

CULTURE AND CONQUEST:  
THE MULTINATIONAL CORPORATE CHALLENGE TO NATIVE RESOURCE CONTROL:  
HYDROELECTRICS AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN SOUTH AMERICA

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Most of the most powerful cultures in the world today have not shown very much tolerance for other ways of life. Religiously, economically, politically and physically, they have almost without exception attempted to destroy, dominate, assimilate, or remake into their own image, whenever they could, those other cultures with which they have come into contact.<sup>1</sup> We should not expect that they could be changed very easily from this direction, for it is too powerful a part of their make-up, it is too basic to their self-image as all-powerful and as always right. For them to be truly tolerant of others' rights would threaten too greatly their self-righteous sense of justice, since it would amount to an admission of guilt about their past.

Not only is it probably fair to say that most members of the dominant world cultures feel little or no guilt for their past or present treatment of indigenous or minority groups, it is also probably fair to say that, even if some major cataclysm should bring them to feel that they may have done wrong some place and some time, this feeling will be specific to only

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<sup>1</sup>  
E.g., John H. Bodley's Victims of Progress; Menlo Park, Calif.: Cummings, 2nd. ed., 1982; Shelton Davis' Victims of the Miracle, N. Y. and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; and Western Expansion and Indigenous Peoples, edited by Elias Sevilla-Casas, The Hague: Mouton, 1977.

that one historical moment, which can then be defined as only a temporary aberration, as a deviation from their normal path of righteousness, to which they will of course return soon if only their older values are reborn in even purer form. For example, the Germans and the Japanese could not tolerate the idea that WWII, nor Americans that Vietnam, was an indication of their true colors; that all of them have recovered from those errors is, of course, now shown by their rewritten history books. So, the Japanese and the Germans and the Americans can still teach their children that their own ways of life, their basic traditions and beliefs, are uniquely the best. By definition, therefore, all others are not as good. Also by definition, and as shown by history, those inferior others are likewise fair game for exploitation by the former, whether to satisfy their evangelical religious needs, their expansionist economic needs, or their geopolitical "defensive" needs. Quite simply, might, in their minds, makes right.

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See, for example, Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Identity, edited by Carola Sandbacka, Helsinki: Transactions of the Finnish Anthropological Society no. 2, 1978. Of course, there are within each of these cultures some individuals who do not fit their general cultural mold, who do not believe in the exploitation of one culture by another, for example. However, these people are themselves a minority within their own culture and represent a deviation from those norms. Historically, they do not exemplify those cultures' major tendencies, nor are they likely to be very instrumental in reshaping them in the future. Leslie White made this point a long time ago, in his article "Ikhnaton: The Great Man Versus the Culture Process" in his The Science of Culture, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1949, pp. 233-281.

This is not, however, a problem of individual psychology which a large number of psychiatrists might cure, nor is it a problem of a particular moment which the passage of time might cure, rather it is a problem of culture - of an extremely old set of traditions which have oriented these peoples for a long time, continue to orient them now, and will undoubtedly orient them far into the future unless they are shaken to their very roots and rebuilt in a NEW mode. Simply reviving the old ones won't help.

Simultaneously, while these cultures have always dominated and exploited those others with whom they have come into contact, they have also superficially fostered an image of the romantic or the exotic about them, to focus attention on how poor, backward, dangerous, and different these peoples are or were, the better to justify their treatment today, by which they say they are only trying to "upgrade" or "improve" them. Since their own religions aren't good enough, they must be missionized; since their own political structures aren't good enough, they must be communized or democratized; since their own production and distribution techniques aren't good enough, they must be "collectivized" or "capitalized"; since their own food and clothing (or lack of it) and music and everything else they have is not good enough - in other words, isn't like that of the cultures which dominate them - it must be changed "for

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I show this, for example, in my article "Why I Am Against a National Indian Museum" ("Por que Sou Contra um Museu Nacional do Indio"), published in issue 23 of the Boletim de Ciências Sociais of the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brasil (October-December 1981, pp. 1-6), regarding the native peoples of Brazil.

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their own good".

So the philosophy of the "white man's burden" (please note that this is in no way the exclusive property of Caucasians) is still with us, only now overlain with at least a touch of fear, since the most powerful cultures of the world now realize that the demographic numbers game eventually may be stacked against them - that there may be more "minority" peoples in the world today than they wish to know about and even more coming in the future if "their" population is not controlled. (Even their family and reproductive life is not good enough, anymore.) Furthermore, with the export of the powerful cultures' surplus weaponry to these other peoples, for whatever reason, they increasingly fear (and increasingly find) that their own weapons may be used against them.

It is therefore not unlikely that the generalized and historic intolerance shown by dominant cultures for peoples with other ways of life will increase in

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It would be inconsistent with any culture's self image to admit that it was acting against another's welfare, unless (as in the case of war) that were necessary for some overriding human value (such as "democracy", "Christianity", or "our" survival where "they" are only "dogs", "pigs", or "vermin" who need to die). Even the competition of unbridled capitalism supposedly benefits everyone through the principle of comparative advantage by specialization. Every culture's rhetoric therefore will be unassailable: what is done for another will always be "for their own good". This is shown, for example, in my recent article on the control of tourism in native areas of Brazil - "What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You", in the special Summer 1982 issue of the Cultural Survival Quarterly (volume 6, number 3, pp. 20-21) on tourism's effects on native peoples.

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the near future, rather than the opposite.

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In Latin America today, as elsewhere, immense energy and mineral resources lie on lands presently used by or claimed by native peoples of these areas. Many native peoples' lands sit astride transportation and communications pathways considered (by national and international developers) critical for the expansion of some national or international enterprise, even in some cases for the social and/or (more likely) the fiscal solvency of an entire nation or region.

As I have shown elsewhere, hydroelectric power plants planned or under construction by 1980 alone threatened more than 30 Indian peoples in Brazil.

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At the same time, political rhetoric to the contrary will actually increase, in an attempt to preserve the veneer of self-respectability and self-righteousness which all cultures like to believe constitutes their true character. This has often accompanied periods of greater exploitation or repression by or within such cultures in the past.

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These projects and the peoples they will affect are discussed in my Indian Areas Threatened by Hydroelectric Projects in Brazil (co-authored with Dr. Silvio Coelho dos Santos), published by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (Copenhagen, Denmark) in October, 1981 (IWGIA Document Series, Document no. 44). Those in southern Brazil are also discussed in the article I wrote with Dr. Santos on the "Uruguay Basin Project: Damming the Indians of Southern Brazil", published in the Anthropology Resource Center/ARC Newsletter, volume 3, number 4, December 1979, p. 6.

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Additional projects keep cropping up in the media at a dizzying pace.

The only real question is which and how many of them ultimately will be built, and in what order, and which and how many Indian people will be seriously affected, before the money runs out.

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An article in the Estado de Sao Paulo newspaper, for August 25, 1981, for example, said that 21 hydroelectric dams were presently under study for the Brazilian Amazon Basin, potentially affecting as many as 27,000 native people. Some of these dams were already included in my 1981 study (mentioned in note 6, above), some are multiple-dam projects rather than single dams, and some will never be built for various reasons, including overlapping other projects in existence or planned for the same areas. However, the total threat is clearly enormous. (This article is reprinted in the latest edition of Aconteceu: Povos Indigenas no Brasil/1981 - Sao Paulo: Centro Ecumenico de Documentacao e Informacao, April 10, 1982, p. 39 - which compiles news articles about the native peoples in Brazil each year.)

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The politics and international economics of these energy development projects affecting the native peoples of Brazil are discussed in my article, "Too Much Light: Hydroelectric Development in Brazil", published in the Anthropology Resource Center/ARC Bulletin no. 11 (May, 1982) pp. 9-14.

The Brazilian Constitution makes it quite clear that native peoples will have to move or relinquish control of areas considered to be in the national interest.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, it is in Brazil's national interest (as the leaders of Brazil define it) as an expanding capitalist culture, to exploit to the utmost the fiscally cheapest energy sources available to run its machines. With little coal, oil, or natural gas, but with huge untapped river systems, hydroelectric power seems to them to be "obviously" "the best way to go".<sup>10</sup> Quite clearly, no major hydroelectric facility's construction will be held back very long because of the existence of some native or indigenous group in the area (even uncontacted, isolated peoples may be flooded without any warning).

Present Brazilian law sanctions the exploitation or removal of native peoples for this purpose. Ultimately, of course, the Brazilian government could declare almost anything to be in the "national interest", so the exploitation of native peoples' water and energy resources for hydroelectric

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<sup>9</sup> Legal aspects of the development of energy resources or other projects affecting native peoples in Brazil are discussed in my chapter on "Social Impact Assessment in Hydroelectric Power Development in Southern Brazil" in the book on Indian SIA: The Social Impact Assessment of Rapid Resource Development on Native Peoples (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Natural Resource Sociology Research Lab Monograph no. 3; pp. 338-370), edited by Charles C. Geisler, et al.

<sup>10</sup> This is debated in my article "Why Construct Dams in Indian Areas" ("Para Que Construir Barragens em Areas Indigenas") Journal of the Santa Catarina State Engineering Association (Jornal da Associacao Catarinense de Engenheiros), volume 22, pp. 8ff., 1981.

power is only one of the many possible ways the native peoples in Brazil may be exploited under this law. (The same situation, of course, also pertains in many other countries; I <sup>merely</sup> use Brazil and the native peoples there as examples of the more general point I wish to make here.)

Some people believe that present Brazilian law also provides some basic protections for and restitution to the native peoples there for losses they might incur as a result of these or other development projects.<sup>11</sup> However, it should be quite clear by now/<sup>that</sup> any such "loopholes" or other beneficial provisions of law will only be tolerated by those who wrote them to begin with - i.e. the governing strata of the nation - as long as they do not become too onerous at any one time and as long as they fit into the general historic pattern for dominant/minority relations in such cultures, that is to say, as long as they continue to gradually diminish the long-run viability of the native peoples, to take from them more than they get in exchange, to bleed them dry drop by drop. Quite clearly, if the native peoples ever should begin to get the best of the deal, or even a fair deal, or if it ever even began to look like they might, those loopholes would disappear, the beneficial laws would be changed, the constitution would be amended or ignored, or suspended or replaced by an entirely new one.<sup>12</sup> Because, if ever

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For example, Dennis Werner's article on "Indians and Dams - a General Perspective" ("Indios e Barragens - Uma Perspectiva Global"), in issue number 24 of the Boletim de Ciencias Sociais of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (Brasil), January-March 1982, pp. 26-33. See also the reference in note 9, above.

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See, for example, Eva Solem, "Norway Supreme Court Rejects Sami Appeals Over Alta Case", IWGIA Newsletter no. 30 (April 1982), pp. 103-106 and Robert Paine, Dam A River, Damn a People? (Saami Lapp Livelihood, the Alta/Kautokeino Hydroelectric Project and the Norwegian Parliament), IWGIA Document no. 45 (June 1982), Copenhagen: IWGIA, esp. p. 95.



these native peoples should gain fully fair treatment in one area, it would open the door to similar fair treatment in other areas, and to similar fair treatment for other minority peoples there or under the domination of the particular dominant culture in question, elsewhere. The ultimate result of such unchecked successes on the part of the native peoples would, of course, be that the dominant peoples would have nobody left to exploit. This they would not tolerate, to be sure.

Nobody likes to admit/<sup>it,</sup> because it sounds somehow threatening to "the powers that be", but the success of the native peoples' movement IS a threat to the continued existence of the cultures which presently dominate them and to the multinational system which these dominant cultures have built. For, in the end, the success of the native peoples' movement would mean a fair deal, a fair share, for everybody, whereas the presently dominant cultures and their multinational system are built on and dedicated to principles exactly the opposite - to inequality, competition, dominance, control and exploitation of others "for their own good".<sup>13</sup>

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This idea is further discussed in my "The Indian in the Face of the Law, or the Logic and Coherence of Cultural Codes" ("O Indio Perante o Direito, ou a Logica e Coerencia dos Codigos Culturais"), Boletim de Ciencias Sociais of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (Brasil), January-March 1981, pp. 1-14.

It is therefore not on the multinational corporate control of world resources that I suggest we should focus our primary concern here. Rather, I suggest we need to look more closely at the cultural conditions and traditions which have led to the creation of such multinational institutions in the first place and supported their operations subsequently. Otherwise, we risk attacking what is only a symptom instead of its true cause. The multinational corporate structure is only one manifestation or aspect of their cultures' general ethic of domination. Unless that supporting cultural ethic can be broken, the system may be incurable, after all.