., Eds. Oxford University Press, New York, 1967. 814 pp., illus. $8.50.

Someone has said that the degree of man's civilization is shown by his interest in history. In recent years American readers have shown an increasing concern not only with their own history but with the history of earlier ages and with prehistory. This volume—the first of two (the second to be published later this year)—is evidence of the interest of a large number of people in the historic processes that have brought us to our present technological status. The volumes grew out of a conference held at the University of Wisconsin in 1963, at which a panel of historians of technology met to see whether they could prepare a course of study for the U.S. Armed Forces Institute. They will be used in a one-year course to be given by that institute, and are frankly designed as textbooks; but volume 1 can be read with interest and profit by anyone concerned with the origins of technical processes. It supplies an enormous amount of information about technological developments from the beginnings of man's emergence in the Early Stone Age to the end of the 19th century. Volume 2 will bring the story of 20th-century technology down to date.

Volume 1 is composed of five main parts with a total of 45 chapters, each written by a specialist. Lynn White, Jr., writes on Technology in the Middle Ages, Shepard B. Clough deals with Economic and Political Developments, 1600–1750, G. E. Russell treats The Agricultural Revolution, 1600–1850, Bern Dibner has two chapters, one on The Beginnings of Electricity and one on Communications, and Robert P. Multhauf discusses Industrial Chemistry in the Nineteenth Century—to mention at random only a few of the chapter headings. Naturally the style of the exposition varies with individual authors, and not all chapters manage to focus attention upon essentials, but by and large the writing is clear and the presentation effective.

One of the most fascinating chapters is White's discussion of the remarkable advances in the Middle Ages and the rapid and often unexplained spread of the knowledge of certain inventions and techniques throughout the known world. Someone in the 10th century introduced the Javanese fiddle bow, and soon it was being used to make music all over Europe. White shows that the late Middle Ages were years of extraordinary inventiveness, and A. Rupert Hall in the next chapter, Early Modern Technology in 1600, comments: "The Renaissance is regarded as one of the most creative and glorious periods in human endeavor. Yet in terms of the history of technology it perhaps does not rank as high as the Middle Ages with its power revolution and its agricultural innovations." Some historians will wish to debate this statement, but it does serve to emphasize the advances made during a period which most people think of as given over to feudal quarrels and baronial wars.

In the condensation required for the vast amount of information packed into these chapters, some oversimplifica-