

## A Critical Essay on John H. Bodley's *Victims of Progress*<sup>1</sup>

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Let me begin this essay by using the words of the professor who gave me the opportunity to do this work. Peter W. Van Arsdale wrote in his review of the book *Traditional African Societies*: "One of the strongest endorsements that a book can receive is that other scholars not only begin using and citing it, but begin building their own research upon the ideas it contains, sometimes even in unexpected settings." Such is the case with Mayfield Publishing Company's third edition of *Victims of Progress*, by John H. Bodley.

*Victims of Progress* appeals to students of culture change, modernization, and economic development within tribal cultures. The book has also been widely used in introductory general and cultural anthropology courses when the instructor wished to present these topics in depth. Nevertheless, perhaps the reason for which this book has been edited three times is that Bodley's work continues to present a particular viewpoint on controversial issues, in other words, it continues to serve as a stimulus for debate. Clear arguments, abundant case materials and ample documentation provide solid bases for classroom discussion and encourage further reading.

As Bodley says in the introduction to this edition, industrial civilization is now completing the process of transformation and absorption or extermination of the world's tribal peoples and cultures that politically organized states have been carrying out for 6,000 years. According to many authorities within industrial civilization, this disappearance or drastic modification of these cultures is necessary for the "progress" of civilization and is inevitable, natural, and, in the long run, beneficial for the peoples involved. However, ironically, now that we foresee the imminent possibility of the disappearance of free tribal peoples, we are just beginning to realize the staggering worldwide costs of industrialization. It is increasingly apparent that civilization's "progress" destroys the environment as well as other peoples and cultures and that modern civilization may become a victim of its own progress. In view of this situation, we might question the wisdom of endorsing and encouraging the final disappearance of peoples who reject our "advances" and instead find

satisfaction in small-scale, relatively egalitarian ways of life which are geared more to the sustained use of natural resources.

Paradoxically, tribes were destroyed because global technological evolution outstripped social and political evolution in the twentieth century (p. 207). Today, only a few thousand independent tribals remain, and the debate goes on over how to deal with them. According to Bodley, a broader discussion of some specific issues, like ethnic and cultural diversity, local autonomy, social equality, and the preservation of natural ecosystems will benefit these remnant tribal groups, but will also be significant for the estimated 200 million indigenous peoples who now struggle to regain control over their lives and resources.

Safeguarding the rights of tribal and indigenous peoples to maintain their independent existence and manage their own natural resources represents genuine "progress" that in the long run will benefit the entire international community (p. 2). Nevertheless, it is the epistemological alienation of "human beings" where I find the problem.

The incredible concern that certain groups of indigenous and "native people" inspire among intellectuals, anthropologists and human rights activists (including, of course, John H. Bodley), and the artificial enthusiasm with which these intellectuals celebrate the involvement of indigenous people in politics -- as if they have never done it before and as if it were an inconceivable feat -- makes one think that human rights activists and the so-called defenders of the indigenous people, because of the noble nature of their concerns are far from any political interest, and, therefore, should be taken more seriously than politicians. But the intellectuals' good intentions are not enough.

To turn the problems of indigenous people into a human rights problem or violation, and then turn such violation into a political problem is "morally incorrect." It is as if it were obligatory to celebrate any cause claiming to support indigenous people, and suppose

that aside from the realities of western society, the indigenous people unanimously argue with the pretensions of their "defenders." Nevertheless, this leads one to think that the "defenders of the indigenous rights" are either intransigent pro-indigenous activists or merely racist criminals.

Bodley argues that the impact of modern civilization on tribal peoples has been a dominant research theme in anthropology, but in the past anthropologists often viewed it from the same ethnocentric premises accepted by government officials, developers, missionaries, and the general public. Surprisingly, anthropologists who "discovered" ethnocentrism and built their profession by scientifically documenting and analyzing tribal cultures and the process of their "modernization" too often took positions facilitating their destruction. Early on, some applied anthropologists attempted to reconcile the natives to the "inevitable" loss of their "maladaptive" cultures, often working to speed the process even as they eased some of the detrimental side effects. Unfortunately, many anthropologists disregarded their own humanistic admonitions concerning ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and the fundamental right of different lifestyles to coexist. They developed theoretical concepts and advanced seemingly "scientific" arguments masking the political realities of civilization's systematic destruction of tribal cultures.

However, Bodley says, since 1968 the situation has changed dramatically and is now in many ways more hopeful. Surviving tribals have not remained passive as states have enveloped them, instead, they have redefined themselves as "indigenous peoples" and have struggled with some success to retain their distinctive features. At the same time, many observers now recognize that the survival of tribal and indigenous peoples is, in fact, an international human rights issue.

Nevertheless, as I see it, Bodley's theoretical discourse or rhetoric, and his inclination to defend certain groups of indigenous people, reminds one (even today and against his own premise) of 16th century missionaries and their language of guilt and paranoia that is inappropriate for the political reality of this world. The concept of human rights as we currently know it is a product of late western civilization, although its principles and reasons are specifically targeted against western societies' "progress" and "modernity."

This hidden ambiguity is intrinsically behind the axiom: "all human beings have fundamental rights simply because they are human beings." The phrase serves as a motto that encapsulates the aspirations of the human rights activists, but at the same time, its own logic only has meaning in the moral language of western societies, where humanity becomes the radical criteria to decide legal and normative controversies. Even more, the intrinsic meaning of the concept of "universal or essential human rights" could only be understood under the frame of the western "way of life," which includes economic prosperity, access to education, and equality of opportunities. But the western moral language is neither universal nor essential, and it has been used for a long time as a means to justify atrocities.

Therefore, it is important to analyze this ambiguity; in other words, it is important to analyze the contradictions in the human rights rhetoric.

"Human rights essence" is a reaction to history and to the effects of progress and modernity, and is a consequence of demagoguery that serves as means to make credible the critical assumption: "Western societies are evil and oppressive, and therefore, other people's demands and ways of life could be better."

In my opinion, human rights are nothing but a vulgar version of multiculturalism and diversity that attacks modernity with political populist support. Human rights are, therefore, useful for intellectuals without a market or politicians without votes. Human rights are used as critics of a civilization, but at the same time -and because of their "impracticability"- they become part of a perpetual activism (an activism that could never finish because it could never be fully attended).

This logic complicates the problem even more because it could be argued that western civilization, far from being unique because of its racist, imperialist and colonialist inclinations, is unique for maintaining the utopic aspiration of equality, regarding universal human rights. Therefore, human rights are not the product of an intellectual or "human" relations evolution, but of the spiritual and affective emptiness generated by progress and modernity.

By accepting the notion of what is good and what is bad, and even worst, by accepting the idea of "rights," human rights activists are removing the human

conditions of those humans they are trying to help. Through this way of thinking, backwardness, misery, and needs of indigenous people would be the product of continuous western contamination. Nevertheless, the indigenous people's backwardness and misery are not only the product of their exploitation and colonization by the west, but also of their own customs and cultural characteristics. Therefore, human rights activist should consider the relativity of the indigenous backwardness and misery before they start to ask for "education" in a community that is not used to "education."

Before the logic and judicial opposition that exist in the use and customs of human rights, and considering their dysfunctional nature, I can say that human rights are nothing more than an evasion as a means to accept "de facto" and not only "de jure," the equality among human beings.

This manipulation in the conceptualization and use of human rights not only generates a rhetoric of "guilt" between those who violate and those who should defend human rights, but also provides "moral satisfaction" to those who promote them. Those who oppose the use of human rights are seen as a threat to humanity and to the universalization and proliferation of those rights. Therefore, it is not only hypocrisy or spiritual emptiness which drives human rights activists, but also solid political and economic interests.

Bodley says at the beginning of his short Preface that "the interactions between industrial nations and tribal cultures since 1830 is an unfortunate record of whole-sale cultural imperialism, aggression, and exploitation that has involved every major nation, regardless of differences in political, religious or social

philosophies. While blatant extermination policies have become relatively infrequent, basic native policies and the motives underlying them have changed little since the industrial powers began to expand more than 150 years ago. Today, however, many hopeful signs are appearing, especially at the international level."

And in a certain sense, Bodley is right: With the promotion of human rights, those who are "marginalized" by the system have always been the last to win; if we can say that sometimes they get to win something. Many anthropologists have found employment as consultants, advocacy promoters, experts or bureaucrats; important patrons of the political elite have also benefited from such processes, as have some agitators. But the indigenous and marginalized people around the world, living in the "first world" as well as in the "third," are still waiting to be treated as human beings. Therefore, I only hope that the "hopeful signs" seen by Bodley at the international level can finally bring the "quality" of human beings to those people: a "quality" based not on the use of rights, but on concrete actions. As I see it, human rights are only useful to reduce the violence that implies a superficial, abstract, and naked discussion about justice and equality generated by the very emptiness of our system. Ethnic and cultural diversity can only be reached in facts, never through law.

#### Notes

1. From Mayfield Publishing Co. Third edition published in 1990.
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