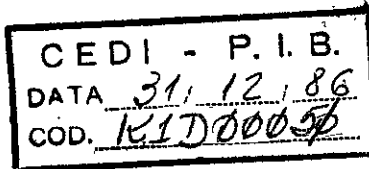


An anthropologist urges an examination of moral and political issues raised by modern development — before time runs out for some fellow peoples.



Societies on the brink

by David Maybury-Lewis

Small societies around the world are currently threatened with extinction. The threat, either implicit or explicit, that they must die so that we may live is something we normally conceal from ourselves under comfortable phrases like "the social costs of development," or "the price of progress." The assumptions behind this sort of thinking need to be examined.

We need first to try to develop some perspective on a problem that is often debated with considerable passion. If we consider the whole span of human history, then it is clear that the majority of the peoples of the world lived until quite recent times in relatively small and relatively isolated societies. The emergence of powerful tribes, nations, or empires threatened the physical existence and certainly the cultural continuity of smaller, weaker peoples. This is a process that is as old as humankind itself. What has rendered it more dramatic in recent centuries is the development of what we are pleased to call "Western technology." This placed the nations of Western Europe and, later, North America at an enormous advantage and hastened the process of physical and cultural extinction of weaker peoples. Even China, an ancient and powerful civilization which hardly qualifies as a small-scale society, was shaken to its very foundations by the impact of the West. It was able to recover because of its vast reserves, demographic and otherwise. Small societies cannot recover. Instead, they face destruction, either by physical extinction or by absorption into the larger ones that press in on them.

The process has long been recognized; scholars have tried to grapple with its implications since the earliest days of the European expansion. For a while it was a matter for serious debate whether humanoid creatures encountered in other lands were really humans at all. The people in the other lands were equally puzzled. A British party was at first kept in cages by the Singhalese, who tried to determine whether or not they were actually human. We have similar reports from other parts of the world. In fact, even when the conventional attributes of humanity were granted to alien peoples, debate still raged as to whether they were fully human and therefore entitled to fully human treatment (whatever that might be by the standards of the time and place). Thus it

became a matter of grave consequence whether they were or were not considered to be endowed with souls. Similarly, arguments raged as to whether peoples who apparently possessed the basic physical and mental equipment of human beings could nevertheless put themselves beyond the pale by practicing "inhuman" customs.

Cannibalism was usually regarded as one such practice. One can imagine with what *frisson* the Europeans of the sixteenth century read Hans Staden's *True History and Description of the Land of the Savage, Naked and Ugly Man-eating Peoples of the New World of America* (1557). The Tupinamba Indians, who once held Staden captive, regularly and ritually killed and ate their prisoners. It was considered a heroic death. A captive warrior, who in some cases might have been living with his captors for years and might even have raised a family there, was led out and clubbed to death in a ceremonial duel, after which the entire community ate him to partake of his heroic essence. Staden also pointed out that the same Tupinamba were horrified by the cruelty of the Europeans with whom they came in contact. They considered the Europeans to be in some sense beyond the pale because of their inhuman customs, such as the routine use of torture in trials and punishments, and the practice of slavery.

The relativistic implications of the Tupinamba view were not, unfortunately, taken seriously by European scholars. The debates concerning the essential humanity of alien peoples and the rights to which they were entitled were conducted in strictly European terms. Even when the arguments were genuine—as in the case of the famous series of debates before the Spanish crown be-

Opposite: In the northern Kalahari of Botswana, a San boy squeezes water from a grass sponge into his sister's mouth. The scene reflects the traditional San hunting-and-gathering way of life: the water comes from a depression in the trunk of a monongo tree, whose protein-rich nuts are a vital food source. In the years since this picture was taken, however, cultural change among the San has increased dramatically as a neighboring cattle-keeping people, the Herero, have encroached on their territories (see page 60).

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A Tasaday mother amuses her baby with a monkey skull. This tiny group, perhaps numbering no more than 100 when "discovered" in 1971, had lived isolated in the dense rain-forest uplands of Mindanao in the Philippines for 700 years or longer. Although the Filipino government established a forest reserve to protect them, logging interests still threaten their territory, and contact with the outside world has changed their lives.

tween Las Casas and Sepúlveda—the results were self-serving. When the debate went against the Indians, the local authorities considered that they had learned opinion on their side. When it came out favorably to the Indians, the local authorities refused to abide by its outcome. In the last analysis, the principal argument was power. The stronger tended to find justifications for using the weaker, or at the very least for making the weaker over in the image of the conqueror.

I have referred to these centuries-old arguments because modern versions of them still persist in our own thinking, both in our conventional wisdom and in the assumptions made by our theorists. On the one hand we have what may be called the liberal, neo-Darwinian view that small, weak societies are fated for extinction and that there is not much that can be done about it. Perhaps indeed, according to this view, there is not much that should be done about it, for why expend energy and resources in trying to interfere with irreversible processes that are part of the order of things? On the other hand, there is an orthodox Marxist position that holds that such societies are backward and out of step historically. They must therefore be assisted in getting in phase with history as rapidly as possible or they will be crushed by the relentless and irreversible force of historical process. But the results in practical terms of these two views are monotonously similar. Small societies are extinguished, culturally, or physically, or both.

These arguments are unsatisfactory. There is no natural or historical law that militates against small societies. There are only political choices. In fact the rhetoric of both the United States and the Soviet Union, to take the two strongest powers in the world today, stresses cultural pluralism as a goal for their own societies and indeed for the world at large. The fact that this rhetoric is not often put into practice is not a matter of natural or historical necessity but of political convenience.

A small society is of course a relative concept. Many nations are small compared with the superpowers but overwhelmingly large compared with some peoples in remote jungle regions who have just come into contact with the outside world. It is the societies at the lower end of this continuum with which I am primarily concerned, although the fact that it is a continuum and that the problem transcends the fate of isolated, tribal populations has certain implications, which I shall also discuss.

Anthropologists have often come to the defense of these tiny, tribal peoples. When they do, these anthropologists are normally attacked with a battery of arguments that need to be explicitly stated and examined.

First it is contended that anthropologists want tribal peoples left alone simply to preserve a traditional way of life. They therefore want to halt the push to explore and exploit the resources of the earth. They are sentimentalists who stand up for the right of a few to live their own lives in backwardness and ignorance as against the right of the many to use the resources available. Anthropologists are therefore the enemies of development.

This is a serious misrepresentation, which makes the defenders of the rights of small-scale societies seem like the nineteenth-century Luddites, who went around smashing machines in a futile effort to halt the Industrial Revolution. Whether isolated, tribal societies would be better off if the world left them alone is an academic matter. They are not going to be permitted to live in isolation. The people who speak up for them do not argue that they should be left alone or that all exploration and development should be halted. On the contrary; we assume that isolated societies will not be left alone and are therefore concerned with how to soften the impact of inevitable contact so that it will not destroy them in the name of progress. To return to the Luddite analogy for a moment, we do not try to stem the Industrial Revolution by breaking the machines. We accept its inevitability but question the necessity of chaining children to the machines (as was done in nineteenth-century England) as a means of capital formation.

A second argument is a malicious variation on the first one. According to that, it is claimed that anthropologists would like to keep tribal peoples isolated in what amount to human zoos for their own research purposes.

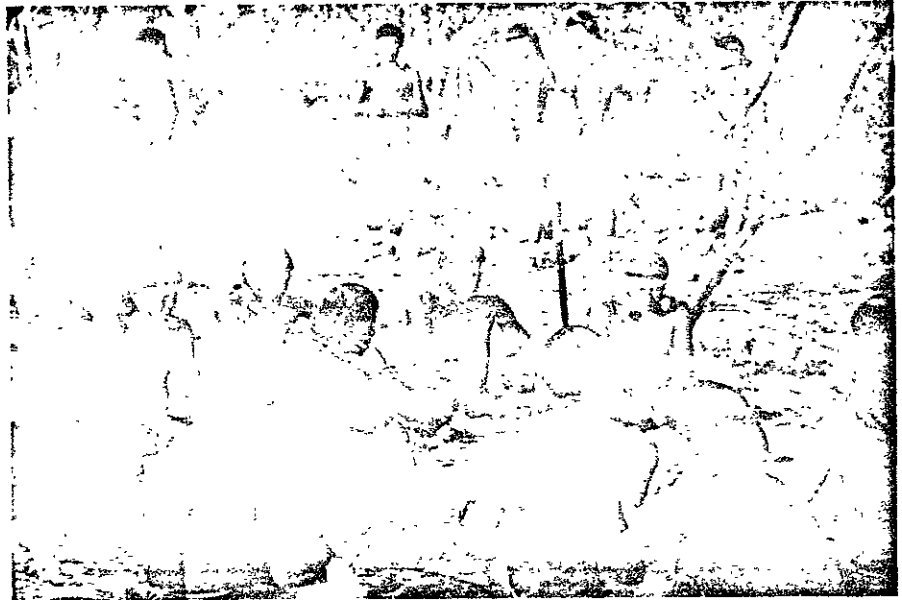
Again this is a misrepresentation. Anthropologists and others who take an interest in such small societies argue that these peoples' contacts with the outside world should be regulated if they are not to prove destructive. A small society must therefore have a guaranteed territory that it can call its own. This should not be a reservation in the sense that its inhabitants are confined to and imprisoned on it, but rather a home base, which the members of the society can use as a springboard in their efforts to come to terms with the outside world.

Another variation on these arguments stresses the immorality of preventing

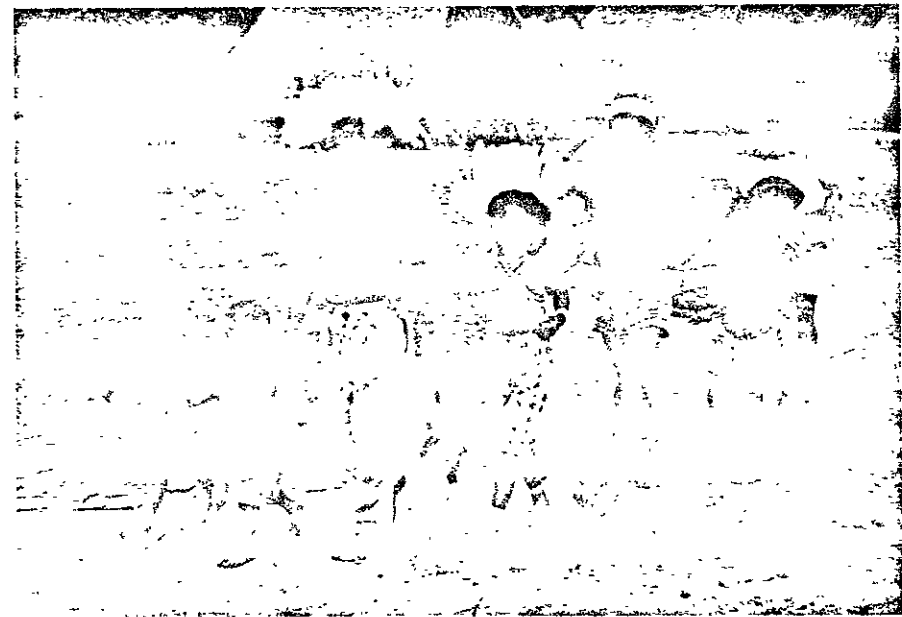
"backward" peoples from enjoying the benefits of civilization. Who, it is asked, has the right to insist that a relatively isolated society be left alone, to manage without modern medicine and modern consumer goods? Some ardent proponents of this theme wax so eloquent that they make the anxious anthropologist seem like a puritan who is determined to deny color TV to the natives. But the argument, once again, is a distortion of a position that gets little hearing.

Those people who are concerned about the effects of contact are merely urging caution, based on an understanding of the possible harmful effects of such contact. One would have thought that the grim historical record of death, disease, and despair that also accompany the arrival of civilization in remote areas would be sufficient grounds for advocating a cautious approach. We now know a good deal about the diseases that are introduced and we know too that they tend to be unremitting, while the provision of modern medicine is often fitful or inadequate. At a later stage in the process, we know too that the introduction of new industries in remote and not-so-remote areas can lead to cultural breakdown and personal despair within the local population *as well as* providing jobs, increasing income, and so on. This is a familiar dilemma even in advanced societies, which is why people are so anxious to have a say in what happens to their own communities. There is an uneasy suspicion that the arrival of, say, an oil refinery may on balance produce costs for the people of the community where it is located and benefits for people elsewhere. We understand this element of trade-off keenly enough in advanced societies and yet we often seek to impose oil refineries or their equivalents on societies much less able to cope with them. When the results are not cottages and TV sets but disruption and even death, we tend to shrug our shoulders and reassure ourselves that such costs are unavoidable. I am arguing here that this is not so, and that such costs can be minimized even if not avoided altogether.

But the most insidious argument used against those who speak up for small societies is insidious precisely because it seems so reasonable. Why, it is asked, should such societies be protected anyway? What are the advantages of protecting their way of life? There are in fact many that have been claimed. We can learn from their life styles, since we are clearly so desperately unhappy with our own. We can learn from their views of the world, particularly as concerns the general interrelatedness of things on



Above: Shavante men of the Brazilian highlands sing during a religious ceremony. The nineteenth-century Shavante moved from central Brazil to their present home to avoid the westward-moving "civilized" frontier; now further development of the interior pressures their society again. Below: Wearing white feathers, a Cashinahua boy and girl are ushered into adulthood by their Peruvian tribe—whose land has been assigned to an oil company, and whose customs are being altered by missionaries.



earth. Many Americans are, for example, discovering a harmony in American Indian views of the world which they find conducive not only to inner peace but also to a more effective use of the environment. There are other arguments that are frequently advanced as reasons for protecting the life style of small societies in different parts of the world. We need to do so in order to further our understanding of human cultural variation. We know too little about how societies work and about how they can be made to work *for* people rather than against them. Besides, it is claimed, the

members of the small society will be more useful citizens in the larger one if they come into it with something of their own heritage intact. Then, again, there may be genetic advantages in seeing that such groups are not physically extinguished, and so on.

But these are the wrong questions. Supposing we decided that we had nothing more to learn from small societies; that there was no particular genetic advantage in seeing them survive physically and no particular social or philosophical advantage in seeing them survive culturally. Would that then give us

the right to eliminate these cultures? Would we be willing to apply a similar reasoning to the sick, the weak, or the aged in our own culture? The question, put that way, is horrifying, which is precisely why I called the original question insidious. If we accept it as a legitimate question, then we find ourselves debating the question of whether it is *useful* to permit another culture to survive. But useful to whom? Presumably the usefulness of their physical and social existence is not in doubt for the members of that culture. What we are in fact debating is whether their existence is useful to *us*. Such thinking can lead to the gas chambers and has done so in our own time. That is why the original question is the wrong one. The fundamental reason why we must help other cultures to survive is because in all conscience we have no alternative. It is a moral imperative of the sort that insists that the strong ought not to trample on the rights of the weak.

Some writers have referred to the process by which a powerful society extinguishes a weaker culture as *ethnocide*, and have argued that this is (and should be recognized as) a crime analogous to genocide. I understand and sympathize with the passion that informs this view, but I find the formulation of it unhelpful. Homicide is hard enough to define and the arguments concerning the circumstances under which it may or may not be justified are complex. Genocide is even more difficult and its use as a term of opprobrium all too often depends on the point of view of the user. I find the concept of ethnocide more difficult still, and much too vague to be helpful. The moment of a culture's death, even more so than that of a person, is difficult to perceive. The manner of its passing, save in the most obvious cases, is hard to evaluate.

Take some hypothetical cases. A society may occupy the territory of another so that the members of the latter are deprived of their livelihood. Or it may send missionaries into a territory, who then seek to undermine the culture they find. Alternatively, a timber company may move into an area and pay the local people for cutting down the forests off which they have traditionally lived. Again, a new industry may move into an area and effect profound changes in its way of life. Now, all of these changes have some disruptive effect on the local

Opposite: A San woman winnows corn in a Herero village, earning milk, corn, or perhaps a goat or cow in return. The change in life style from that shown on page 57 is evident.

culture. At the same time all of them, save presumably the first instance, bring some benefits. How is one to decide on the precise ratio of costs to benefits that constitutes ethnocide? Indeed, how does one deal with the paradox of a society that may collaborate in its own ethnocide, permitting its culture to be extinguished in exchange for the benefits obtained from another society? In my view, the concept of *ethnocide* is too much of an either/or, life-or-death concept, and does little to help us understand situations where often it is not clear how to knock the gun out of the murderer's hand, or even who the murderer is or which is the gun.

I would insist instead that we are dealing with processes of contact and rapidly induced change that have in the past been known to have serious and even fatal consequences. The problem then is how to soften the contact and how to regulate the change so that its consequences for the small societies are minimally harmful. We are seeking to minimize the costs and to maximize the benefits for the people contacted.

This is not easy to do, however, since the benefits usually accrue to the wider society while the costs are borne largely by the contacted culture. We are thus dealing with a problem as old as humankind itself, namely that of protecting the weak against the strong. It is a problem that is unlikely to disappear and for which there are no easy solutions. Yet there are some things that can be done.

In the first place it is important to insist, as I have done here, on the right of other societies to their own ways of life. Such an insistence is not banal. This right is neither generally accepted nor generally understood. That is why it must be established that small-scale societies are not condemned to disappear by the workings of some abstract historical process. On the contrary, small societies may be shattered and their members annihilated, but this happens as a result of political choices made by the societies that impinge upon them, and for which the powerful must take responsibility. It is not, in any case, inevitable. The smaller societies can be assisted to deal with the impact of the outside world at comparatively little cost to those who bear down upon them. We have now come to recognize the principle that it is reasonable to set aside some part of the profits from the extraction of resources from the earth to be used to offset the ecological damage that may have been done in the process of extracting them. A similar understanding of the human costs of development and a

willingness to deal with them is all that is necessary.

Such understanding and willingness cannot be taken for granted. It has to be cultivated and the attempt to cultivate it will not always be successful. It is unlikely, for example, that anybody, however eloquent or theoretically brilliant, could have convinced Hitler of the right of German Jews to their own cultural integrity. In such cases there may be no redress other than warfare or revolution. In many instances, however, the ways of persuasion have hardly been tried, and it is largely out of ignorance that planners make decisions that have such fatal costs for the small societies caught up in their plans. It is therefore vital that anthropologists and others concerned about the problem make people aware of its dimensions and point out that the cost of assisting small societies to become successful ethnic minorities is a comparatively small one, which may well be offset in the long run by the benefits the wider society will reap as a result.

Of course, attempts to protect threatened small-scale societies will not always be successful. The politics of some situations indicate that the minorities are doomed, if not physically, then at least as distinct cultures or subcultures. Yet this is no reason to abandon the effort in despair, any more than we abandon the efforts to avoid war or to construct just societies because these efforts are so often frustrated. I consider the effort to protect the cultural integrity of small-scale societies an issue of equal importance. We are talking not merely about the fate of tiny enclaves of people, buried in the last jungle refuges of this earth. What we are really talking about is the ability of human beings to discover ways to live together in plural societies. It seems to me that this is the critical issue of our times. Our success or failure in this endeavor may well decide whether people anywhere will be able to live in societies based on a minimum of mutual tolerance and respect. The alternatives are unpleasant to contemplate. □

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