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Stanley Diamond. *In Search of the Primitive, A Critique of Civilization*

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. . . and . . . it is possible to write a prehistory of women.” In this precise and professional book, she may well have actualized the first of these two possibilities for herself. For most laymen, however—especially for those in search of a distinctively feminine vision—she has hardly begun to actualize the second.

Hilja B. Wescott
Roger W. Westcott

A CRITIQUE OF CIVILIZATIONAL RATIONALISM

Stanley Diamond. *In Search of the Primitive, A Critique of Civilization*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books: 1974 (3rd printing, 1987).

We don't talk about the primitive as much as we did just two decades ago when Stanley Diamond wrote his critique of civilization by contrasting it with the primitive. It may be that the primitive, like many other terms, seems now to evoke pejorative, indeed odious comparisons. The implied note of superiority in such comparisons stems from the view that the premodern, or the traditional, or the primitive, was somehow less developed, less humanly accomplished, less expansively creative than the modern.

One line of reasoning was based in the set of dichotomies whereby sociologists contrasted some previous societal form with the current, societal frame. There was society based on status as opposed to contract, or on tradition as opposed to rationality, or on mechanical solidarity as opposed to organic solidarity, and so on.

Another approach was less neutral in seeking analytical categories for the study of various societies. It seemed propelled by the modern conviction that *progress* was to be found principally in society itself. The modernization of society could be traced in its economic, its political, and indeed in its cultural characteristics. The modern economy was industrial, the modern polity was a state, usually a nation-state, and the modern culture was literate, sponsoring education, and a range of art forms in music, painting, literature and poetry. What preceded the modernized society offered little if anything that was thought to be pertinent, and useful, for the contemporary ways of life. The prior circumstance, whatever it was called, and however it was analyzed, filled out the more exotic ranges of human behavior, and was instructive about what modern men and women had now left behind and transcended.

Stanley Diamond takes a strong position in opposition to the comparison of the contemporary, so-called civilized world and what had preceded. He introduces the book with the statement: “Civilization originates in conquest abroad and repression at home.” Although he discusses some of the characteristics of archaic and modern civilizations, his principal theme is the human meaning of the “breach between civilized and primitive culture.”

Unlike many of his anthropological colleagues, Diamond searches for the primitive so that he can understand civilization; and he reports on civilizations so that he can identify more clearly what the primitive is. Then he identifies, and frequently laments, the evident losses and the often questionable gains when and where civilization supplanted primitive culture.

In rereading *In Search of the Primitive*, I was surprised to find that Diamond was a postmodern *before the letter*. What could be read as an attack on anthropology and on the civilizations which have engendered "the study of man," can also be understood as a strong desire to be modern and also to hold onto the best that he found in his studies of primitive cultures. At best, the postmodern sentiment is to retrieve and recover, indeed to reinvent, the better qualities of the past. Yet Diamond's language is not always consistent. Sometimes, he contrasts the primitive and civilization as mutually exclusive. At other times, he assumes a postmodern posture by seeking the better qualities of each.

In his criticism of progress, it seems, in some texts, that Diamond's focus is exclusively on western civilization, the historically specific instance where progress has become a central dynamic. Yet, some statements seem to reject civilization *tout court*, as an unfortunate disaster for humankind. By narrowing his attention to the predominantly protestant, capitalist, and highly rationalist instance of western civilization, he focuses on an extreme case. While a powerful civilizational influence throughout the world, the *west* is not the only civilization. Indeed, the comparative study of civilizations in the contemporary world may give a special place to western hegemony, but it does not ignore the diverse civilizational matrices within which many peoples cope with the contemporary, global agenda.

The study of Plato's influence is a central chapter in the book. Diamond raises the question about Plato's hostility to poets in *The Republic*. But he fails to highlight the poet as educator in the oral culture. Indeed he is critical of Plato's conclusions about the need for a new type of education leading to self-reflective knowledge. Yet in my view, he does not adequately appreciate the fundamental conflict between the oral and written cultures. It may be because he assigns literacy as a secondary tool and symptom of civilization (126).

Eric Havelock in *A Preface to Plato*, and Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy*, have thoroughly analyzed the differing characteristics of the oral and literate cultures. Indeed, Levi-Strauss, whose structuralism is targeted in Diamond's critique of the profession, had said during an interview that it would be better to refer to oral rather than primitive cultures. I wish to make two points about that issue. One, Stanley Diamond, in arguing for the better qualities of the primitive and the civilized, could be said to be arguing for maintaining the immediacy and concrete dimensions of the oral culture while having the capability of participating actively in the literate culture. Two, the criticism of civilization, then, could be seen as a critique of the extreme, and

extremely narrowing, form of rationality which is found in contemporary, advanced industrial societies. Thus, it is less a rejection of the industrial civilization as such, and more a criticism of the stultifying forms of the rationalized modes of social life.

All human beings begin in the oral culture of family and immediate environs. Some rather early in life are expected to acquire literacy and thereby to develop literate skills as necessary to participate in society. The literate skills may be seen as superior because they increase human capabilities, or they are superior because required for full participation in society. But literacy can destroy the vitality and dynamism of oral culture. The conflict generates misperception and misunderstanding. The distance between the extremes is great, the distance, that is, between an oral culture untouched by literacy, and a literate culture that has suppressed the vibrancy of orality. My interpretation of Diamond's analytical intent is that the civilizational destruction of oral cultures is a major loss, whatever the alleged gains.

Ancient Greece was a center of cultural conflict. As a mediterranean civilization, it was influenced by the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. Recent scholarship is uncovering the evidence of deep ambivalence in the literature about patriarchy, about women, about place. Vic Walter has attempted in *Placeways* to recover the tradition of place in *Oedipus at Colonus* and other sources. In that tradition there is a *spatial dimension to identity*, and indeed to citizenship. To be able to speak with authority, and to be listened to by others, it was not enough merely to be someone, but one had to be from somewhere. If consideration of the primitive is opened more broadly to include the oral cultures, and the spatial dimensions in the actual way of life, then we see more clearly the losses resulting from any civilizational discarding of these dimensions of human life.

In searching for the primitive, Diamond finds *Rousseau* to be a guide for an appropriate anthropology. To Diamond, "anthropologists are *spiritual* double agents" because anthropology is both an academic discipline and a search for "human possibilities"(89). He finds Rousseau calling for a proper anthropology (93) whose purpose is "self-knowledge" and the means "the authentic understanding of others"(94).

In the nineteenth century, the concept of the primitive no longer meant the search for "natural man," because an evolutionary perspective located the primitive at the base of civilization. Thus the concern was for progress through the conquest of nature, and through imperialism. The result was that reason was reduced to rationality, and a widespread *distrust of reason*, according to Reinhard Bendix, grew alongside the dominance of a narrowed rationality.

By contrast, Rousseau was "alive to the human possibilities that he sensed in the primitive culture"(106). He seemed to be committed to a "journey" to the "center of his own civilized being"(112). Diamond finds in Rousseau that his desire to understand primitive people is connected

to his effort to understand his own possibilities as a civilized person (113). For Diamond, contemporary primitive peoples, while marginal, and in locations removed from the centers of social life, are "our contemporary pre-civilized ancestors."

Diamond discusses in detail ten characteristics of primitive peoples. But he fails to note the intrusion from outside that makes it difficult to maintain the ancient customs. Indeed, the view of the isolated primitive people seems romanticized particularly in his discussion of the "public" (168). He tends to consider the primitive peoples only in their isolation, and thus he laments the threat to their ability to continue a way of life without intrusion from outside, or to protect themselves from conquest, the main means through which civilization gains hegemony over them.

Yet when Diamond poses "the central problem of anthropology" (175), which is to help so that man can be reunited with his past, and the primitive can be reconciled with the civilized, he could be expressing the postmodern problem for the anthropologist. Indeed, is he not posing the problem for social science and for the comparative study of civilizations?

The idea of the primitive is connected with the idea of civilization. It is civilized man who searches for the primitive, as "the utopia of the past" (208). The civilized person creates the notion of the primitive, according to Diamond, in the search for "human identity." These quests occurred as a result of the Enlightenment, during which the primitive and the civilized were both created. While anthropologists differ in their consideration of the relations between them, Diamond argues that the conceptions of primitive society enable us to put "critical aspects of our civilization in critical perspective" (226).

Major contrasts are drawn between primitive societies and civilized societies by noting the presence of schizophrenia and alienation in the latter and their absence in the former. Moreover, customs, in primitive societies, are judged superior to the rule of law in civilized societies. The former is social morality, the latter a continuing response to pathologies. A third contrast is between the trickster and Job. Among primitive peoples, Diamond writes, "all antinomies are bound into the ritual cycle" (p. 290).

Diamond concludes by referring to Marx who conceived of "primitive society as the critique of civilization." But Diamond does more than Marx. He cites approvingly T. S. Eliot who urges us to go back so that we would be better equipped to go forward. I find that to be a theme in the postmodern moment which tries to embrace both the primitive and the civilized in a continuing dialectic.

Carroll J. Bourg