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Coles: The Old Ones of New Mexico

REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

The Old Ones of New Mexico. Robert Coles. Photographs by Alex Harris. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973. 74 pp., 40 photographs. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Edward T. Hall¹
Northwestern University

To the Spanish Americans of New Mexico, there are two kinds of books: those by insiders and those by outsiders. *The Old Ones* is by an outsider. However, an unwary reader could be misled into believing that the people Coles interviewed—an old woman, a storekeeper, an ex-janitor-farmer, and a priest—are really presenting an inside view of Spanish American village life in New Mexico, for on first perusal one is left with the impression that Coles learned something. As a matter of fact, this impression prevailed among the outsiders (predominantly Anglo) whom I interviewed about *The Old Ones*. Almost without exception they liked the book and said something to the effect that “this was a true to life picture.” They then commented on how well the book was written. It seems, therefore, that if you are a liberal middle-class Anglo, the chances are that you will find yourself responding as many such do, and will accept this book at face value.

As to Coles' proficiency as a writer, judging writing is like judging art. One hesitates to criticize a “Pulitzer Prize” winner for his writing, but this reviewer, having subjected Coles' book to an old but reliable test, found the writing wanting. The test is simplicity itself—does the writing improve or appear to deteriorate with each reading? Most slick writing must stand up through at least the first reading, and may stand a second, while only exceptional writing reveals new insights, subtleties, and discoveries with each successive reading. Some of the problem stems from the fact that Coles was translating from Spanish to English, and Coles himself admits to “broken or at best passable” Spanish (p. xv). Several of my informants, the ones who really know New Mexico, had never heard anyone talk the way Coles has his subjects talking.

I do not want to give the impression that I am simply “out to get Coles.” Far from it. His stated intentions are good, and I laud his concern for children and old people. I agree with his introductory observations that the “gente” are “strong, proud, vigorous, independent.” I am not taking issue with Coles personally or even with his manifest goals. Mine is a deeper, subtler, more insidious target. I want to speak for people everywhere against the kind of cultural imperialism—the naive meddling—the unstated sense of superiority, and the condescension of the American intellectual establishment whenever they discover something different which they think they understand when quite clearly they do not. As a resident of New Mexico for over 50 years, I have found much to

object to in the traditional Anglo intellectual's view of our Southwestern ethnic groups—be they Indian or Spanish. These outside experts all too often distort their data and, through unconscious selection of their material, reinforce the very stereotypes they seek to break down. Books like this one mislead the public about the complexity of interethnic research, and at best they appear to condescend. Grantsmanship and status all too often involve treating one's data and one's subjects as pawns on the chessboard of success. This point is not lost on our Indian and Spanish friends when they talk about these “rip-offs” by instant experts.

Admittedly, many of the outsiders who have written about the cultures of the southwest were not consciously putting us down; they were simply using the procedural, analytic, and literary models bequeathed to them by their elders and popular with their peers. It is these unconscious, unevaluated, unquestioned models that should be unmasked. This is not an easy task, for, as Einstein once said, ways of thinking that one takes most for granted are imbibed “practically with the mother's milk” and are reinforced from that moment on.

The principal problem I face in criticizing Coles' book is that those who know Spanish American culture well will immediately recognize what I am talking about, while others will not. Let us therefore begin with a few questions, examples, and tests that might be applied to the book. Perhaps in that way at least the outlines of my objections to much of modern social science will begin to emerge.

Question 1. If one removed all the references that fix the scene in a particular space/time frame (Northern New Mexico, late twentieth century) would it be possible to distinguish the people Coles describes from any others in similar circumstances in another part of the world? I think not. They could be poor Greek or Asian villagers who are struggling with life and death and a marginal subsistence economy in a rapidly changing world. All over the world people's problems are exacerbated by an encroaching complex technology controlled by other groups. This control may rest with another class, caste, political, religious, or ethnic group. What, then, is unique? In other words, where are the New Mexico *Spanish Americans* in *this* book? Who paid enough attention, who cared enough to find out who they really are? What we see is reporting by cookie cutter. Find a people who are living marginal lives and let them tell their stories in their own words. How simple, yet how deceptive. What gets left out is the core of their culture. Such decontexting omissions by a psychiatrist of Coles' background are incomprehensible to me.

Question 2. How does this conscious and unconscious structuring of data distort the picture he presents? Coles frequently hides the identity of his villages (a social science device designed ostensibly to “protect” one's subjects). If there is one critical piece of information one needs to know before anything else when evaluating a report about New Mexico it is the identity of the particular village one is reporting about. Northern New Mexico villages may look alike to outsiders, but they are not. Truchas is different from Pojoaque, Pojoaque from Nambe and Jacona, Trampas from Ojo Sarco and Peñasco. Each has a distinctive character that leaves its stamp on its residents. Villages near Santa Fe and Albuquerque are different from those in Rio Arriba, and

mountain villages from those in the valley. Each produces its own characteristic gestalts for dealing with the environment. Coles does name Cordova where Mrs. Garcia lives, but hides the identity of the other three. Another point to understand is that what impresses one the most about village life is that it is made up of a complex web of strong personalities and their relationships to each other set in the unconscious matrix of Spanish culture. Yet there is no feeling in Coles' book for the interplay of either personalities or culture at the deeper levels. In fact, one is left with the impression that these do not exist. These relationships are not discovered overnight, and the Spanish, like every other ethnic group, cannot describe the structure of the paradigms by which they live. The observer has to be around long enough and be involved enough to recognize and define these paradigms. Unfortunately most research in social science is geared to one- to five-year time spans, and the investigators must "produce" within these time frames because that is the way their work is funded. How can the results be anything but superficial?

Question 3. How about the "facts" related to the people Coles writes about. On page 16, he notes, "boredom or indifference" . . . to "politics"!! Why this conclusion? Because the Garcias don't listen to Walter Cronkite and John Chancellor. Why should they? Cronkite and Chancellor live in Coles' world, not the world of the Garcias. The fact that it *is* a different world does not make it less valid, involving, or rewarding to live in. Politics in New Mexico are *local*—characteristically *personal* and intense. To give the impression that indigenous New Mexicans are apolitical is a distortion of the worst kind.

The importance of the church in New Mexican life comes through and, if anything, is overemphasized, but I suspect that the emphasis on God, church, and priest may be simply an artifact of Coles' methodology. Coles (p. 14) seems surprised that the people are philosophers. What does he expect when an Anglo outsider comes in and wants to immortalize his subject's speech by putting it in a book? These people are talking for the record when Coles is not talking for them, and there is no way to tell which is which. However, what I object to is not a particular sentence or word attributed to his subjects but the totality of these texts and commentaries. This book is like a Norman Rockwell painting or a portrait by Bachrach, designed to appear more like the idealized image than to convey a sense of reality. In this connection, when I questioned individuals who have lived in New Mexico all their lives and who have worked at the interface between Anglo and Spanish American culture, their first comments were how improbable the conversation sounded as reported by Coles. "He is silent because he understands the world" (p. 23). Who ever heard "No habla porque entiende el mundo" coming from the mouth of a Truchas villager?

For years, recording people's speech and juggling sentences and situations to hide identities has been a popular device of social science. Given the mass of raw data this technique generates, it is an easy method for fieldworkers. Yet the very convenience of the system obscures its defects and pitfalls, of which there are a number. Unless one is extraordinarily gifted and has a deep feeling for pattern, the people lose their dimensionality and become flat, pasteboard figures, colorless and devoid of the juice of life and of all

human frailty. The people in *The Old Ones* are unreal. The Spanish Americans of New Mexico have blood in their veins and are subject to the same negative human emotions, greed, envy, lust, anger, and hate as the rest of humanity. None of this comes out.

Some mention of Alex Harris (Coles' photographic collaborator and friend) is in order. Coles calls him a "pioneer." He states that Harris's photographs are the first real efforts to document the life of the people. All other photographers are supposed to have been captivated by the country. Clearly, Irving Rusinow's *Camera Report on El Cerrito* was overlooked, but no doubt the 1942 publication date had something to do with this. In discussing photographs it is very important to remember that man does not see passively. He paints his own picture of the world with his eyes, and even more so with a camera. Harris's photographs are no exception. Another photographer would have told a different story, and if the reader takes this to heart he will not be misled. *The Old Ones* is a story by Coles and Harris. It is *their* story, and a much better picture of what *they* see, think, and value than it is of the people who mouth the sentiments that Coles chose to include in the text. People are always looking at things through their own eyes, which would be all right if only they would realize that what they see is not always what is there. We see this most graphically in Harris's photographs—he repeats all of Coles' clichés and thereby reinforces the middle-class stereotyped distortions. One returns to the fact that one does not see passively. What Harris sees, the Spanish do not like, which is one of the ways we know that their visual models are different from ours. Behind these differences one sees two cultures struggling to reach each other with little or no awareness on the part of either the social scientist or the photographer that cultural differences are far from abstract, but are instead very real, very deep, and extraordinarily subtle.

Note

¹This review is a slightly revised version of a review appearing in the *Rio Grande Sun* (Santa Fe, New Mexico), Vol. 1, No. 4, September 5, 1974.

CANCIAN REPLIES TO COLLIER

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I thank the Book Review Editor for inviting me to reply to John Collier's review of my *Another Place: Photographs of a Maya Community* (Scrimshaw Press, 1974) which appears in the first number of this journal (*Studies* 1:60-61, 1974).

I would like to respond to: (1) Collier's comment on the message of the book; (2) his comments on the organization of the book; (3) his speculations about my intent as a person and an anthropologist; and (4) his exploration of the proper nature of visual anthropology. First, I want to say that Collier has not really reviewed my book. He begins by stating that "it offers a starting point for reasoning and exploring further the contribution of visual communication for anthropology, for it places focus on the intellectual and creative role of the anthropologist." In what follows, I serve as his