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Ideal Types and Aging Glands: Robert Redfield's Response to Oscar Lewis's Critique of Tepoztlán

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Ideal Types and Aging Glands: Robert Redfield's Response to Oscar Lewis's Critique of Tepoztlán

In the recent critical "life and letters" of Oscar Lewis by Susan Rigdon (1988) there are reprinted major portions of several letters Lewis wrote to Robert Redfield regarding their differences over the interpretation of the "folk culture" of Tepoztlán (Redfield 1930, Lewis 1951). For understandable reasons, the volume does not include Redfield's side of the correspondence. Since this is one of the classic cases of substantial disagreement over the interpretation of what was putatively the "same" ethnographic entity (cf. Stocking 1989), and since Redfield (unlike Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead in the other two most important cases) did in fact respond to the critique of his work, both in correspondence and in print (cf. Redfield 1960: 132-48), it seems appropriate to get into the public record some of his side of the private correspondence responding to the Lewis critique.

Lewis had been in touch with Redfield from the time of his first fieldwork in Tepoztlán (OL/RR 11/9/43, reproduced in part in Rigdon 1988:187-88), and Redfield was on several occasions supportive of his work. During the late spring and early summer of 1948, however, Lewis wrote several letters to Redfield from Tepoztlán indicating the nature of his developing disagreements with Redfield's interpretation. In the first of these (RRP: OL/RR 5/7/48), he said that he had originally planned his study as supplementary to Redfield's, and had not foreseen the differences in interpretation that had developed. Now that he had become aware of them, he hoped that they might discuss their evidence and methods in order to "work out the fairest possible presentation of the findings." Responding to an account of one family which Lewis forwarded, Redfield sent back a two page critique by his wife, Margaret Park Redfield (who had been with him in Tepoztlán), in which she suggested that "if culture is seen as that which gives some order and significance to life," then Lewis's account had "very little of culture in it" (RRP: RR/OL 6/8/48). In a letter which Rigdon reproduced in major part, Lewis suggested in response that "the idea that folk cultures produce less frustrations than non-folk cultures or that the quality of human relationships is necessarily superior in folk-cultures seems to me to be sheer Rousseauian romanticism and has not been documented to my knowledge" (1988:205). In a letter dated June 22, 1948, Redfield replied as follows:

One of the important results that we may expect from your work will be the investigation of the tensions, conflicts and maladjustments which undoubtedly

exist in Tepoztlán families. You refer to the idea that folk cultures produce less frustrations than non-folk cultures. This is not so much an idea to be embraced as it is a problem to be investigated--would you not agree? That the quality of human relationships is necessarily superior in folk societies you well call "Rousseauian romanticism." It seems to me pretty doubtful, whatever you call it, and certainly not a matter in which personal differences in valuation will enter. But it may be that the quality of human relationships is different in such societies.

You invite me to express myself as to whether or not Tepoztlán is or was a folk society. I can only say that it was some experience with Tepoztlán which caused me to develop the conception. As the concept is an imagined construct, no actual society conforms to it in every particular. In many respects Tepoztlán does conform with that imagined construct: it is or was relatively isolated and homogeneous, with a traditional way of life. The extent to which it has other characteristics of more primitive societies is a matter to be investigated. In general, I suppose Tepoztlán to represent the middle range, of peasant or peasant-like societies. The size of the community does not, in my opinion, make it impossible or improbable that Tepoztlán should have some or many of the characteristics of folk societies. The Baganda are more numerous.

It is surely important that you are making much more intensive studies in a community studied by someone else. But I suppose we must be prepared to admit that it will never be possible to bring your materials and mine into full comparison because the investigators were different, and because time has passed. For example, my impressions of Tepoztlán were not of a suspicious and hostile people. Was this because I found doors that were open to me and people who wanted to talk, and met no unfriendly experience? Or is it that, since developments of the past twenty-two years, the temper of the community has changed?

With reference to the questions you raise as to the interpretation of the materials on the Rojas family, I think the point in my mind, and my wife's, was that the person you had collect the materials was probably not experienced in cultures different from that of the town or city of her own upbringing and was perhaps therefore insensitive to aspects of the family life which a more widely experienced person and trained anthropologist might have felt. The materials, as read by us, do indeed give that impression.

You refer to my wife's belief to the existence of a middle class bias on your part. There is no such belief. She supposed such a bias to exist in the woman who lived with the Rojas family, affecting her choice of materials to report.

Unless this misunderstanding be the cause, I am at a loss to account for your finding some of our comments unkind. The comments were made, in response to your invitation that we make them, in an entirely amiable temper. I think you know that I have always appreciated and learned from your work, and have supported it, in general sympathy and in not a few practical acts. I shall continue to learn from what you do. That you will find part of what I recorded in that community twenty-two years ago to require correction is to be expected, and your own success in that direction is to be applauded. We learn not by defending a position taken, but by listening to the other man, with the door of the mind open for the entrance of new understanding.

Even before the emergence of their disagreements, Redfield was somewhat restrained in his evaluation of Lewis at the time of the latter's appointment to the University of Illinois, suggesting in his letter of recommendation that while Lewis was "a good man," he was "probably not a man of first rank" (RRP:RR/J. W. Albig 4/26/48). However, he continued to support other Lewis initiatives (RRP: RR/American Philosophical Society 11/6/50), and when Lewis asked to dedicate his book to Redfield, he acquiesced, sending along a rather ambiguously worded comment for the jacket blurb: ". . . because, in putting before other students my errors and his own [sic] in a context of intelligent discussion, he has once more shown the power of social science to revise its conclusions and to move toward the truth--for these reasons, I praise and recommend the book" (RRP undated).

In an unpublished document prepared at about this time, Redfield listed six of Lewis's major criticisms, offering a response to each of them:

- 1) "The folk-urban conceptualization of social change focuses attention primarily on the city as the source of change, to the exclusion or neglect of other factors of an internal or an external nature."

This objection misunderstands the nature of the folk-urban conception. As developed, it proposes a contrast between elements "ideally" identified with the city, and those "ideally" identified with the primitive isolated society. As societies change, whether by contact with the city or by contacts with other peoples or by development from within, urban elements may appear. It is true that in TEPOZTLAN attention was centered on urban

elements coming from town or city. But this was because such elements were, in the very recent history of Tepoztlán, important, and because they had been neglected by many students of primitive and peasant societies. Such societies had often been studied in such a way that city-like, and indeed city-originating elements, had been neglected. There is nothing intrinsic to the folk-urban conception that requires or even persuades one to neglect elements of change that arise from sources other than the city. The conception does direct attention to a kind of element of culture-society, or of changes therein, but it does not restrict the attention to any particular source for the changes. Indeed, in the FCY [The Folk Culture of Yucatan], recognition was given to city-like elements (pecuniary valuations, impersonality), in Guatemalan societies which, it was tentatively asserted, arose in pre-conquest time from the development of trade and money and not, perhaps from the city at all.

2) "It follows that in many instances culture change may not be a matter of folk-urban progression, but rather an increasing or decreasing heterogeneity of culture elements...the incorporation of Spanish rural elements, such as the plow, oxen, plants, and many folk beliefs, did not make Tepoztlán more urban, but rather gave it a more varied rural culture."

This is just the point I tried to make in FCY. There I tried to show that the incorporation of Spanish elements into the life of the QR [Quintana Roo] Indians had not resulted in a more urban culture, but in a more folk-like culture. I characterized the QR people as "ritually bilingual," so to speak: the addition of Spanish ritual made their culture more various--we might, as does Lewis, say it was more heterogeneous; Linton would say there were more alternatives. Of course culture change may not be a matter of folk-urban progression. It may be a matter of urban-folk "retrogression," or of change from loin-cloths to trousers with no relevance for folk-urban change at all, or from Buddhism to Christianity--a matter of interest in itself and with or without interest for those using the folk-urban conception as one among many possible instruments of understanding.

3) "Some of the criteria used in the definition of the folk society are treated by Redfield as linked or interdependent variables, but might better be treated as independent variables. Sol Tax, in his study of Guatemalan societies, has shown that societies can be both culturally well organized and homogeneous and at the same time highly modular, individualistic, and commercialistic."

This is just what I reported in the last chapter of FCY. I did, in passages earlier in the book than those referring to the Guatemalan facts, propose that these be considered as dependent variables "for the purposes of this investigation." Such a consideration is a hypothesis derived from (suggested by) the polar ideal types. This particular hypothesis was in my own book at once denied, or qualified. Thus, on p. 358 I wrote: "But it may well turn out that the correspondence is limited by special circumstances. Certain Guatemalan societies are homogeneous [and] isolated, [but] nevertheless family organization is low, and individualization and the secular character of the social life is great . . ."

Lewis adds in the paragraph numbered (3) that in Tepoztlán commercialism is combined with strength of family organization. Excellent. We are now in a position to ask: Is the greater strength of the family in Tepoztlán as compared with its strength in Agua Escondida, Guatemala, connected with the lesser power of commercialism there or with some other factors not yet sufficiently identified? Again, Lewis seems to have read the propositions relative to the folk-urban differences as assertions of what is universally (or perhaps only usually) true. Rather, they are propositions derived from the application of the folk-urban conception to a few cases with the expected result that they prove not to be true in some of them, at least without the introduction of qualifying factors. It is just in this way that the folk-urban conception is a creator of questions; it does not provide answers. Only particular societies can do that.

4) "The typology involved in the folk-urban classification of societies tends to obscure one of the significant findings of modern cultural anthropology, namely the wide range in the ways of life and in the value systems among so-called primitive peoples."

A class has members; an ideal type, as "the folk society," has no members. The folk-urban difference is not a classification. It is a mental construction of imagined societies that are only approximated in particular "real" societies.

As such it does indeed obscure the difference among primitive societies. That was what it was designed to do. It arose out of the need to find conceptions which would enable us to describe some of the changes which societies undergo, both in macrohistory and in microhistory, and to allow us to consider the "emergent" features of societies as the history of the human race proceeds. It arose out of the simultaneous consideration of modern urbanized peoples, primitive peoples and

peasant peoples, and was developed to help in the understanding of the resemblances and differences among these. It is not offered as an exclusive way of thinking about societies and of studying them, but as one way, useful in certain connection only.

Lewis is quite right when at the end of this section he says "what we need to know is what kind of urban society, under what conditions of contact, and a host of other specific historical data." It is to bring it about that we look for these data that the conception was developed. But we would not be looking for these data at all if we did not first think of urban society as something distinguishable from folk society.

5) "The folk-urban classification has serious limitations in guiding field research because of the highly selective implications of the categories themselves and the rather narrow focus of problem. The emphasis upon essentially formal aspects of culture leads to neglect of psychological data and as a rule does not give insight into the character of the people."

I repeat that the folk-urban conception has both the limitations and the advantages of any preliminary way of looking at complex phenomena. It does indeed lead to neglect of psychological characterizations of, say, the Tepozteicans as contrasted with the Tarascans. It may, however, lead to psychological characterization of peasant peoples, or of marginal societies, as compared with psychological characterizations of isolated, little-changing homogeneous societies. (Francis on The Peasant.) Indeed, in one chapter in TEPOZTLAN a single Tepoztecan was described in psychological terms referring to his character as a "marginal man." Other conceptions of psychological character may lead to a recognition of anal vs oral types, or Apollonians vs Dionysians; this one leads to psychological characterizations that reference to what happens in human living when the original conditions of isolated self-containment are altered, by whatever cause, endogenous or exogenous, in the direction away from the constructed folk type. Changes in psychological character may be expected to correspond with this interest, but not with interests expressed in alternative conceptions.

6) "Finally, underlying the folk-urban dichotomy as used by Redfield, is a system of value judgments which contains the old Rousseauian notion of primitive peoples as noble savages, and the corollary that with civilization has come the fall of man."

The statement as to the value judgements implied by my use of this dichotomy seems to me exaggerated. I do not recall any intention to suggest that everything about savages or about Tepoztecan life has my approval nor that with civilization came the fall of man. I think it is true that TEPOZTLAN shows my admiration of certain features of Tepoztecan life: the provision the culture gives of a sense of what life is all about, and a rich expressive life in the community. There was much there I did not like.

It is interesting that Lewis does not object to the presence of a value judgement in my work; he thinks I chose the wrong one: He writes (p. 435, note 14): "We are not, of course, objecting to the fact of values, per se, but rather to the failure to make them explicit." They will be found, inter alia, where he writes of how the Tepoztecan could be helped to greater agricultural production and a substitution of science for magic. These are also values. The values stressed by my way of looking at these communities are somewhat less often stressed in the work of modern Western science than are the values of increased production and science-rather-than-magic; perhaps then no great harm is done in bringing them to the fore to complement the usual emphasis. And, as to the degree of attachment to both the ideas and the involved values, for what it is worth I guess that my emotional involvement in mine is no greater than is Lewis's in his. It may even be less, as my glands are older.

The general impression I retain after studying these criticisms that Lewis [has] written is that they pretty much amount to blaming the parlor lamp for not cooking the soup.

The folk/urban continuum was of course the subject of considerable anthropological discussion after the appearance of Lewis's book, and the Redfield papers contain a number of documents relating to this debate. In 1954, Redfield invited Lewis to come to Chicago to participate in a seminar, on which occasion he gave Lewis a copy of a manuscript on "The Little Community," in which he commented on Lewis's critique. In responding to the manuscript, Lewis agreed that "I was asking what makes Tepoztecan life unhappy because I thought you had already investigated the other question as to what makes them happy" and went on to defend his own use of models (RRP: OL/RR 4/25/54; cf. Rigdon 1988: 212-13). Two days later, Redfield responded as follows:

Yes, I think you did not quite see the conception of the ideal type as a mental device for asking questions along neglected lines. An ideal type suggests tentative statements about particular facts in particu-

lar places that can, of course, be proved or disproved. But the ideal type itself, as I understand it, makes no assertions.

I agree that a "model" usefully gives way to another. The time comes when the new model suggests questions that the old one failed to suggest -- creates new lines of inquiry. Then the new model needs to be made explicit. I think the ideal type of folk society is an extreme, or limiting case, consciously conceived, of a possible but non-existent real system. An ideal type is thus perhaps not the same kind of model as is the conception of the universe as a machine that developed in Newtonian physics. It is the very fact that the folk society is such an extreme or limiting conception -- inward-facing, all relations personal, etc. -- that gives the conception its power as a problem-raiser. To revise the extreme statement by qualifying it in directions suggested by real societies does not improve the usefulness of the conception it seems to me. . . .

I appreciate your friendly reaction to those pages in the Little Community manuscript about your Tepoztlán and mine. The more I think of it, the more wonderfully complex I see to be the factors that go to explaining the differences between the two accounts -- different questions asked; change in the community itself; great development in the science and art of study; personal differences between the investigators; and no doubt other elements beside. What a difficult business we are engaged in!

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