Rationality and Fantasy in Styrian Villagers

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RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur décrit comment un village autrichien se modernise graduellement. Deux facteurs psychologiques semblent favoriser cette tendance: une orientation rationnelle alliée à une grande capacité d'imagination.

The modern complexion of rural life witnessed in the homes and on the farms of workers and farmers in the Styrian (Austrian) village of Altirdning impressed me greatly when I[1] first came to know that community in 1960.[2] Since then, during return visits, I have noted increasing numbers of farmers and nonfarm workers, the latter commuting from the village to jobs (Honigmann 1963), adding baths, electric appliances, and other domestic comforts as well as large, new farm machinery, silos, and modern barns for the dairy cattle. My ability to be impressed with those phenomena no doubt stems from the fact that I first visited Altirdning a few years after having done fieldwork in West Pakistan. There my interest had been directed to community development and I found the pace of modernization to be extremely slow. Naturally I looked for an explanation of the different trend in Austria.

Increasingly through the years my inclination has grown to augment psychological explanations for the progress of change and modernization with another viewpoint which I designate by the term, situational dynamics (Honigmann, 1966). Though it is

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unnecessary to develop the theory here, briefly it can be said that psychological traits favorable to modernization constitute only one factor in the situation that supports them. I assume that people are highly likely to adopt new forms of behavior that are presented in a situation so largely different from the old that it demands nearly totally new forms of adaptation. Naturally, the more dramatically different and challenging the new demands of adaptation, the greater the resultant change is likely to be. Illustrations are provided by the modernization of the Manus islanders (Mead 1956) and by what happened within a single generation to Eskimo trappers who moved off the land and sea to homes and jobs in a modern, eastern Arctic town (Honigmann and Honigmann, 1965). Confronted by new arenas of action, participation by the Manus and Baffin Island Eskimo in their new situations led them to develop new meanings and values. As a result, their cultures became substantially transformed. Particularly the dairy farmer in Altirdning is located in a situation that has allowed him to modernize. The valley with its abundant meadows, mountain stands of timber, and accessibility to markets contains varied ecological resources for him to utilize. Postwar prosperity increased his economic opportunities while a cooperative processing plant and marketing system enabled him effectively to take advantage of those opportunities. Government agencies propagating new techniques in word, print and by demonstration have also contributed to the process. Meanwhile the worker, backed by his income, like the farmer, learned new standards of life from advertisements and other published and broadcast sources.

These introductory remarks set the context of what follows. They scarcely attempt to rule out the assumption that personality factors play a part in cultural modernization, though they do pose the question whether from the standpoint of motivation, so-called "favorable" psychological traits are not precipitated by a modernizing cultural situation as much as they further the process of modernization. In the absence of historical material to cope with that problem, I will be concerned mainly with identifying two psychological strains currently detectable in the village of Altirdning. Although these strains could pull in contrary directions, they are actually mutually supportive and congruent with the tenor of modern life in the village community. The first, with its several

manifestations, I call a rational orientation and the second, which cultivates imagination, I perceive as revolving around fantasy. I shall take each in turn.

THE RATIONAL ORIENTATION

In the category of rational orientation I would put the villagers' attitudes toward work, particularly their view that work is not intrinsically onerous or undesirable but that it carries intrinsic rewards as well as opportunities for self-actualization (Cf. Maslow n.d.). Hence work falls into the company of play and art. Unquestionably Altirdningers possess a high level of need-achievement but achievement as I identify it in the specific context of this culture carries overtones not included in the term as it is used by psychologists studying the relationship of personality to economic development. The villagers' concern with achievement is illustrated in almost every issue of the weekly *Ennstaler* when public attention is drawn to individuals who have reached what the community regards to be an admirable status. Brief paragraphs note that certain youths have sucessfully passed examinations entitling them to practice as journeymen or master masons, hairdressers, or plumbers; men and women are identified who celebrate advanced birthdays or wedding anniversaries; young people's graduations from agricultural school are announced, and recognition is given to a man's fifty years' membership in the war veterans' society. In the village, passage rites, like graduation from *Volksschule* or First Communion, are celebrated in the family, the child being the target of attention manifested by gifts or a journey on which he is taken to some showplace in the vicinity by an aunt or uncle. These ritual gestures, like the attitudes to work, are indicative of a readiness or capacity for vigorous action, self-assertion, doing, or achievement on which the modernizing trends in Altirdning at least partially rest. They reveal a correlation between achievement and personal identify which is further evidenced by the frequent use of honorifics, like "Herr Professor," and terms of reference that utilize the individual's occupation ("Frau Gruber, the postmistress," or "Herr Franz, the cabinetmaker"). A person is not only motivated to achieve; the fact of his achievement in some fields

at least is likely to be periodically recognized and socially reinforced by the way his social being is identified with his role.

Following the language of Herbert J. Gans (1962), I would identify these Austrian villagers as routine-seekers rather than as action-seeker and this characteristic is also suited to modernization. Nationally they very much appreciate a *maessig* (temperate), stable way of living and rank high the economic and emotional security of the individual and his family. According to Gans (1962:28), the routine-seekers' "way of life is marked by a highly regular and recurring scheduling of behavior patterns, and nearly all their activities are organized into routine. There may be a regular menu for every day of the week, which differs little from one week to the next... A similiar regularity is observable in the celebration of holidays, giving of gifts, and in many of the other spheres of life in which the middle-class person strives for novelty and variety." In contrast the action-seeker's life is episodic. It is given to a search for thrills and welcomes the chance to face and overcome challenges. Altirdningers are not so Dionysian (to employ a familiar term for a similar cultural orientation), except possibly in the case of a few men who look for the opportunity on weekends to lose themselves in drunkenness. But on Monday morning even they are almost certain to be ready for work. Variety is good, but in the routine-seeker's hierarchy of values, it should not be cultivated to a point where it interferes with prior necessities of life. The value Altirdningers attach to variety is expressed in several ways. New experiences, the absence of monotony, and vacations are at least ideally encouraged. People like to vary their diets from day to day; they believe that a change of air benefits health and that periodic *Erholung* is essential (though farmers complain that they cannot go away on holidays as other people can). An informant maintained a change of water to be healthful, the different chemical elements found in various localities exerting different, useful physiological influences. Holidays with their accompanying fantasy are one occasion that allow even the highly routinized farmers occasionally to introduce variety into lives. Before turning to that aspect of the personality, however, let me remark on one further, related tendency that is more highly developed in some people than in others, the inclination to become obsessively preoccupied with even mild dilemnas. Such

people worry long and intensely, for example, over a broken implement, an unfulfilled obligation, an expected guest who might arrive while they are absent from home for an hour or two, or a major task that must be done soon but which for one reason or another — maybe rain in the case of haying — is blocked. With obsessiveness goes a readiness to become depressed when "important" things go wrong, as well as a strong consciousness of self in social relationships (to which is related my previous observation on the villagers' developed sense of personal identity). Obsessive and self-preoccupied people very deliberately rehearse and thoughtfullly plan their actions, ponder the possible consequences of alternative lines of conduct, and calculate the possible cost or gain in respect or good feeling that a given course of behavior carries in their society. One day my hostess said that she had given her radio to a repair firm whose owner had called to pick it up immediately upon her request. He had promised to return it equally promptly. The woman recalled that her neighbor had also given a radio to the same firm and had suffered from a torturously long delay before it was delivered. In detail she spelled out that she wouldn't dare to reveal to this neighbor how quickly her radio was returned (for she was counting on its quick return) lest it make the neighbor jealously resentful of the special attention that my hostess had received. The neighbor might angrily mention the differential treatment to the firm's owner, causing the latter to become annoyed with my anxious hostess. Obsessive self-concern, careful planning, and reflective thoughtfulness insure that people are dependable, even when impersonal or organizational goals are at stake. By contributing to diligent and careful work habits, the trait directly supports modernization and the economic productivity on which development in turn depends. To be sure, excessive concern and self-consciousness can hamper living. Yet a community like Altirdning, where everybody is supposed to be cautious, rational, and concerned, is tolerant of obsessiveness and gives it much scope. Therefore it is unlikely that obsessive behavior will lead to social difficulties as quickly as it might in a social system whose culture is marked by greater flexibility and less demanding of responsibility. In the latter, an obsessive person would stand out much more conspicuously and might more quickly land in trouble with his fellows.

SYMBOLIC RICHNESS AND FANTASY

I turn now to the second and imaginative strain in the personality of these Styrian people, in which symbolic richness and fantasy are cultivated and manifestly enjoyed. By symbolic richness[3] I refer to the culture's stock not only of Christian saints and related religious figures but also of other and presumably older folkloristic concepts, like the Bishop and related characters belonging to the midwinter ceremonies or the clowning woodcutters who make people laugh when the Maypole is cut up summertime. Woodcutters are a recurrent theme in the village repertory of fantasy and humor. The Maypole ceremony burlesques them, for they appear blackened, roughly dressed, and uncouth in manner, acting out the social stereotype by which members of this relatively low-status occupation are rather fondly regarded by the rest of the community. Fantasy is expressed in masquerades, clowning, explanatory tales, and other activities which engage not only children but adults as well. The referents of the symbols involved are not solely person-like but include special occasions, seasons, and special day of the year like St. Michael's Day and the night of St. John's Day. Fantasy revolves around the special significance of time and place, and includes nostalgic attachments to certain places, like the high moutain meadows *(Almen)*. Here farmers formerly pastured their milk cattle in summer, leaving them in the care of an ideally young and beautiful dairy maid who used much of the milk in cheese-making. Changing technology, better markets, and new values for young women have deprived the *Almen* of much of their economic significance, but an emotional attachment to them and to their former economic utility continues in song and story. On weekends and holidays people visit the high-lying meadows. Several, famous ones have in recent years become tourist and ski resorts connected to the lower valleys by roads and ski-lifts. Their modern use as summer quarters for heifers, who are cared for by grandfather or hired man, evokes no romantic sentiments.

[3] My thinking in this section has been influenced by Margaret Mead. See Mead, 1935:v-x, 310,332; 1939, and 1947.

Part of the appeal of tourism in this part of Austria lies in the profitable opportunity it gives for villagers to dip into their store of symbolic richness and to renew their attachment to folkloristic concepts. Fires on St.-John's Night, for example, are prepared more by the management of large resorts than by individual farmers or their children. In the adjoining communtiy of Oeblarn, where tourism has developed into an especially thriving sideline followed by farmers and others, each Thursday the community presents a *Volkstuemlichenach* (An Evening of Custom). The guests are treated to traditional entertainments which are as important for the villagers who participate in or present them as they are for enlivening the visitors' vacations. During the summer of 1967, Irdning (the market town to which Altirdning is closely attached) also presented a costume festival that appealed to summer guests.[4]

Other behavior related to the nonrational sphere of imagination is revealed when villagers (all but a few skeptics) idealize what they hold to be "natural": the country, rye bread, wild berries, wild mushrooms, and herbal medicines. They rate such items superior to what they conceive to be artificial counterparts — cities and white flour, for example, in which the hand of civilization has intruded. At first glance, a stranger might suppose that the traditional conservatism of the peasant is making itself evident. However, like the rest of fantasy, the dichotomy between natural and artifical and the ideal preference for the former over the latter, has not held up modernization. We are dealing with a kind of compartmentalization of values, so that attachment to sentiment isn't allowed to interfere with the importance of being practical. Nobody in the village would ever insist on herbal medicine to the point of refusing to call a doctor in case of serious illness.[5]

[4] In sentimentalizing and dwelling on bygone rural customs (as in respect to many other cultural traits), Altirdning is far from unique. After all, *Volkskunde,* which studies premodern folk customs, with much appreciation and relish is a very well developed field in Europe and has influenced the ethnography of rural life even in the Soviet Union (Dunn and Dunn, 1967:94).

[5] I have not found fantasy to include an image of limited good or that resultant syndrome of envy to which Foster (1965) has called attention. My principal informants on this subject gave me no grounds to think that an image of limited good sundered human relationships in this community. Several times in responding to my invitation to talk about local expressions of envy in behavior, people responded with statements about how hard they or others

What then are the functions of the imaginative life in this culture and how do they relate to the pronounced rational orientation in personality whose congruence with cultural modernization I have emphasized? In my study of the displacement of summer pasturing on the *Almen* and the worked-over retention of this pattern of ecological adaptation in sentiment and fantasy (Honigmann, 1964), I used that example to hypothesize that the Altirdning villagers are a nostalgic people who simultaneous possess a practical and rational orientation of personality so genuine that it prevents them from clinging to tradition for its own sake. The rational orientation in their personality is manifested when they weigh alternatives and make a selection in terms of what promises to work best or will bring the greatest advantage. Hence their sentimental attachment to Alpine pasturage as it was practiced in the past "costs" them nothing and provides them with emotional release without obstructing other behavior. Such sentimental attachment to tradition, I suggested then and repeat now, even makes change more palatable then it otherwise would be to a practical people hopeful of progress. Subsequent fieldwork, which has been in part the basis of this paper, has confirmed and elaborated the hypothesis.

I would augment the explanation by pointing out that the Austrians are not a highly spontaneous people. They are far too cautious, rational, planful, and sometimes obsessive to act impulsively. Gaiety is deliberately procured through moderate drinking. Rituals which feature fantasy and bring out the symbolic richness of the culture also serve as channels for a degree of pleasurable emotional release that is beyond anything invested in everyday social relationships. Altirdning partakes of the highly ordered, bureaucratized character of Austrain national culture. People accept an ordered life as desirable because of the manifest advantages it brings. The epitome of this attitude may be seen in the mountain streams that descend to the village as they begin their long journey to the Danube and the sea. Although such a stream

have had to work to achieve the degree of success that their less fortunate rivals might envy. They seemed to be saying that when one works hard, success can be achieved. Success is available to anyone who tries for it. This attitude, of course, is congruent with the belief that work is good. Such views are a long way from the notion that good is limited.

is called "wild" or "natural" (it is a *Wildbach*), its flow is closely confined in a stone-lined channel and regulated by weirs to protect the surrounding land. Similarly the countryside is neatly cropped, the river bottom drained, the mountain roads ditched to slow up runoff water, and the high slopes reforested after timber has been cut. Artifice is deeply embedded in the rural setting and just as firmly do forethought, reason, and practicality firmly contain the people's emotional life and sentiments. There is nothing contradictory here because the people themselves never confuse ideal and real. Both are equally valuable and in different ways rewarding.

Fantasy embodied in certain seasonal rituals helps to bridge the world of children and adults and thereby helps to reinforce a basic attitude toward young people. In Altirdningers' conception, children are not to be rigorously excluded from the adult world. Rather they are allowed to be present in adult company, may overhear adult conversation, and are generally tolerated as long as they behave properly, that is, with restraint. Introduction to adult responsibilities begins early, with tasks commensurate with a child's ability and strength. One object in such early training, whether it occurs in home or school,is to familiarize children with the adult world's values and purposes. Consequently, in the village at least, a clear-cut youth culture is hard to identify. My 23-year old son independently confirmed this observation when, fresh from the U.S., he remarked (mistakenly, I am sure) that people in the village didn't seem to enjoy themselves. He explained that he saw few groups of young people abroad and found small opportunity for sociability. (He soon discovred a youth culture in the adjacent market town, Irdning. Here cafes are mostly taken over by young people in the evening but revert to older adults on Sunday, at least until nightfall. We rarely saw or heard of Altirdning youth in such parties.) In the village, young people may enter a tavern or attend a *Gartenfest* (fair) in a group, but they would be involved in the company of adults who sit at the same table drinking the same drinks or who dance the same steps in response to equally familiar tunes. While young people and older adults follow somewhat different patterns of dress, clothing is not extremely divergent between age categories and as a result possesses no overtone of being emblematic of age status. Therefore

a high degree of continuity exists between adults and children in Altirdning. It manifests itself, first, in the fact that adults believe children should early be incorporated in the grown-up world and, second, in the identification that adults feel with children. Such identification is partly mediated by the generations' common participation in many fantasies, particularly those associated with Christmastide. Such engrossment with fantasy is undoubtedly stronger in children who, if they are young, don't even distinguish between reality and imagination. While adults do make the distinction, they encourage children's more thorough commitment to folkloristic figures. They may even admire the child's ability to believe thoroughly or with more conviction than they themselves can any longer muster. Fantastic figures do sometimes embody moral themes or inspire fear in children. Then they serve for children's socialization, augmenting but not substituting for the socializing power of adults. By aiding adults to supervise children, folklore of this type may well lend itself to achieve that degree of discipline, restraint, and "oversocialization" that Altirdningers possess and that serves as a useful adjunct to modernization.

The whole setting in which parents and children play out their fantasies is replete with what Margaret Mead (1939) calls "plot". By this she means essentially that human relationships are endowed with heightened complexity. Fantasies of bogeymen, gift-givers, saints associated with their grottos, and mountain shrines add to the complexity of the child's realm, peopling the world with additional figures whom he cognizes as able to affect his welfare and who people his imagination. From plot, Mead's theory states, derives a readiness for symbolic richness freshly installed in the following generation. This hypothesis seems to hold for Altirdningers where a capacity for fantasy and symbolic richness coexists with rationality. Both orientations are congruent with a readiness for modernization.

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