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President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



Lesson from Another Land

A Catholic priest friend returned recently from a summer of missionary work in a Central American country. He recounted some experiences that I think should be instructive for all of us.

Having been posted to a small, very poor town on the Pacific coast, my friend found himself in a world that bore little relation to anything he had known before. From his bed one night he could hear gunfire from the nearby hills as Marxist guerrillas fought government troops, and he worried. His apprehensions were well-founded. Many religious have been killed in the internecine fighting in this region, frequently as partisans of one side or the other but sometimes as innocent victims targeted for their publicity value.

Adding to my friend's discomfort was his inability to know which of the people with whom he worked by day might be slipping into the hills to play a more deadly role by night. But while much was hidden, other things were obvious.

In that country, he noted, there are three well-defined groups of people, among whom there is almost no social interaction or intermingling. At the top of the social structure are those of Spanish descent, who possess virtually all of the wealth and political power. The other groups are the Indians and those of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry, called *Ladinos*.

Compared with the Spanish ruling class, both the Indians and the *Ladinos* can be described as poor and politically impotent. Despite these similarities their lives have little else in common.

The *Ladinos*, among whom my friend worked, live in squalor. Sanitary habits are nonexistent. Child mortality is rampant. The vacant eyes of both children and adults convey resignation and hopelessness.

The Indians, too, are financially limited, whether judged by American standards or those of the ruling class in their own country. Most live in small, one-room houses and have

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NHI Notes . . .

Named to NHI's Board of Trustees recently is **Clyde A. Sluhan**, chairman and chief executive officer of the Perrysburg, Ohio-based Master Chemical Corporation. Mr. Sluhan has been a longtime supporter of NHI in part because of his conviction that the traditional morality of self-restraint and love of neighbor must be revitalized before political approaches to society's problems can be effective. . . . NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn** addressed the Heritage Foundation September 27 on the subject of his most recent book, *The New Jacobinism*. The book has been mentioned in several hundred newspapers across the U.S. and has attracted major attention in Europe. . . . On September 28 Ryn and NHI President **Joseph Baldacchino** joined a group of writers and scholars in discussing the life and work of the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1891-1976). . . . Just published by Praeger is *The Challenge of Populism: The Rise of Right-Wing Democratism in Postwar America*, by **Michael P. Federici**, assistant professor of political science at Concord College and former executive assistant at NHI.



NHI Panel on History and Universal Values

Addressing an American Political Science Association meeting in Washington August 30 were (from left) Greg Butler, Claes Ryn, James Miclot, and Michael P. Federici. Not shown are Paul Gottfried and H. Lee Cheek. See page 2.

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few material possessions. They are isolated from their country's politics and want to keep it that way. Preferring their own language, the men speak Spanish only for business purposes, the women essentially not at all.

Yet the Indians are contented, healthy, and blessed with good sanitary habits. They are also remarkably productive, and their economic conditions are improving. Their traditional adobe huts with dirt floors, for example, are being replaced gradually by cinder-block huts with concrete floors.

Since the Indians, like the *Ladinos*, are neither wealthy nor politically influential, what accounts for the sharp contrast in the two groups' living standards? A major factor, my friend observed, is that the Indians, proud descendants of the Mayan civilization, have traditions and customs that give them a sense of who and why they are — elements that are noticeably absent among the *Ladinos*.

Yet, ironically, the very folkways that serve the Indians well are under assault from without. The politicians resent their separatism since it makes the Indians hard to control or to mobilize politically. The Indians are under continuing pressure from government functionaries to abandon their own language in favor of Spanish, to give up their distinctive dress, and, in general, to blend into the larger society.

Nor is the government alone in this push. Considerable numbers of missionary priests and sisters, largely from the U.S. and Canada, view the Indians' way of life as insufficiently "progressive" and miss few opportunities to

drive this point home.

But the question should be asked: If the Indians' faith in their old ways is shaken, if they chase after the will-o'-the-wisp ideological notions being pressed upon them by outsiders, what will it profit them? If they lose their distinctiveness and become part of the general mass of their country, will it be as members of the ruling elite? Or is it not more probable — indeed, certain — that they will sink into the malaise and despair that are already the lot of their mixed-blood *Ladino* neighbors?

I raise these points, first, because they serve as a reminder that we of the industrialized West don't have all of the answers for other cultures; and we should not, like would-be dictators, meddle in unfamiliar territory.

But one does not have to travel to exotic places to discover customs and old ways — often unspoken, but no less real — that give direction to our lives, and order, and a sense of higher purpose. Traditionally, such customs have been all around us here at home where we live and work, but, as with the Indians of that Central American country, so, too, our own heritage is taking a relentless pounding from the forces of abstract ideology.

Yet the very pervasiveness of our own communal habits — our lack of any experience without them — has led us to ignore their importance and even to overlook their existence until they are in danger of being lost irretrievably. That they are actually being lost today is shown by the fact that, while ideologues celebrate social progress, the lives of individual Americans are increasingly lacking in structure and deeper fulfillment.

NHI Sponsors APSA Panel

In conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association from August 29-September 1, the National Humanities Institute sponsored a panel discussion on "Historicism and Political Theory."

Much contemporary debate on the subject of moral universality has pitted those who hold that all morality is merely subjective against those who argue that there is a transcendent morality which inheres in theoretical "principles" and can be known to man through abstract rationality. The NHI panelists considered a third possibility: that transcendent morality exists and becomes known to man in concrete experience.

As Claes G. Ryn, NHI chairman and professor of politics at The Catholic University of America, put it in his paper on "History and the Universal," "normative authority, insofar as it is known to man, resides in historical particularity."

Other papers delivered were Michael P. Federici, assistant professor of political science at Concord College, on "Hegel, Burke, and Historicism"; Greg Butler, assistant professor of government at New Mexico State University, on "George Grant and the Problem of History"; and James M. Miclot, David A. Scott Scholar in Political Theory at NHI and assistant professor of government at the College of William and Mary, on "Benedetto Croce, Historicism, and Liberalism."

Discussants were Paul Gottfried, professor of humanities at Elizabethtown College, and H. Lee Cheek, editor of *Humanitas*.

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