



The "savage slot" of class polarization

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Published in:
Focaal - European Journal for Anthropology

Publication date:
2006

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Steur, L. J. (2006). The "savage slot" of class polarization. *Focaal - European Journal for Anthropology*, 48, 169-172.

Inevitably, Celtel has had to generalize many of Dumont's discussions because he focuses centrally on the analysis of individualism. The price is a rather impoverished sense of Dumont's own wide learning and the many interconnected topics in his case-studies. The discussion of caste is an example. For Dumont, this includes the argument that there has been a fundamental opposition between pure and impure and a dissociation of status from power in India; critics have addressed different aspects of this interconnected analysis. Some critiques have been temporally situated, and deploy actor-centered theories against Dumont's position. Theories of agency, which has to be seen temporally, clearly involve 'categories of the self' but agency is set aside by Celtel, explicitly ignored as just part of a (presentist) 'postmodernism' and outside his brief. Celtel's take on the historical is rather unconsidered and casual. But his own presentation suggests that over time, Dumont's perspective became more historical and attentive to actors. Yet, Dumont's analysis of Marx in *From Mandeville to Marx* is effectively ignored, as is the contemporary relevance of this critical history of economic individualism.

Celtel finally concludes that Dumont's grand periodizing is out of fashion. Could Dumont be more influential? And what is theory for? One theory offers one way, not the only way, to complex realities. Perhaps Dumont could be better rehabilitated for anthropology by aligning what he himself described as 'the evolution of our own society' with social history rather than with philosophy?

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The 'savage slot' of class polarization

Gerald Sider, *Living Indian histories: Lumbee and Tuscarora people in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, pp. lxxii + 309, ISBN 0 8078 5506 5 (paperback).

Fortunately anthropology has left the 'savage slot'. However, with a global economy creating havoc and governments that encourage new rounds of class polarization—in other words, with true savagery called neo-liberalism engulfing millions of people's lives—the 'savage slot' reinterpreted thus, is arguably what most urgently demands anthropologists' attention.

Sider's book indeed focuses its attention precisely on the effects of class polarization among the Lumbee and the Tuscarora under the profound transformations of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The 72-page preface (the focus of this review) carries his earlier (1993) original and thrilling 'reverse history' of Native people's struggles in Robeson county (North Carolina) into the twenty-first century. *Living Indian histories* is basically an account of how oppressed people such as Native Americans in the US have to live "within, and also against, their own histories and their own cultures and simultaneously within and against the histories and cultures that others try so intensely to impose on them" (p. xiii).

As an analytic concept, culture has always been a primary concern for Sider. In his earlier books (e.g., his 1986 book, *Culture and class in anthropology and history: A Newfoundland illustration*) he has proved himself one of the most intense critics of what may be called the Boasian tradition of culture as somehow a consensual whole. If Eric Wolf opened the anthropological agenda of connecting culture to history in constant interaction with class inequality, it was primarily Sider who successfully developed this agenda and inseparably tied culture to everyday struggles about and within this inequality. For Sider, culture and in particular the splits, tensions, and antagonisms within a culture are not simply *in* history but *constitute* history. Likewise, the tensions and contradictions within lived Indian culture in fact constitute the unity of what it is to be Indian.

The title *Living Indian histories* stresses the fact that the abstract Indian 'culture' that the state demands proof of as a criteria for recognition "is also a people's culture that comes from people with multiple ties and allegiances, is

irreducible to its own history and is not containable in any one place" (p. xxvi)—hence is 'living'. Culture and cultures are continually formed through the assertions, rejections, and necessarily incomplete acceptance of the forms of knowledge and ways of being that power creates. Sider thus never uses culture in a static or comfortable sense—culture is at most a very temporary condensation of a balance of conflicting powers. Though much of anthropology has started to adopt a more antagonistic and dynamic view of culture, Sider remains one of culture's sharpest critics: unlike for instance Appadurai or Hannerz, who undermine a static, consensual notion of culture by showing its untenability in the face of *external* forces like creolization and global media images, Sider's critique of culture is an internal one, which originates in the contradictions of the everyday life of ordinary people.

Sider's fascinating, concentrically progressing argument on culture in *Living Indian Histories* soon also brings us to the state. Indeed for Sider culture, and particularly its inherent contradictions, is crucial because it "reveals the state" (xl) as a self-perpetuating mechanism of class polarization, i.e., of the increasing well-being of some that goes hand in hand with the increased vulnerability and dependency of others. The state's role in class polarization is captured by Sider's concept of 'politically constructed classes'. The concept emphasizes how inequalities are produced primarily in the political arena and are *used*: not only in and for the economy but also in the maintenance of the state itself. Thus Sider notes that precisely at the moment that African Americans and Native Americans have gained a modicum of rights in the US, they become useless: "an African American [or Native American] with civil rights [is], in this economy, a contradiction in terms" (p. xl). Thus a new mass of exploitable labor has been created: thousands of 'illegal' Mexican immigrants—'illegal' being in parentheses as one must wonder what that means if everyone, including the police, knows exactly where these 'illegals' live and work (p. xxxf.). For Sider, the US border control is not there to stop Mexicans entering

the US but to intimidate them into accepting their illegal, rights-less status. Together with the off-shoring of the entire textile industry, this has led to massive job loss among the African Americans and Native Americans of Robeson county—a situation that is in turn aggravated by a change in labor practice whereby people, forced by revised unemployment insurance rules to find any possible work, are increasingly hired as eternal 'temps' ('temporary workers', without benefits) through regular firing and re-hiring. All this again is done in full view of the state and Sider, drawing a complicated but fascinating parallel to the impunity earlier granted to organized lynchings of Blacks in the Southern US, argues that this is fundamentally how the state works to reproduce itself: it creates laws that supposedly ensure the equality of all, but through impunity allows these same laws to be used precisely to create inequality, i.e., on the one hand a mass of vulnerable people whose dependency makes them turn to the state for alleviating the hardship the state itself created, and on the other a small elite, for example those who get jobs as staff in poverty alleviation programs.

This is the background against which Sider describes in more details the process of class formation taking place among the Native Indians of Robeson country whereby as they become wealthier as a group, differences among them become stark. Sider adds that these "two manifestations of native life, prosperity and hardship, are inseparably joined into one range of possibilities, one public people, one politically constructed category" (p. xxxviii). This "range of possibilities" includes for the Lumbee a search for federal recognition, first through petitioning the Bureau for Indian Affairs and later through an appeal to Congress. This (expensive) search is initially led by the Lumbee Regional Development Association (LRDA), which Sider himself helped to set up in the 1960s. The LRDA in the course of time, however, develops into a professionalized for-profit organization and is eventually, through a struggle fought out in the court, superseded in 2000 by an elected tribal council as the legitimate 'Lumbee government' that the state requires the Lumbee to have before they

can gain federal recognition. Sider's deep engagement, what he calls "partisan anthropology", can be felt in a footnote saying "[m]y critique of how things subsequently have developed in the LRDA's programs and policies is partly an attempt to come to terms with the political innocence of my own youthful dreams about social change, dreams that in one shape or another I would still rather revive than bury" (p. xlv).

A group of Indian people who did not want to join the Lumbee tribal roll, the Tuscarora, appealed to another 'option' in the range of possibilities, "partly by necessity, and more by choice" (p. lx). Through an alliance with the American Indian Movement, they began searching for a form of sovereignty that, in the words of a Robeson county Tuscarora "the federal government did not give ... , and cannot take ... away" (p. lxii)—i.e., a sovereignty that is not about dressing up as the kind of Indians that the state would be willing to recognize but is about being sovereign regardless of the state, a sovereignty oriented not toward the state but toward the Tuscarora and other Native Indians *themselves*. This, however, also entails "making one's peace with widespread poverty and hardship, which government funds certainly do not remedy, but do somewhat lighten" (p. lxv). In sum, looking at these initiatives by Native Americans in Robeson county, we see a "nearly irresolvable contradiction between service and sovereignty" (p. xxxiv), between ensuring some kind of well-being through the state and keeping some sense of independence and community.

Sider thus not only provides a very important conceptualization of culture in terms of struggle and everyday life within and against history, but also proves the value of his theory in enabling us to get a deeper and sharper understanding of concrete historical situations and political dilemmas. However, there are also a few problematic aspects to the book. First of all, making reference to others than the very few scholars Sider finds absolutely 'brilliant' and avoiding turning the rest into invisible strawmen is not Sider's strong point. It often seems he would like to attribute the use of a totally obsolete culture concept to the unmentioned 99.9

percent of anthropology—this may not be entirely justified.

More problematic however is Sider's excessive emphasis on the state, which he can only get away with through a total lack of international comparison. His conceptualization of the state, moreover, is as he himself admits (p. xliii), too vague and unitary. His argument that the US state uses its border control to produce an illegal and thus exploitable mass of labor rather than to actually keep illegal immigrants *out*, for instance seems incompatible with the Bush administration's definite plans for a huge fence along the US-Mexican border. Sider's radical argument that the state creates social laws under the pretence of ensuring equality but in fact ensures inequality through their unpunished transgression I find uncanny because it simply collapses all the contradictory interests of which the state is an outcome. Might we then just as well *not* oppose the present endeavors by the Republican-dominated National Labor Relations Board to deny millions of US workers the right to unionize by redefining every worker who sometimes gives instructions to others (e.g., nurses) as 'supervisors' (Paul Krugman, *International Herald Tribune*, 7–8 October 2006)? Sider's conception of the state I would find more useful if he saw the state as he does culture: as a contradictory and temporary condensation of ongoing struggles.

What may have also enriched the book is a bit more statistical data on certain key socio-economic trends, more elaborate and detailed life-stories, and more direct quotes of Sider's discussions with Lumbee and Tuscarora people. 'Partisan anthropology' can produce insights that an anthropology that is less directly engaged in struggle cannot and it is to some extent legitimate that precise documentation would therein have to give way to lived-through accounts. However, when the impreciseness gets too much, 'partisan anthropology' comes dangerously close to *paternalist* anthropology: missing the more precise facts that could make us really decide for ourselves whether the Tuscarora for example indeed took a different route to sovereignty "partly by necessity, and more by

choice” and lacking more elaborate transcriptions and biographies of Sider’s “truly insightful” (p. xxxivf.) and “very special” (p. xvii) comrades in arms (or what for more conventional anthropologists would be ‘informants’), the reader has to rely a bit too much on Sider’s personal judgment in these matters.

Impreciseness is also risky when Sider claims that recent changes are “so fundamentally different from the transformations that characterized the first three-quarters of the twentieth century that partisan anthropology has been shaken to its roots” (p. xiii). In principle I agree, but when making such claims it is crucial to provide enough concrete data on political-economic and biographical shifts. Where his writing be-

comes, at times, more suggestive than precise, Sider could see himself in the strange company of postmodernists and ‘we-have-lost-all-our-sense-of-direction’ (and, some add, ‘moral compass’)-perspectives.

Having exhausted my critique of Sider’s brilliant book, I warmly recommend it to any activist or scholar interested in the intense analytical and political dilemmas of having to live “within and against” one’s own and others’ history and culture in these savage times. I strongly doubt they can find a sharper exposé of the dilemmas involved than the one offered here by Sider.

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