

## **In Memoriam of Tom Hoffman**

Many of us greatly miss Thomas J. Hoffman, who at 62 walked on July 27, 2013. Tom taught political science at St. Mary's University in San Antonio Texas for 31 years, where he is remembered as an excellent teacher and advisor, and a very fine human being. Tom, who studied with Vine Deloria, was for many years at the heart of the Western Social Science Association Meeting's American Indian Studies Section, which Vine launched. Tom regularly contributed to annual discussions of American Indian religion, and in more recent years with analysis of Vine's work. When we meet at WSSA, and go for our annual barbeque dinners, there will always be a special place for Tom.

## **The Metaphysics of Modern Existence: A Spragens Analysis**

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Thomas Spragens in *Understanding Political Theory* outlines a framework by which we can understand the thought process of the writers of political philosophers. He helps us to discover the "logic in use" that they follow in the formulation of their political theories. I have applied Spragens' framework to the reading Deloria's *Metaphysics of Modern Existence*. Before applying that framework it is appropriate to explain the major features of Spragens' analytic technique.

There are four stages to the Spragens framework:

1. description of the problem;
2. diagnosis of the problem;
3. reconstruction of the polis;
4. prescriptions.

What each of these stages do can be expanded upon.

1. description of the problem: explains what the disorder in the "body politic" consists of;
2. diagnosis of the problem: inquires into the roots of the disorder. Makes this inquiry by trying to answer two questions:
  - a. are the roots of the problem personal or general?
    - i. If personal, no responses is necessary;
    - ii. if general, then a social or political response is necessary;
  - b. are the roots of the problem natural or artificial?
    - i. if natural, the best response is to try to contain the problem;
    - ii. if artificial, it is in human power to change it.
3. reconstruction of the polis: the changes in the "body politic" that are appropriate, depending upon the diagnosis:
  - a. conservative reconstruction: based upon things that worked in the past, can lead to stagnation;

- b. radical reconstruction: attempt to remove the problem by going to its roots, with the advantage of being profound and comprehensive; however it can exceed people's grasp;
  - c. pragmatic reconstruction: piecemeal reform; an approach which is flexible, but also can lack foresight.
4. prescriptions: the steps we need to take to deal with the problem (contain, eliminate, adjust to):
- a. assess potential, possibility, necessity, and boundaries of reality;
  - b. make positive prescriptions—what political arrangements want, which are possible, and which are necessary;
  - c. make negative prescriptions—what arrangements are irrational or beyond reach.

Now that we have an understanding of Spragens' framework we can now apply it to Deloria's *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*.

Vine Deloria, Jr. (1979), in *the Metaphysics of Modern Existence* provides an exposition of the major differences between Western and Non-Western views of nature. He contends that the disorder present in today's world stems from a lack of a unified vision of reality, the lack of a metaphysics. There is a fragmentation of knowledge, a lack of a full understanding of the multifaceted nature of life. Modern people need to search for the structure and meaning of reality, i.e., we need to devise a "metaphysics of modern existence".

Deloria describes the various sources of this disorder. In his diagnosis he notes that much of the problem is rooted in some Western views. He describes five causes. First, in Western religions the world is viewed in one of two ways--it is not "good" or humans are superior to the rest of nature. As Diana Coole (1993, p. 2) puts it, "Western thought generally.... relies on.... dualistic foundations, where knowledge and citizenship are equally grounded in hierarchical oppositions that value mind over body, culture over nature, reason over emotion, order over chaos, transparency over opacity." These views contribute to the attitude that nature can be exploited to fulfill human needs. Second, as a result of Darwinism, humanity is seen as the pinnacle of evolution. Thus, humans do not need to be in concert with nature. Indeed, they need not be in concert with other humans, since competition (in Darwinism) rather than cooperation is a primary force. Third, the Western view of history negates the value of immediate experience. Fourth, Western science leaves out data which do not fit the criteria of the "scientific method." Fifth, the Western divisions between space and time, objectivity and subjectivity (although they allow the creation of modern technology), lead to a loss of the spiritual dimension of life.

Deloria also envisions a reconstruction of the world in which those things missing from the Western view could be reintegrated. Nature should be respected and given its rights. Knowledge can be reunified if all data are allowed. The world could become humane if personal rights are allowed and positive freedom is promoted. The material benefits of Western technology and the spiritual benefits of Non-Western approaches to reality could be enjoyed. Once again community would be rediscovered in this reconstructed polis.

Deloria carefully examines Western and Non-Western approaches to reality. Western peoples have the attitude that they can exploit the environment. However, this reality is crumbling. He (1979) notes that other human societies interpret through nature: "It is the apprehension of reality emerging from an experience of the power of things, therefore, that encourages some human societies to interpret reality

through nature" (p. 22). He (1979) explains: "In other words, a community of experience is created through an encounter with the numinous quality of life that is manifested in all life-forms, and humans are seen as another species rather than as an exalted, alienated species unrelated to the rest of creation. Immediate involvement in nature and natural processes orients humans to the reality of existences as it is experienced" (p. 22). He (1979) characterizes the Western approach in the following way:

*... interpreting reality through the use of history as the highest category involves a determination that the recorded experiences of the human species, and only the human species, is sufficient to interpret the meaning of the rest of creation. Nonhuman life-forms and the passage of time itself become processes that exist for the benefit of the human species rather than as ends in themselves (p. 23).*

He (1979) proposes a synthesis: "The proper approach to interpreting reality is most probably a combination of nature and history that recognizes the value in the ongoing processes and life-forms of nature while making a serious effort to derive meaning from the passage of time directed in an irreversible forward sequence" (p. 30).

Deloria (1979) contrasts Western and Non-Western views of the universe, property and the world of experience. These differing views demonstrate a disunity in visions of reality.

The most prominent division existing among members of our species is in the approach to the kosmos. Two major attitudes can be distinctly outlined and they conflict both in theory and practice. The kosmos can be viewed on the basis of its manifestation of energy and personality, which can be explained as spiritual activity; or the kosmos can be seen as a complicated structure, devoid of personality, and operating as a relentless machine, uncompromising toward human efforts to find meaning (p. 33).

The former approach is characteristic of Non-Western peoples, while the latter approach is characteristic of Western peoples. Derivative of these views are attitudes towards property. The Non-Western approach leads to a respect for nature. Deloria (1979) points out that the Western approach leads to a notion of property that does not hold respect for nature. "Our present conception of property revolves around our use of it, not around its existence as an element of the universe in its own right. Nature has no rights of its own in our legal system. If our legal system reflects our view of reality, then we believe that we exist over and apart from the physical world" (p. 135). Western and Non-Western views of experience are at variance. The Western approach bifurcates experience into spiritual and material realms. Deloria (1979) contrasts this with the Non-Western approach: "Primitive people do not differentiate their world of experience into two realms that oppose or complement each other. They seem to maintain a consistent understanding of the unity of all experience" (p. 151). He continues "Their failure or refusal to differentiate subjective from objective, spiritual from material, seems to form the basic difference that separates them from us.... Thus it is with the most common feature of primitive awareness of the world--the feeling or belief that the world is energized by a pervading power" (p. 152). As Griffin-Pierce (1996) points out "Tribal languages lack a word for 'religion'; the term 'sacred' is more appropriate because it conveys the reverence for all living beings that underlies native rituals" (p. 16).

A key difference between Westerners and Non-Western peoples is that Westerners see themselves as dominating or controlling nature. Kellert (1993) points out that "... in order to satisfy a cultural and economic interest in dominating nature, science sought predictable, regular behavior" (p. 155). He indicates that "One of the strongest metaphors operating in science is the image of the universe as a machine and the scientist as an investigator seeking to discover its hidden workings.... But the vision of the world as a clockwork mechanism implies that physical matter is inert and dead" (p. 156). This approach is not shared by Non-Western people. Fitzgerald (1991) reports that Thomas Yellowtail affirms that "Man must realize that his importance is nothing compared to Nature and that the sacred realities are even much greater than Nature" (p. 20). Deloria (1979) writes:

All species, all forms of life, have equal status before the presence of the universal power to which all are subject. The religious requirements for all life-forms is thus, harmony, and this requirement holds for every species, ours included. The natural world has a great bond that brings together all living entities, each species gaining an identity and meaning as it forms a part of the complex whole. If ever there were a truly evolutionary theological position, primitive peoples would represent it (pp. 153-154). Westerners and Non-Westerners have two radically different perceptions of nature. A need for dialogue is clear. However, Deloria (1995) suggests:

Two things need to be done, in my opinion, before there can be any exchange of views between American Indians and Western science. First, corrective measures must be taken to eliminate scientific misconceptions about Indians, their culture, and their past. Second, there needs to be a way that Indian traditions can contribute to the understanding of scientific beliefs at enough specific points so that the Indian traditions will be taken seriously as valid bodies of knowledge (p. 60).

## References

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