**Continuing the Conversation**:

**The Case for More Than “Deconstruction” in Micronesia**

***Introduction***

Some months ago I picked up a book that purported to offer a new and challenging view of education in Micronesia. The book, *Disassembling and Decolonizing School in the Pacific* by David Kupferman [2013], was much less a view of what education in the islands was, or even what it could be, than what it was not. By the time the author had finished “disassembling” (or, to use the more common term, “deconstructing”) education, there was nothing left to work with except the vague suggestion that somehow island people might be better served by reverting to the informal education–on the beach, in the home, in the canoe–that had served them so well for so long. Kupferman, like many others these days, is so determined to spare us the curse of colonization that he leaves island educators almost nothing to work with. What, then, can be salvaged of an education so contaminated with colonial power? we must ask by the end of his book.

Kupferman’s book, done with true postmodernist flair, reminds me of what I have been missing these past several years. I’ve always picked up articles and books in the hope of gaining a clearer understanding of how Pacific societies work today or did work in the past, how island institutions operate, and perhaps even a suggestion on where to begin in the work of improving them. But I find myself disappointed and increasingly irked by the failure of contemporary authors to deliver. Not that they *can’t*–many of them may have a deeper understanding of how these societies work than I do–but because they *won’t*. Do they see something that I, a relic of an older age, am missing? Or is it just that they’re so busy dissembling and deconstructing that they never get around to putting the pieces back together again?

Much of the writing on the Pacific today reveals an obsession with deconstruction–picking apart a literary or visual representation of a piece of the island world to show how flawed it is. Kupeferman, for instance, targets the education system in Micronesia, attempting to show us as he “disassembles” the system that it is not what it was represented to be–an institution that will train the young to be responsible and informed adult islanders. Kupferman’s work, however, is but one example; the targets of deconstruction are many. The target could be an institution (education), a social phenomenon (suicide), a geographical name (Micronesia)–anything that lays claim to presenting life as it is and the islands as they truly are. It could even be the stuff of popular magazines or movies–the way in which photos in *National Geographic* depict islanders, or the treatment of ukelele-picking Hawaiians in movies–as well as serious island histories written a generation or two ago. Anything pretending to present as reality some aspect of island life, past or present, is fair game for deconstruction.

***Deconstruction***

Why the obsession with deconstruction? Perhaps a generation of young scholars with roots in the islands may have simply grown tired of seeing themselves continually misrepresented in one way or another. Rather than dismiss this with a smile, as many Islanders might have done in the past, they have decided to fight back. Not just against the stereotypes–the caricature of the islander as easy-going to the point of laziness, the licentious male and the easily available female, the ever friendly and empty-headed local boy–but against representations that have posed a much more real danger. The country reports and the development plans that foreign officials, agents for international agencies, and finance managers bring with them lay out the social and political terrain and plot the course of development. “We know who you are, and we are here to help you grow into something even better in the future,” they seem to say.

Yet, the metaphors, the models and the very standards used to define Pacific societies are imposed by the West. Is feudalism, with its referent to medieval Europe, an accurate term to describe the Polynesian chiefly system, Islander scholars may ask. Does dependency theory, originating as it did in Latin America to describe economies supported by transnational corporations, offer the best model for understanding a Micronesian economy today? Must Pacific Island nations be held to the same standards of governance that obtain in other nations, even if this demands a measure of political transparency that may be at odds with traditional island norms? It is difficult to miss the dismissive tone that underlies such assumptions and privileges the West in nearly all cases. If island feudalism is an obsolete system under which much of Europe once labored, the implication is that the same is true of chiefdoms and monarchies in the Pacific. Furthermore, land rights divided and layered, as in feudalism and land ownership in many islands of the Pacific, are an obstacle to development. Even reciprocity, a cardinal value in all island societies, may be seen as the keystone of a “primitive” system and a value all too liable to degenerate into corruption, as much of a threat as an asset when measured by the sound governance practices invoked today [Huffer & So’o 2005, 312-3].

In a publication of mine I once suggested that what is known as the MIRAB economy might be a reasonable development route for resource-poor island nations to take [Hezel 2006]. While islanders might recognize remittances from the family abroad as an entirely acceptable form of support, development economists usually view this as a manifestation of economic dependence rather than a legitimate economic strategy. Since development economists and the financial institutions that support them define what is legitimate and what is not, islanders and those others who try to view life through the eyes of island people are at a decided disadvantage in a difference of opinion.

And then there is the problem of understanding gender roles and power in the islands for Westerners who are accustomed to measure the strength of women’s power by the number of seats they hold in the national legislature. Or try to explain to some reform-minded consultant from Geneva or Atlanta that a 911 call might not be the best way to ensure protection for a woman who is being threatened by her husband even if she has blood relatives in the area. Or try to explain to an outraged advocate of gender equality why the respect behavior a young islander shows to her “brother” by stooping or even crawling on her knees is not an act of utter debasement. (Her brother would be expected to show reciprocal respect to her by rising from his seat and sparing her any public embarrassment.)

If you were a Pacific Island scholar, what are the chances that you could hold your head high and keep ideals untarnished while attempting to do local history or anthropology or economics or social analysis in the face of deprecating assumptions such as these? It’s not surprising, then, that the field of academic inquiry is as often as not seen as a battleground, with Pacific Islanders defending their own territory from the presumptuous and faulty assertions of the outside establishment [eg, Wood 2006, 33ff]. With weapons in hand, they strike back at the “totalizing” enemy, parrying the enemy’s interpretation of their island past and present rather than striking a decisive blow by offering a better one.

Under such conditions, it’s no wonder that Islander academics and those who sympathize with them devote so much of their time and energy to dissecting the misleading representations of their own island world. They engage in the work of deconstruction–the attempt to take apart the misrepresentation of their world that is implied in the Western development model, the diagnosis of social ills offered by the overseas consultant, the snapshot of island life presented in a popular American magazine. In the minds of these Islanders, the struggle for independence continues, long after most of the Pacific Island nations have achieved their political autonomy. The contest today is being fought over the legitimacy of the standards that once served the islands so well even if they vary at times from those embraced by the West. The message delivered is: “You don’t own us any more. In fact, you don’t even understand who we are.”

***Foucault and Postmodernism***

It’s not surprising, then, that these young island academics might fall in line behind Michel Foucault, the prime cult figure of postmodernism. Foucault, the author of two illuminating volumes on the social history of the West–*Madness and Civilization* and *Punish and Discipline*–shows how those who exercise power in a society can establish as orthodox a view of reality that may be used to control others in that society. The definition of madness, he proposes, might become a catch-all category to include many forms of social deviance. This, in turn, could legitimize sweeping up such deviants in a medical treatment net and sending them off to a mental institution for the rest of their lives. Foucault, who discovered he was gay at a time when it was unthinkable to admit this publicly even in liberal society, had good reason to contest the way that reality was defined. In his uncompleted series on the history of sexuality [Foucault 1978-1986], he exhibits repeatedly his conviction that the “privileged” (in this case, the majority) have defined the subject in such a way as to marginalize homosexuals and put them at risk of punishment, just as European society had done for years with those it defined as mad or as criminals. Foucault’s growing conviction, expressed in the anthology *Power/Knowledge* [1980], was that systems of knowledge are inevitably means of exercising power–weapons used to force the submission of others and to control them.

Postmodernism, begun in the early 1960s as a reaction to colonialism in all its forms, goes even further in protecting beleaguered minorities from those who assail them. If knowledge is a form of power, if conceptual schemes can be used as systems to control those at the fringes of society, then postmodernism challenges our confidence in knowledge at its philosophical core. Postmodernism rejects as illusory the belief that a single thought system–whether a philosophy or theology or any other conceptual framework–might be broadened sufficiently to encompass the world. Postmodernism, in its early French expression, is founded on a “distrust of totalizing systems of knowledge which depend upon theory or concepts” [Young 2004, 41]. Much of the effort of its adherents, then, goes into the deconstruction of traditional assumptions: “disassembling established structures, deflating pretensions, exploding beliefs, unmasking appearances,” as Tarnas [1993, 401] puts it. Jacques Derrida, one of the foremost prophets of postmodernism, warns that one culture’s *logos*, or reason, is another culture’s myth [Derrida 1982, 213]. In his view, what those in the Western tradition would call “reason” is so contaminated by Western bias that we can only despair of finding a thought system that all people hold in common or can even be applied to all. Indeed, there is no empirical “fact” that is not inextricably bound up with interpretation, and there is no interpretation that can be called final.

Hence, any attempt at a universal history which would collapse non-western experience (the “Other”) into the history of the dominant tradition (the West) is dismissed as a colonialist project. The “Other,” because it is radically other, may not be folded into the dominant conceptual framework. Even beyond this, the “Other” is resistant to the best attempts of anyone outside that tradition to understand it. We can “gaze” at it without ever hoping to penetrate it, never mind fathom it. The best we can do is to offer a decidedly limited history–or “discourse,” if you will–which may bounce off others like balls on a billiard table rather than interact with them in a more generative fashion, as atoms might combine to form different molecular structures.

***The Impasse***

Foucault and the postmodernist thought with which he is linked may offer necessary cautions to those of us too quick to impose our view of reality on those we study. The dangers of imposition of an ethnocentric definition of reality on the “Other”–to use the term so dear to those schooled in this tradition–are too great to ignore. All of us positioned between cultures, islanders and expatriates alike, have struggled again and again with these dangers. My quarrel with postmodernism, however, is a serious one: to the extent that it presents the “Other” as veiled in mystery and inaccessible, it would seem to deny the possibility of a serious conversation between oneself and the “Other.” The exchange that should result in a shared understanding of one another’s viewpoint–the growing familiarity with one another that commonly occurs between individuals–is categorically dismissed. Instead, the encounter between cultures, framed as it is in terms of power, is defined as nothing more than a contest between oneself and the “Other.”

Foucault has identified the danger that the systems of thought may be used to shape reality in such a way as to relegate certain groups to the fringes of society or even term them as miscreants. He has clearly established the point that systems of knowledge can be employed to exercise power over others. Indeed, those who invoke Foucault today assume that the attempt to define reality constitutes a power play on the part of these people. But is that truly what these systems were intended to do? Might there not be a more innocent function of such thought systems?

Representations of reality in the form of a worldview, even if they are distrusted as “totalizing systems of knowledge,” answer to the fundamental human need to get a handle on the world. As we name things by imposing on them words, create concepts, and organize these systematically into a worldview, we are drawing a map and building structures that forge a bond between individuals, at least in our own culture, through a shared understanding of life. To define reality in this way is to craft the tools necessary for understanding the world, but these tools need not become weapons, I would like to believe. Admittedly, this shared understanding does not extend over the whole globe. Yet, it is unlikely that this was intended as exclusionary, much less as a device to marginalize those who operate within another system, even if it may in fact have this effect on those outside the system.

As one group after another constructs its own worldview–or sense of reality–we are faced with the problem that Derrida pointed out: “one culture’s reason is another culture’s myth.” There are any number of “Others” on the table, each with a claim to reason and reality. Must we think of these “Others” as impermeable pockets of mystery, incapable of being partially understood and respected, even if never totally probed? Is it possible that knowledge is not just a tool for control, as Foucault would have it, but a bridge for crossing the chasm between “Others?”

***Moving Beyond Deconstruction***

The problem with deconstruction is that in the end we are left with a dismemberment of the original work, the vital organs scattered all over the morgue slab. It’s helpful to know what the cause of death was for the unfortunate victim, but shouldn’t that translate into sounder health practices for the living? There is the danger that our social scientists and historians and social critics today have become literary coroners. Don’t we have a right to expect that today’s practitioners will attempt the type of constructive work that is needed to replace, or at least to correct, the works they have so avidly dismembered? In too many instances, the “re-membering” of the body parts that is promised is not delivered.

Individuals like Kupferman may feel obliged to “disassemble” education in Micronesia, if only to make the uninitiated aware of the range of differences between education in the West and what passes for education in the islands. But let’s hope that it is not done simply to keep the screen of opaqueness unbreached and so to defend the islands against new modern-day forces of colonization. Such authors may wish to write at length about how the very notion of education in the islands differs from that in the West, how the curriculum may serve the purposes of agents of modernization more than the simple villagers, how higher education especially has dampened interest in traditional island skills and the simple life they supported, how education might be responsible for reshaping the island family today. Lay out the situation as seriously and as clearly as possible, but do so with the understanding that this will constitute an invitation to others to respond.

Another topic that baffles outsiders is suicide, a subject that greatly interested Foucault, who is reputed to have made a few attempts on his own life in his younger days. Westerners often descend on the islands with the confidence that they have the tools required to help Micronesians reduce the high rates of suicide in their islands. In my experience, there is a great deal of deconstruction that is needed, for in the minds of these well-intentioned psychologists there is an almost necessary link between clinical depression and suicide. In their reasoning, such a desperate act must be occasioned by a mental condition that persists over a period of time; the depression almost certainly is caused by one’s perceived failure as a person. After all, they suppose, the individual sense of self-worth is based on personal attainment rather than on the strength of the person’s social identity. This may be wrong-headed and the assumptions might be inapplicable to island society, however solid they are in the West. Even so, it could be helpful to both parties to carry on the conversation rather than to simply dismiss the consultant.

Likewise with other sensitive topics. The objections to using the term feudalism to describe the land systems are certainly valid. To attempt to capture the complexity of island systems by equating them to a medieval system is less than satisfying. But the people who use such terms are doing what we all do–explain by way of a rough analogy something complicated and unfamiliar. Still, this approximation, as rough as it is, sheds a bit of light on a subject that baffles many of us who have lived here for years. Better some light on the subject than none–unless people fear that they will be forever pinned to the board by the term “feudalist.”

The results of the conversations that ensue between the Westerner and the “Other” can be many. The outsider with his metaphors, his analytical framework and his conceptual schemes will be forced to redraw his map of reality. Islanders will profit by having to articulate their own cultural values and patterns, and possibly even picking up an idea or two that they hadn’t considered before. All this, of course, can only be done if both parties believe that such a conversation will eventually yield a closer approximation to what we have always called truth.

***Conclusion***

My problem with deconstruction, as should be clear by now, is that it often serves to end the conversation rather than extend it. All too frequently the message sent by such works as Kupferman’s volume on Micronesian education is that the terrain is off-limits to all but the initiated. The effect of invoking the “Other,” as Kupferman repeatedly does, is to post a “No Trespassing” warning to all outsiders.

While nearly everyone would agree that the “Other” can never be plumbed to its depths, never fully measured, many of us would like to think that we can come to an ever richer appreciation of it as it gradually reveals itself to us. We learn to understand human persons, over the course of repeated encounters with the individual, through a relationship that passes from mere acquaintance to friendship and love. Isn’t it reasonable to assume that we can depend on much the same in our attempt to understand cultures and histories?

The best of the traditionalists among those academics working in the Pacific accepted that what they wrote was necessarily blinkered and partial. Yet, they wrote in the belief that their narrative, with all its limitations and partiality (in both senses of that word), opened wider windows on the society and its past. The best of them expected that their works would have to be redone every generation or two, but that the result of this ongoing process would be an even more faithful and penetrating understanding of the islands. In other words, they believed that we might asymptotically approach the truth, although never quite reaching it and certainly never encapsulating it.

As one who has spent nearly his adult life “on the beach”–that is, in that middle ground between the local and the foreign–I have persisted in the belief that the “Other” is not thoroughly opaque. My own life’s work has been to promote the conversation between Islanders and outsiders, as among Micronesians of different linguistic and ethnic groups, in the hope that all would be enriched with an appreciation for what each group has to offer. At the end of it all, I hoped, the worldview of all would be larger and more detailed and much more representative of what we so cavalierly refer to as reality. For this to happen, however, the “Keep Out” signs have to be taken down, the conversation has to be resumed, and the deconstruction has to proceed to reconstruction.

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