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ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICA

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Note: David Sweet was the student of Latin American poor people for several years before undertaking graduate study with John Smail and others in the Comparative Tropical History Program at Wisconsin in the late l960's. There he he was much influenced by the approach to colonial history and colonialist historiography which informs the lead essay in this volume, and by the extraordinary quality of John Smail's teaching. The present essay was originally and for years the first lecture in an introductory Latin American history course at the University of California at Santa Cruz, first given on the author's first day of teaching in 1971. The thinking behind it has evolved considerably in more than twenty years of discussion with student critics, and has been nourished by the published work of Miguel Barnet, Gonzalo Castillo Cárdenas, Orlando Fals Borda, Gilberto Freyre, Luis Gonzalez, Ranajit Guha, Reynaldo Ileto, Sidney Mintz, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Gary B. Nash, June Nash, Tillie Olsen, Orlando Patterson, Richard Price, Walter Rodney, Rafael Samuel, William Taylor, Studs Terkel, Charles van Onselen, Eric Wolf and many others. In essay form, the piece has benefited from critical discussion with Santa Cruz colleagues David Anthony, David Brundage, Terry Burke, Dana Frank and Takashi Fujitani. But for all these beneficial influences, the piece is still rather a sermon for beginning students of history than a contribution to serious scholarship. John Smail's influence on the gestation of this essay was very great, as will be clear to the discerning reader; but he must be absolved from any responsibility for the specific directions his "autonomy" and his zeal for independent inquiry have taken in the hands of this grateful student.

History is the mother of politics. The way we conceive of our own human nature and our human condition, the way we interact with other human beings as individuals, the way we cooperate with others in the workplace, the way we engage with others in the pursuit or restraint of power -- all of these are born of the notions we carry around within us of what human experience has been up to now, and what it therefore is and can be. A people without a clear sense of its history is like a person without a memory -- so confused about the nature of its self, and about the process of its continuing self-transformation, as frequently to experience disorientation and be handicapped for any sustained and purposeful action. The history of any people is its knowledge of itself in action. By the same token, a people lacking in a sense of other people's histories is handicapped for any joint endeavor with those peoples to "make history" and forge the future. The history of all peoples is therefore a valuable part of humanity's working knowledge of

itself in action. A world history can be the mother of a world politics.

History thus conceived is not the past itself, lying there to be uncovered by historians. Nor is it the historian's artificial narration of that past -- ostensibly "objective," maybe even weighty or entertaining, but in practice inaccessible to most people. Real history is a vital and present set of practical working impressions or understandings of what the human race, or some particular branch of us, has been up to since the beginning of its remembered time. It is the sum of what we have learned from our own experience, or what we now have to tell about it. These are the stories and the half-understandings which have been and continue to be distilled into each of us from a million facts and pronouncements, from books and speeches and newspaper articles, from movies and ballads and gossip sessions and grandmothers' tales. Together these impressions constitute the functional or operative history, or the "working knowledge" of history, which is our haphazardly gathered, always shifting set of collective self-conceptual tools for living. They are our stories told and retold. They are our tools for working and playing and reproducing ourselves, and for participating in the never-ending process of social change that is going on around us. We can never have enough of these tools; but those we have are seldom sharp enough or well-enough oiled for the purposes to which we put them.

History-telling and society.

In the present commercialized media age, much of the information on which our working sense of history is based has been "infotainment," flashed past us too quickly to be taken in properly and incorporated in some systematic way to our thought. Our thinking has been shamelessly manipulated by those who work the media in an effort to manage both our public and our private behaviors. The version of history which is at work in any one of us today is, therefore, for the most part a garbled and befuddled, contradictory, unsteady set of impresions. Our forebears, in contrast, learned whence they came, who they were and what they might hope to accomplish in this life more slowly. They had much less information than we have, about a narrower range of human experience in the past; but they were able to digest what little they did have more thoroughly. They were more credulous. They had more opportunity than we generally have to reflect upon what they were learning about the past; and as a result they were perhaps more empowered than we are -- and at the same time more effectively handicapped -- by their sense of that

past. But our much shakier notions of history nevertheless function in the same way as theirs did, to condition decisively our activities as members of society. They function in ways which for the most part hie closely to the prevailing consensus among our contemporaries, with regard to the essential characteristics and the main lessons of our collective human past, whether local, national or international.

Notions of history nevertheless change all the time; and the direction of that change is to a large extent indicated by the work of people we may call tellers of history. Some history-tellers are academically trained historians; most are simply keen students of life who like to talk about it. Both kinds work thoughtfully and patiently to purvey the information, and also the elements of analysis, from which every people's sense of history is continually developing. Whether they are amateurs or professionals, public-spirited people or selfish, wise or silly, knowledgeable or merely opinionated, these tellers of history have put their minds to studying and interpreting the imperfect record that remains of our many human pasts, a record that often consists largely of their own recollections, and they communicate their own changing understanding of those pasts to others. They do this all the time, whether we ask them to do it or not -- by writing books and television scripts, or by teaching in schools, or by singing folksongs or telling stories to children, or by simply gossiping with their friends or scrawling graffiti on subway walls.

The impact of history-tellers upon our changing public consciousness of the past is both indirect and diffuse. It is wrought over the long term rather than the short; it is impossible to predict or to manage; it interacts all the time with the influences of other kinds of thinkers and actors; but it is nevertheless very great indeed. This will be clear if we think about the infinitely ramified impact on human experience of the reflections on history of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; or of Adam Smith and Karl Marx; or of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.; or of Winston Churchill, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zhedong and Mikhail Gorbachev. Or of the less famous history-tellers who have for half a century patiently been reworking our understanding of the historical experiences of women and working people and people of color in North America. It will be clear if we think about the impact on our own lives of reflections on the past that have been passed down to us by our parents and grandparents. Or the impact of a hundred generations of old people distilling in stories the experiences of their lifetimes for the enlightenment of the young.

Reading and thinking and talking and writing about the past is therefore an important and influential

kind of intellectual work. It is work that is much too important, in fact, to be left entirely to the academic historians. The contributions of professional scholars and teachers to historical understanding have been very great indeed; but such people, by and large, are more concerned with assembling and interpreting information for other scholars, and for the small circle of listeners to history-course lectures and readers of scholarly books, than they are with making their views of history more widely known in the world, or with expressing them in the ways that can be most useful to others. The commitment of most trained historians is to fulfilling standards and following fashions of our own devising. Most of them are only incidentally concerned (if at all) with their role in the continuing transformation of society for the benefit of all. In particular, the work of constructing a history that can be used by everyone alive is work that is too important to be left to those scholars who are interested mostly in great men and great events -- that is in "history as past politics" -- or to those for whom historical "data" are no more than grist for the mill of a self-serving, self-referential and self-sufficient social science. Studying and telling history is work in which, when it comes right down to it, nearly everybody needs to be actively involved some of the time. The more diverse the practitioners and the more varied the perspectives they bring to bear on the subject, the better our history will be. Writing history for publication takes a bit more training than simply thinking and talking about it with others; but people who are not full-time professionals can certainly take a hand at that work as well.

Every people and every person needs a history which evolves all the time, as it is thought about more widely and more deeply, and retold and written about more usefully, by more and more diverse kinds of history-tellers. We need a history which is concerned with the full breadth and depth of our human experience, which can fill our heads with useful stories of all kinds, which is a constant source of surprises and things to think about, which is freely available and accessible to everyone, which pleases us and angers in about equal measure, and which is told or written or sung or painted to fascinate and to be of practical use to everybody. Such a history can be made, and is being made daily by ordinary people like ourselves -- as we read, listen, think and talk with one another about all we figure out about every aspect of human experience, in the course of our everyday living. We all remember what we can; and we make our history up as we go along. Fortunately we are able to get a little help and a little new information from time to time

from the "experts."

History and Politics

A people's history can be the mother of a people's politics. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how our consciousnesses can ever be raised to the point at which a genuinely democratic politics and real social justice can be achieved anywhere in the world, without the support of a healthy and comprehensive, participatory, new consensus-building view of history that embraces every people's past both lovingly and respectfully. What we need today is a history that is so far barely imaginable -- one that leads us to a common awareness of the enduring importance of every individual's contribution to the social processes of the world, and of the demonstrated capacity and determination of peoples everywhere to exercise a collective will in determining to some degree the courses of our own histories.

This essay will suggest ways of discovering and helping give currency to such a history for the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (or of any other part ot the world). Our purpose is to get better acquainted with the pasts of peoples who, like us, have been obliged so far to make their way in the world with neither a people's history nor a people's politics to help make life meaningful for them. The essay is not the product of "expertise" in this field, because although a great many useful contributions to a people's history of Latin America and the Caribbean have already been made by professional historians and others (examples include Luis Gonzalez' San José de Gracia, Manuel Moreno Fraginals' The Sugar Mill, Blanca Muratorio's The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso and Richard Price's First-Time and Alabi's World) such history remains to be written for most peoples. That is the way it is for every part of the world, of course, in the present stage of historical research and thought; and no responsible teller of history would claim to be an expert on a people's history of anyplace. So this is no more than a reflection on the uses that have been made of Latin American history so far , and on the conventions of its study, teaching and writing. It is written for university students of that history, and for other people interested in Latin America as well: for the readers of history books, newspapers, novels, and travel accounts; for travellers and movie-goers; for those who are fortunate to make the acquaintance of Latin American visitors, and for others who in any way gather and survey impressions of Latin American history and society before passing them along to others. My subject is an attitude toward that subject, or a specific demand to make of it, which can perhaps inform

and give purpose to our inquiries. This is the attitude which insists upon finding elements of an understanding of ordinary human experience in everything we learn, which seeks to establish the consequences of every "major event" and "historic development" we study for the lives of ordinary people. We need to develop that attitude and apply it to our thinking about Latin America (and about our own country and every other country as well), so that we may refocus the history that informs our politics, and equip ourselves better for the work of making this world a safer and a healthier place for the ordinary people who live in it.

Let me begin by asserting simply that a "people's history" of Latin America or anyplace else is a history that can in fact be ferreted out and studied, and that once studied can certainly be told. It really exists; and it really works. You would not guess that this is so from your reading in most of the history books presently available to you. But whatever the usual sources of information and the standard ways of looking at things may suggest to you, there is and always has been a discoverable and reconstructable experience of ordinary people, which is there to be explored by any seriously interested inquirer. This is the experience of the great majority of people, the experience of those who were neither rich nor powerful but nevertheless did most of the work and most of the living and dying, most of the laughing and loving, most of the lying and stealing, most of the failing and succeeding, in any particular place or time. That experience is usually difficult to find, but it is always knowable to some extent. This is important reality to understand and remember; and it is a reality that must be insisted upon, because of course it is <u>that</u> historical experience more than any other -- conditioned and constrained as it always has been by the ideas, individuals, institutions and events that are featured in the conventional histories of wealth and power -- which has made every people what it is today. Each individual human being is primarily the product of "ordinary" experience in the past; and every society is the product of that experience as well. Glimpses of ordinary historical experience, and a growing sense of the broader dimensions of that experience, can be gotten by any patient inquirer who insists on looking for them while reading, watching movies, listening to music, talking to people, and in general poking around in the world in the pursuit of a continuing education. There are no reliable manuals of everyday human experience, and no "definitive" writings on the subject to consult. But every student ought nevertheless to be involved in a relentless search for some of the elements of an

understanding of ordinary past human experience; because that is the understanding that we most need in order to learn how to live our lives fully and purposefully today.

An elitist history, one focused on the uses of wealth and power, can tell us a small part of what we need to know about the past in order to take effective action in the present. It speaks of affairs that do have an impact on the lives of everyone. But when all is said and done the history of what most people have been up against, of what has been done with the wealth taken from us by employers and tax collectors, or with the spoils carried off by the victors in wars we have lost, is by itself of very little use to poor and powerless people today. It provides us with a notion of how enduring wealth and power can be, and of what we are up against still. But a history that stops at that can only give ordinary folks a complex. It deprives us of dignity; and it is no fun to think about. It may even leave us feeling sorry for ourselves, or with a sense that we are more powerless and more lacking in resources than we actually are. Worse yet, an elitist history works on our minds in a subliminal way to suggest to us that we need always to look to strong leaders for the solutions to our problems. It invites us to hope (usually in vain) that these leaders may prove to be wise and effective, the charismatic living embodiments of the values and aspirations we hold dear. In the absence of any such leadership, a consciousness rooted in the elitist sense of history can fall all too easily into a fatalistic resignation and despair.

To get a sense of the dimensions of this problem, think about the present situation of the people of the United States as we face the challenges of institutionalized militarism, unrestrained corporate power, widespread corruption, environmental pollution, electoral abstentionism, general cynicism and disillusionment, and the mass escapism of substance, food and entertainment abuse. We are handicapped to be sure by a paltry and often irresponsible leadership; but we are handicapped much more by the systematic disinformation and disorientation in which we live, and by an abysmal collective ignorance of the problems our own people have faced in the past, and of the determined struggles we have always waged to try and solve those problems. A genuine people's history could help make us knowledgeable enough, and confident enough, and strong and purposeful enough, to take charge at last of our lives together in society. It could help us learn to work together across barriers of race, class, gender and ethnicity, and to find more or less adequate solutions to each of the challenges we face as it comes along.

Changes in the prevailing views of history in any society are both causes and effects of changes in the social and economic order. One result of the breath-taking changes that have occurred in recent times in almost every country has been to bring "the people" into greater prominence in our understanding of the political and economic processes of the world than hitherto. Democracy is a widely accepted political ideal; "public opinion" is carefully monitored; the role of consumers and the labor force in a capitalist economy loom large. But these changes have not yet put the people into the forefront of any society's historical understanding of itself; and in societies where the people feature prominently in the historical discourse because revolutionary governments are in power, they are usually not given as much opportunity to speak their own minds as one might expect they would be given. It is not yet clear whether the great political, social and economic changes of the 20th century represent a movement toward greater freedom for the development of individual human potentialities through cooperative effort around the world, or a movement toward greater mass manipulation and control. It is also not at all clear as between the capitalist, Communist, ex-Communist and hopelessly indebted sectors of the world, which offers the greatest promise for some measure of freedom from manipulation by rich people in power. But we may nevertheless be certain that in all countries, a history that sees ordinary working people as dignified, intelligent, self-reliant, diverse, wise, imaginative and peace-loving human beings (which we are at least as often as we are slavish, dull-witted, dependent, undistinguishable, foolish, pedestrian and warlike) -- a history in which ordinary people experience as much joy, creativity and sadness as anyone else, in which we customarily think and work and struggle together to bring about change -- such a history will help hold the line for a genuine kind of freedom. On the other hand the view of ordinary people as a grey and undifferentiated mass of workers or subjects or soldiers or consumers (even, in pseudo-Marxist terms, as a grey and undifferentiated mass with a role as heroic protagonist in the historical process) is nothing but a summons to mass manipulation.

Historical autonomy

In order to get at the problem of the possibility of a people's history -- that is, the possibility of writing and teaching such a history, and especially the possibility of discovering elements of it for ourselves through the careful reading and questioning of almost any text -- let us first examine the notion that the history of every people is in some considerable measure an autonomous one. No matter how much the

course of national events and even the daily lives of people have been affected or bent out of shape by outside influences, and by influences coming at people from the ruling classes within their own societies, it is an indisputable fact that the lives of all people (and of all peoples) have always actually been lived by the people themselves. They have been lived as we contrive to live our own lives today, in our own ways and as independently as possible within the very real and inescapable constraints that are presented to us by the specific historical context in which we are living them.

I remember that as a graduate student I was very much impressed by an article of Michael Moerman's which told about how in a village in northern Thailand, not so very many years ago, the "Coke" bottle introduced from American airbases had come to have an important cultural role -- being used on account of its beautiful form to hold up the corners of household altars. It was not, however, used to store Coca-Cola, which was at that time unavailable in the local market place! The marketing program of the powerful transnational Coca-Cola company, which had sent the bottles to Thailand in the first place, appeared to have had no impact at all on the uses to which the Thai villagers put these classic artifacts of North American culture.

To give another very different kind of example, the United States has lived during all of our lifetimes, and indeed for the last three quarters of a century, in the grip of a veritable hysteria of anti-Communism. This was true especially during the early 1920's, the early 1950's and the 1980's. The hysteria we have suffered, and which has cost us so dearly in cultural and economic deformation and in the loss of our reputation in the world, was in part the result of the very real if short-lived ascendance of the Soviet Union, and perhaps even in some small degree of the work of the tiny Communist Party of the United States. But it has been <u>our</u> hysteria, mainstream America's hysteria, nevertheless; and it is very much more the product of our own history and of our own cultural peculiarities than of any outside influence.

The evidence that we are the subjects and not the objects of our own historical experience, and that this experience is to a significant degree <u>autonomous</u>, is abundant everywhere. Culturally aware Chicanos in California have for several years now been revealing to the rest of us the existence of an autonomous Chicano experience, one which has flourished right in the midst of the overwhelming pressures for

conformity presented to Mexican immigrants and their children by "mainstream" Californian society. There is nothing "mainstream" (or for that matter, particularly Mexican) about a low-rider's beautiful car, or about the vital multicultural street language and wall-writing tradition of the barrio, or about menudo as a "breakfast of champions." These cultural expressions may serve as yet another illustration of the principle of the essential autonomy of the historical experience of every people. To put this case in a more extreme fashion, there have been no more dominated and manipulated groups of people in the history of the world than were the Jews, Gypsies, Communists, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and others who were confined in Nazi concentration camps before and during the Second World War. The lives of those people were indeed horrendously constrained by their oppressors. Millions were killed in gas ovens or died of the starvation, forced labor and extreme privation to which they were subjected in the camps. But a considerable number of people survived those experiences nevertheless; and it should be clear on a moment's reflection that the history of the survivors -- like that of their sisters and brothers whose lives were taken from them before they could be freed from confinement -- is a history which cannot simply be subsumed within the more familiar and more abstract history of the Third Reich or of World War II. It is an autonomous history, or a series of autonomous histories, in the important sense which I am trying to develop here. A history which was lived out under extreme duress by the prisoners themselves, in their own ways, within the terrible context presented to them by a relentless enemy. The autonomy of these people's histories was of course never absolute, nor is any people's. The history of every people, and of every individual person, has been forged within a particular context of constraints; and every history has of course been profoundly influenced by these constraints. But the history of the constraints, whether man-made or natural, within which any people has forged its history is no substitute for a history of the people themselves.

As we a approach our study of the history of Latin America's peoples, then, we must not be satisfied with a history of colonial exploitation or with a history of the uses and abuses of power by the homegrown elites of Latin America. We must work against every handicap to find ways of understanding, as nearly as possible in their own terms, the autonomous histories of the slaves who labored within the plantation system; of the women and children who reproduced society and culture within the patriarchal household; of the hard-rock miners who made possible the figures for silver and tin exports; of the

cultivators of the soil who fed the great land-holding oligarchs; of the carters and mule-drivers and canoemen who moved all merchandise from one place to the other; of the shanghaied footsoldiers who fought almost every battle; of the slum-dwelling wage laborers who operated almost every machine.

A shift in perspective.

To get at the idea of an autonomous people's history of Latin America, or of anyplace else, it is necessary first of all to conceive and then to achieve a dramatic shift in perspective -- in the vantage point from which we normally view that history. The history of the peoples of Latin America has for the most part been written up to now from a perspective which is either xeno-centric (that is, Euro-centric or Anglo-Ameri-centric, centered on the interventions of foreigners and their consequences) or oligo-centric (centered on the affairs of the ruling few). But the perspective required for a people's history is neither the view from the outside looking in, nor the view from the "topside" looking down. A people's history calls for a view of human experience from the inside looking out, or from the "bottom" side looking up. Or better yet, a view which does not even attempt to look up or out, but concentrates on simply telling the people's story as it can be seen from the people's perspective.

One way of preparing oneself to make this critical shift in perspective is simply to recognize the indisputable fact that the prevailing model of society as a natural hierarchy, with a vertical distribution from upper to lower along a scale of power and wealth and perceived importance -- the scale which places powerful countries "on top" of the rest, or rich and famous people "on top" of ordinary folks -- is no more than a mischievous abstraction. It does not correspond to reality; rather, it serves to distort reality. It is, in fact, a self-serving mystification which was dreamed up a long time ago by the people in power and put over on the rest of us through propaganda. The truth, as anyone can see by looking around, is that the distribution of people and nations on the face of this earth is horizontal rather than vertical. Groups of people, like individuals, are not to be found either above nor below one another, whatever the distribution of wealth and power may be. We walk around side by side -- each of us laboring at our own tasks and contemplating the rest of nature and the rest of humanity from our own perspectives, each getting by in relationship to the others the best way we can. The Paraguayans' history is as real and authentic and important as is the history of the vastly more numerous Argentinians or Brazilians. The Nicaraguans' history is as alive as our own.

The peon de hacienda's story can be as lively and instructive as the hacendado's.

One condition for conceiving of and helping to construct a people's history is, then, that we recognize that every human being's experience, and every human group's historical experience, is as real, as knowable and as worth knowing about as any other's -- precisely because of its uniqueness and autonomy. We must recognize that power itself, though it constrains and distorts human experience in many ways, and though it also has a large role in determining what we may readily come to know about human experience, cannot encompass or represent that experience as it has been lived by real people anywhere. Even after having acknowledged the autonomy and validity of every people's experience, however, if we want to achieve the shift from an oligo-centric or a xeno-centric to a people's perspective on history we must overcome a serious of formidable barriers to understanding.

Barrier # l: cultural nationalism

The first barrier to be overcome is the persistent notion that the "inside" history of any group can only be written from the inside, by members of the group being studied. This view holds that outsiders have no business writing and talking about any people's history, or perhaps even studying it, because we are hopelessly incapacitated for the job by ignorance and prejudice. Only Black people can understand Black history; only Mexicans can penetrate the esoteric mysteries of Mexican history, and so on.

That view is initially very compelling to those of us who are endeavoring to do our work from a position of respect and of solidarity with other people's struggles. The problem with it is that all the formal writing or thinking about history which anybody can do today, and all the awakening of people's consciousness to it by the artful telling of history, is itself work which is largely a feature of a modern international educated person's way of thought -- a way of thought which is rooted primarily in the Mediterranean cultural tradition. History is now and will increasingly be constructed and told within the context of this single world culture. The people who do such work in China or Nigeria or Mexico or Brazil, whatever languages they speak or write and whatever their explicit purposes, are participating in an undertaking many of whose basic assumptions and procedures are the same everywhere.

This is not to say that there are no entirely independent and autonomous thought-worlds left on earth (there may be a few) -- but only that thinkers from a thought-world which holds, for example, that the

spiritual power of a poor people in rebellion against a government whose army is equipped with modern weapons is such that bullets cannot harm them, do not write history nor do they otherwise systematically recast the past so as to make it more useful in the struggle for a better future. In fact, people who think historically today don't generally express ourselves in the terms even of our own pre-rationalist traditions -- holding in Western Europe, for example, that Joan of Arc was in communication with the Devil, or that the world is flat and that unwary seamen may sail off the edge of it, or that the power of monarchs was divinely ordained.

To the extent that this modern history-telling culture has been adapted to their own needs by thinking people in different cultures around the world, it is like the coke bottle in the Thai village. It is neither a Western property nor, upon close examination, even a sign of "cultural imperialism." Westerners neither control it nor are qualified to judge the uses to which it is put. We are not endowed with any special ability to understand its findings. What we do share with the other history students and history-tellers in the world is the propensity, the responsibility and the opportunity to join with others in the world-wide search for a useable historical understanding of all people's experience. To join in this pursuit is, I believe, to contribute one's energies to a continuing international collective effort to remake this world into a free, just and safe place for all.

So a "people's history," like a national history, is not one which can only be written or understood within some imagined poor people's or poor nation's exclusive thought-world, one which cannot be entered by outsiders. Either nobody is capable of seeking out and writing and talking about or understanding the history of any people, or everyone can have a crack at it. All human experience is of a piece; and all human experience is both knowable and potentially "relevant" to any human being, in our continuing search for self-understanding. The achievement of an effective and widely adhered to people's perspective on Latin American history is work which is going to involve freeing the mind of constraints which are common to the minds of all people who are educated enough to read or write or tell history, whether we are foreigners or Latin Americans. Latin Americans, of course, have many advantages in personal experience for achieving this perspective on their own history (especially, it may be argued, if they are people of peasant or working-class background, or who have committed themselves to the poor people's struggle for social justice!). But

these advantages are often cancelled in practice by the disadvantage of being the products of their own school systems, and of the assumptions about society that prevail among their own educated classes. So the construction and telling of, say, the history of the prostitutes of Buenos Aires or the tin miners of Bolivia, or of the Mayan Indians of the western Guatemalan highlands in their desperate 20th-century struggle for survival, is work that will require the best efforts of their own thinkers as well as the efforts of all others who who care enough about these tragic experiences to attempt to understand them.

Barrier #2 : the confusion of perspective and value judgement.

The second barrier we must overcome in attempting to shift away from a xenocentric and oligocentric and towards a people's perspective on history is a more substantial one than the notion that we might have to change identities in order to do it. This problem is the confusion between a shift in perspective and a shift in the value judgements which we customarily make about history. When we contemplate human experience from the perspective of the wealthy and powerful as historians have usually done -- seeing the history of Latin America's peoples, for example, over the shoulder of their European conquerors, or through the eyes of the Latin American oligarchs and their sons the gentleman scholar-historians -- we can of course see most clearly what the rich and powerful saw. We can see most human beings and their day-to-day concerns only indistinctly as from a great distance; but at the same time we are able to construct a reasonably clear picture of the activities and beliefs and contributions to the world of the powerful foreigners or the oligarchs themselves. We are likely, as a result, to end up feeling empathy with our subjects and experiencing as we deal with them the warmth and tolerance which come from human understanding. In historical study, as in other healthy human relationships, nothing is further from the truth than that bourgeois axiom, "familiarity breeds contempt."

While getting acquainted with the powerful and influential men whose perspective on history we students of history customarily share, we are hard put not to perceive the great majority of human beings and the bulk of human activity as mere background for the stories of our important subjects. We may even end up approving or making allowances for the behavior of the powerful towards the rest, no matter how beastly it may have been by the standards we would apply to the consideration of events taking place in our own time and country. We are likely to understand best, and to approve most easily, that which our highly placed

informants understood and approved; we come almost despite ourselves to share their satisfaction with what they have wrought in the world, to be troubled by what troubled them and to view as natural their attitude towards the "natives," the women, the slaves and the ordinary working people who maintained them. That is to say, we are likely to be blinded by our very sources to the accomplishments and the individuality of most of the people who were present in any particular time and place, in the autonomy of their historical experience. We are likely simply to disregard the contributions of most human beings to the historical process, and to conclude in practice that history itself was wrought for the most part by our influential informants.

Unless, of course, we come to have a particular reason to reject or disapprove of these familiar acquaintances of our research. In that case, we are likely to continue to see things as they do (since they have, after all, provided us with the sources of our information), while reversing the value judgements we make about them. That is the situation in which many Latin American and other Third World historians find themselves today, and many anti-establishment, pro-working class historians in the advanced capitalist countries as well. We write critically of Cortes' conquest of Mexico rather than praising it unreservedly the way the older historians used to do. We may even come to speak harshly of the doughty warrior-statesman-entrepreneur himself (Diego Rivera painted him as a dwarflike, syphilitic wreck). Yet we continue to think about the events that rocked the Valley of Mexico between 1519 and 1521 and thereafter, in what are essentially still 16th-century Spanish terms as a "conquest." We don't go on to wonder how the different groups of Mexicans and the ordinary Spanish footsoldiers experienced those events at the time, or to ask what really happened during those fateful months. We don't raise the question, "what is a conquest, after all?", nor do we speculate about the extent to which that term really describes what happened when the Aztec empire fell apart under the onslaught of smallpox and internal upheaval -- just at the moment in which it was beset by a determined group of steel-clad cavalrymen who bore with them a modest array of significant technological innovations, and a new state religion which was less bloodthirsty than the one with which the Mexican people were familiar.

. Neither situation -- the uncritical sharing of the xenocentric or the oligocentric perspective on a people's history with our sources, nor a shift in the value judgements informed by that same perspective in

the direction of a xenophobia or an "oligophobia" -- is conducive to the new way of understanding every people's history which we so urgently require today. What we need now is a view of history which is not simply "pro-people" and "anti-oppressor," but one which is actually centered on the main experiences of ordinary people, and which bases itself on a probing yet sympathetic, humanizing, dignifying, normalizing, strength-affirming view of ordinary people. We need a people's perspective on history if we are ever going to develop and put into practice an attitude of respect and solidarity toward the people in other times and places who have shared our human condition. We need this perspective in order to learn from them what they have to teach us, so that we may struggle today, alongside their descendants, for a more viable worldwide social and economic order.

Barrier #3: bias against the people.

The main reason for the absence of a well-developed people's history of anyplace so far, is the systematic moral and perceptional bias against the people which may be found almost all historians and social scientists. This bias prevails as well among the journalists, politicians, teachers and ordinary citizens who base their views of past and present society -- whether directly or indirectly -- on the pronouncements and the presuppositions of these same specialists. The bias derives from the distance in time and space from which we view the experiences of ordinary people; it derives from the nature of historical documents themselves (almost exclusively the product of the educated, who in Latin America are likely themselves to be tied in outlook to the rulers and the foreigners). It derives too from the apparently irresistible urge of educated people to achieve coherence and definitiveness in our statements about human experience, an inclination which blinds us to diversity and particularity and change. Paradoxically, the bias derives also from our tendency to attribute general significance to the particular situations which we have examined closely -- that is, to generalize too readily from isolated examples.

The bias against the people does not, therefore, require the active enthusiasm for the rich and powerful which most historians have actually displayed. It may be found as well among those who have cultivated a critical attitude toward the rich and the powerful and their role in history. The problem for all of us is that this systematic bias for the preoccupations of the elite and against the concerns of the people produces a distorted, caricaturized and ultimately not very useful image of the people's experience. Scholars

and gentlepersons specializing in historical inquiry (people such as ourselves) are for the most part at least dimly aware of this problem. We strive to deal with it by attempting to keep our biases under control, and insisting on what many of us still refer to, a bit quaintly and complacently, as "objectivity." Objectivity is of course an admirable principle and goal; but it is not a real or sufficient solution to the problem being posed here.

There is no point in arguing for an "unbiased" approach to history. Such an approach is both impossible and undesirable, since even if achievable it would cause the search for truth to stagnate, and everybody's interest in the subject to wane. At the same time, "objectivity" is a goal for which we must all strive in the interest of avoiding the caricatures that have ever handicapped our view of other human beings. What searchers after a people's history, and particularly a people's history of once-colonized countries, must do is adopt a systematic moral and perceptional bias <u>against</u> the rulers and the outsiders and the matters which have concerned them. But we must adopt this bias consciously and in a disciplined fashion, rather than blindly. At present, for example, many in this country seem to believe that modern Central American history can be understood by studying the U.S. presence in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica during the past forty years, and the policies of the puppet Central American governments. The more responsible among us then strive with liberal fairness to maintain "objectivity" with regard to the guerrillas and Sandinistas. What is being suggested here is that we study the Central American peasants, workers and revolutionaries closely, trying to get somewhere in the vicinity of <u>their</u> perspective on things -- and that at the same time we should strive valiantly to maintain objectivity in our view of Central America's political leaders, the CIA, the <u>Contras</u> and their oligarchical pals. We should express our bias freely (something that the historians focussed on power have seldom done); and we should put it into practice explicitly while reading, writing and talking about Central American history. At the same time, like any other serious students of history, we should struggle mightily to keep our bias under control by maintaining some semblance of objectivity in our approach to the enemies of the peoples with whose historical experiences we are primarily concerned.

The bias being proposed here is not just, or primarily, a bias for those who have struggled for justice. It is not merely an ideological preference for contemplating the occasional moments of open

resistance to the oppressions that ordinary people have mostly faced in an unjust world. In a deeper sense, this is a bias for everyday life as against great events, for the experiences of ordinary people of varied color, gender and age as against those of the powerful white men. For peaceful production as against war. For balanced relations with the environment as against the capitalists' rape of nature. This is a bias which can defy the weight of the documentation to view most of the events with which historians, journalists, teachers and politicians have occupied ourselves as the exceptional and peripheral events they are -- rather than as the mainstream and conventional events they have been drummed up to be. A bias which seeks the basis for a working understanding of human nature, and of the human condition, in the realm of natural life, of natural death, of face-to-face community, of productive labor and day-by-day experimentation, and of loving interactions between people rather than in the realm of exploitation, power, corruption and calculated violence. That will be a genuine shift in perspective!

The image of disregarding the person over whose shoulder we have been looking at most history up to now is a little awkward to handle, perhaps. It represents a difficult problem in "methodology." But this problem will seem easier to solve if we see the business of adopting a new perspective less in terms of a handicapping of our relationship with the oligarchs and foreigners who wrote the documents, and more as a matter of selecting new subjects to talk about. The task is to reassess the importance of these subjects, relative to that of the events with which history has mostly been concerned up to now. And that undertaking brings us to the fourth serious barrier to our shifting towards a people's perspective on history.

Barrier #4: exaggeration of the importance of wealth and power

One of the characteristics of colonialist or oligarchical histories of Latin American and other Third World countries, and as it turns out of anti-colonial and anti-oligarchical histories as well, is that they exaggerate the impact and importance of the Europeans and of the rich and powerful on the histories of the countries in question. Both approaches are guilty of this distortion. A xenocentric or an oligocentric history requires a strong colonialism or oligarchy to glorify; and a xenophobic or an oligophobic history requires a strong colonialism or oligarchy to intone against. The weaker, more ineffective, localized, casual or routinized the oppression, the less material it provides for the writing either of a history which whitewashes, or a history which raises up a protest against oppresion.

One result of this is that relatively minor events are often stretched into events of earth-shaking importance by historians. Columbus "discovered" America in 1492; Cortes "conquered" Mexico in 1521; Bolivar "liberated" Latin America in 1821; Lincoln "emancipated" the North American slaves in 1863 -- when in reality all of these were only moments signalling the beginnings or the culminations of processes which were much more complex, and which involved an interplay of the wills of many more people, than such simple formulations suggest. Huge areas of America resisted "conquest" or even "discovery" for centuries after Columbus and Cortes; neither Black people nor Latin America are yet free. But with the help of thousands of such misconceptions, the discovery, the conquest, the liberation and the emancipation have been attributed by lazy minds armed with conventional historical understanding, to the predictable work of institutions and the awesome personalities of great men rather than to the more interesting and more revealing interplay of multiple initiatives and adaptations which have characterized the real processes of colonization and decolonization in all countries. We conceive of the missionaries' having "converted" the Indians through an extraordinary or even miraculous "spiritual conquest" of America, rather than exploring in close detail how the Indians resisted, tried to understood and in the end contrived appropriate what they could use from preachings of Christian missionaries.

To call a "spiritual conquest" a conquest, to continue with this last example, is like calling an entirely voluntary but clumsy sexual union a rape. Both expressions have the serious shortcoming of concentrating our attention on the supposedly omnipotent perpetrator of the interaction, and making it very difficult to make out the features or judge the sentiments and motivations or sense the dignity of the supposedly passive victim. What we need is a way of talking about power as ordinary people have experienced and survived their encounters with it, how ordinary people have kept it in perspective, how ordinary people have put it in its place. A simple recounting of the accomplishments of power teaches us all but nothing about the history of any people, even when it is done in a spirit of denunciation. Pity for the downtrodden, and expressions of outrage on their behalf have a role in propaganda and politics; but they are a most inadequate substitute for the kind of a vital understanding of real human relationships, real human accomplishments and real human potentials which can come out of the search for a genuine people's history.

When we look at things from any particular vantage point, the objects at our end of the scenario

appear to have a more important part in the whole picture than they did before we started contemplating the scene. So a shift in perspective is a shift in the assessment of the relative importance of that which is closer to the observer's post. By the same token, the higher our assessment of the importance of any group or event, the more likely we are to be able to see it clearly and in its own terms, and the more valid and natural that angle of vision will come to seem to us. So a shift to a people's perspective will involve a decisive shift in the relative importance we assign to the events and people and behaviors that once seemed pivotal when we were viewing history from the perspective of power.

To go back to the notion of autonomy in terms of competing thought-worlds, it is possible without leaving our gringo thought-world to conceive of Latin American history in Latin American categories, or of a people's history in a people's categories. There is an autonomy in any people's historical experience, a matter of undeniable historical fact, which lies in the continuity of culture and of the family and communal social structures, a continuity which operates above and beyond -- or beneath -- the autonomy of independent economic and political power. Latin America and the rest of the Third World before the European conquests were autonomous in both respects -- at the level of the community as well as at the level of the state. Thereafter, the autonomy of the colonized world decreased rapidly at the state level, but not so rapidly at the community level -- even though many cultural and structural elements were "imposed" by the European colonialists and the cooperating local oligarchs, or voluntarily appropriated from them by the colonized themselves. Anything appropriated is by definition from that time forward the property of the appropriater, and operates in the context of his or her life and mind and community and culture. The influence of the powerful outsider is intermittent, but life for people in real families and communities on the face of the real earth is continuous.

This point is perhaps best made by reference to periods of "cataclysmic" social change imposed from the outside -- like the Conquest itself, or the development of cash cropping in areas of subsistence agriculture, or the nuclear and television age in the United States. Just as it is perfectly clear that nobody escapes the impact of these important developments, and that they are major historical events, it is also clear that the people who lived through them are children of people who lived before and parents of people who will live after they have passed -- and that because new people are born every year, and are 15 or 30 or 50 or 75 years

of age each year, the population is always totally diverse in terms of the points in individuals' lives in which any particular changes have occurred, and how they related to them.

Most college students today are at least thirty-five years younger than I have now gotten to be. I remember the first atomic explosion in 1945. I never saw a television until I was a junior in high school. Neither sexual intercourse nor the abuse of hallucinogenic substances was a normal activity among Cincinnati high school students in my youth (though much of our time was spent groping in the back seats of cars, and beer was consumed in great quantities!). The foreign policy of the United States seemed righteous to most young people then; and our ostensibly democratic political system appeared to function pretty well. My students today undoubtedly perceive most things quite differently than I do as a result of these differing experiences; but we are nevertheless participants in the same culture and the same period of history, and even in many of the same subcultures, here in the California of the 1990's. Unless we are totally caught up in the present-focussed view of things and never knew our grandparents, we are all also aware of deep continuities in ourselves and in our society. Yet we are living through one of the more cataclysmic periods of change the world has ever experienced. How much more must these considerations apply to the Brazilians, Argentines, Peruvians, or the Guatemalans who have lived at any moment in time since the holocaust of the 16th century?

There is no such staggering discontinuity in the history of any people as is implied by the perspective which considers as matters of greatest importance the rise and fall of its leaders, its ruling elites, its distinguished war-makers or its very civilization. No historical event or actor transforms people's lives in one fell swoop, and no prolonged process of change in people's lives is presided over and entirely controlled by a single individual or institution.

Barrier #5: underestimation of the victims

A final barrier to the establishment of a people's perspective on the history of any Latin American or Third World country is the notion that the European conquest of the world was made possible by the cultural decadence and enfeeblement of the conquered. That view may have some limited validity with regard to the peoples who disappeared altogether in the holocaust of conquest (wiped out, or nearly so, by the Europeans' diseases, bullets and systematic exploitation). But it is of no use at all for thinking about Latin

America's or the Third World's peoples as a whole -- peoples who, hower diminished in numbers and autonomy or traumatized by "conquest," have continued to reproduce and feed and clothe and house themselves, to produce and distribute goods and services for the enrichment of their rulers, and to forge the elements of new cultures unique in the world, without interruption during the past five centuries. These peoples' continuously evolving colonial and post-colonial cultures and social structures have constituted new forms in the face of colonialism. And these forms have remained coherent down at least to the mid-20th century, since which time they have received a new battering from the modern systems of military domination and of mass communication under foreign control -- new traumas whose consequences cannot yet be foreseen.

Foreign control in colonial circumstances did not imply the feebleness or the insignificance of the controlled, except in the political and military senses which at most moments in the lives of ordinary people were not the crucial senses. The impact on any society of the colonial power, and of elite power in general, was limited for the most part to elite affairs -- to politics, to economic management, to military administration, to the fine arts and letters. It filtered down into ordinary people's everyday lives only slowly. The impact upon Latin America's peoples of their colonial and neo-colonial elites has not been one in which the elite forced change, but one in which it gradually increased and intensified the people's exposure to new cultural elements, while increasing the incentives (both carrot and stick) to accept them. But the <u>acceptance</u> of these elements was done, necessarily, by the colonized themselves -- as and when they could and would accept them. The process was <u>their</u> process, one never effectively managed by the elite. This is a process which has been accelerating all over the world during the colonial and neocolonial era, and which has been called decay in some contexts, acculturation or development in others, social change at grassroots initiative in still others. For our present purpose, these processes were all the same. The changing was done everywhere <u>by</u> the people who changed, rather than to them; and the focus in studying the process of that change can safely be placed on the people who did the changing, rather than on the powerful who sought to bring it about. The powerful were those who schemed and threatened and cajoled in a continuing effort to have some measure of influence on the process of the people's change; but as the documents of colonial administrators and missionaries or of the U.S. State Department reveal, they were almost always frustrated --

at least over the short run -- by their lack of success. People made their own histories. With this clear lesson of history in mind, the dehumanizing notion that feeble Native American societies may have succumbed to a superior Western culture can be replaced by the dignifying view that the surviving Native Americans were strong and vital enough to adapt to colonialism's constraints, to appropriate the new cultural elements that appeared useful to them, to "grow with the times", to contrive their own sustainable arranvements, and to stay alive and hopeful in the face of extreme diversity.

Looking for a people's history

Let us now imagine the questions that need to be asked of Latin American history or any other, if it is to be rendered a people's history which can be useful to most people. What have been the main themes of ordinary human existence? What have been the central concerns of slaves, of peasants, of tribespeople? What forces have held their social organizations together? What have they believed in, suffered from, smiled at, gotten fighting mad about? How have people worked, how have they played, how have they resisted the impositions of the colonialists who beset them and of their own distant and exploitative rulers -- back then and over there, in the times and places where possessions and pleasures were few, where life was lived within walking distance of the place of birth, where hard work was the daily occupation of nearly everybody, where family and community were the exclusive focus of people's attentions, and where women were as numerous and thought to be as important for practical purposes as men?

The answers to questions such as these cannot be gotten at easily, but they do exist -- in chance references and between the lines of history books; much more in the historical documents from which historians asking the wrong questions have gotten most of their material, in art and music, in language and folklore, and in the archeological record of human activity. To get at these answers, it is necessary to have an unwaveringly clear view of the object of our inquiry, to concentrate our attention, to avoid being taken in or distracted from our purpose by the differing preoccupations of the authors we choose to read.

It is necessary also to learn to look at things patiently and in particular: at countries rather than continents, at ethnic groups, regions and particular communities rather than at countries. It is necessary to shun doggedly the need for a coherent, all-explaining view of any chapter of human experience, and be willing to be content with sometimes clear but shifting images of fragmentary things. Willing to come to

understand without really knowing (by which I do not mean feeling rather than thinking, but rather developing a thoughtful, working sense of things which have not yet been explained).

The shift in perspective which is required for a people's history involves not only acknowledging the importance of events and customs and behaviors at the people's end of things, but also de-emphasizing the role of their relations with elites and foreigners as a factor in their lives. The political economy of colonial Latin America had a profound effect on the life of every individual and community caunght up within it. But the question of loyalty to the Spanish King, which was of central concern to the document-writing colonial administrators, had virtually nothing to do with the way in which the llama herders of the Andes grew potatoes, or even with the way they mined the all-important silver they sent to Spain. It had little to do with the kinds of lives in community that those people managed to construct in their colonized situation, around productive activities such as these. It is therefore possible to discuss their history usefully and at length, without having much reference to the names of government officials or to the ins and outs of official policy for the administration of the colonies. The main concern even of Nicaraguans during the Sandinista 1980's was with the production and distribution of goods and services -- that is, with making a living -- and with the reproduction of their species, the enjoyment of their moments of leisure and the steady improvement of their life in society. Dealing with the threatening postures of the powerful United States, even fighting the Contras, was a necessary but less central concern to most Nicaraguan people, who would have preferred to leave that work to the specialists had it been up to them to decide. Yet that country was living for the entire decade on a war emergency footing, greatly handicapped and beleaguered, eventually even brought to its knees economically by the hostile actions of a neighboring power.

Studying the history of Latin America from the point of view of its relations with Spain or Portugal (or more recently of its relations with England or the United States) is like studying history through the biographies of great men, which is an enterprise akin to that of flashing your automobile's headlights on a moonlit night in the desert. The powerful lamps can illuminate a part of the scene brightly; but they will inevitably distract our attention from the glorious rest. Turn off the light, and things which were always there but invisible can be seen in detail once the eye adjusts to the moonlight. They may not be seen quite as distinctly as under the artificial lamp; but they can be seen in relation to the things around

them, and the total picture is beautiful and soothing to the spirit. It is not enough to make value judgements favorable to the people; not enough to contrive somehow to "look over the people's shoulders" at the historical tableau; not enough even to grant greater importance to the events and circumstances which must have been most important to the people. It is necessary also actively to deemphasize the importance of their relationships to the foreign powers, and then to deemphasize the importance of their relationships with their own elites and oligarchies, to get at the place in which the construction and the telling of a people's history will begin to be possible -- the place in which networks of relationships, and unsuspected causes and effects which were invisible from the "top" even in their own times can be examined. That this is true will be clear immediately if we try to imagine the means by which one might get at a history of street people, or housewives, or field workers, or school children right here in California today.

A people's history is one in which a clear picture of the ruling class or colonial power and its system of exploitation forms the backdrop but is not the subject, and in which social structure and economic relations, and patterns of subsistence, and family ties, and communal work and recreation loom larger than great personalities and events -- a history in which what actually happened to people is more important than what was legislated or planned for them. One in which the victims of war are dying people screaming in agony with their guts on the ground, rather than casualty figures. In which the builders of railroads are the men who sang, sweated and fought in the roadbed, and went whoring or wrote to their sweethearts on Saturday nights -- not the well-dressed business executives who deployed gangs of coolies from their boardrooms. It is a history of continuities through periods which from the other perspective appear to be full of change, a history of the gradual changes which have been wrought by the people themselves, changes stemming from a dignified and a thoughtful process of adaptation by trial and error to new circumstances -- changes which have continued relentlessly to occur even in periods which from the other perspective look stagnant. A people's history is a history which can be written by historians, and found out and sketched out and told for themselves by students and by everybody else -- if we are loving enough, and patient enough, and self-respectful enough, and hopeful enough for the future, to insist on finding it.