Anthropologica, XXIV (1982), p. 19-25

Interest Groups, Alienation, and Humanity: A Reply to René Gadacz

BRUCE G. TRIGGER
McGill University

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur indique certaines erreurs factuelles qu'a faites Gadacz (1981) et réfute l'assertation que la méthode de distanciation déshumanise ceux qui sont le sujet de l'étude.

In an article published in *Anthropologica*, René Gadacz (1981) has offered a critique of the methods and assumptions outlined in two programmatic statements that appear in the Introduction to my book *The Children of Aataentsic* (Trigger 1976) and a paper titled "Brecht and Ethnohistory" (Trigger 1975).[1] Inasmuch as Gadacz greatly misrepresents major aspects of my position and claims that an analytical technique I employed effectively dehumanizes the seventeenth century Huron, I believe that a response is in order, particularly so that those not familiar with my work on the Huron will not be misled.

Gadacz (1981: 184-185) alleges that, like Wilcomb E. Washburn, I advocate that ethnohistorical studies should be concerned only with the interrelationships between Indian and White cultures, not with the inner dynamics of the groups themselves. This is a curious claim to make about a book that is subtitled "A History of the Huron People to 1660" and which states at the outset that its aim

[1] The two texts that Gadacz cites are indeed closely related. "Brecht and Ethnohistory" was originally written as part of the Introduction to *The Children of Aataentsic*, but was published separately when I became convinced that its methodological concerns were too specialized to be included in a substantive historical study.

was "to write a history of the Huron, not of New France or of French-Indian relations in the seventeenth century" (Trigger 1976: xxi). Moreover, throughout the book it is evident that analyses begin and end with the Huron and that other groups are considered only insofar as they are relevant for understanding what happened to the Huron.

The source of confusion is Gadacz's misconstruing of the term "interest group" to mean "ethnic group" (in this case referring specifically to the French and the Huron). Readers would have been alerted to this error had four critical words not been replaced by dots in the quotation from my work reproduced on page 182 of his paper. The concept of interest group, which was crucial for my analysis of Huron history, was borrowed from the work of various historians and sociologists. It was defined by me as follows:

> Interest groups are not the abstract social categories established for purposes of comparative research by sociologists and ethnologists; instead, they are groupings that emerge as a result of common interests in real historical situations. Some of them were cliques that had a recognized corporate existence in their own time, others are constructs of the historian. To be a valid interest group, however, its members must have had implicitly shared common goals and supported one another in common action. (Trigger 1976: 23)

I also pointed out that:

> In Canada, Indians and Europeans rarely constituted two homogeneous interest groups, or even lined up as two opposing teams. Groups of European fur traders, government officials, and diverse orders of the clergy often competed with each other more than with the Indians. Likewise, many Indian tribes were noted for their factionalism and internal disagreements even in periods of strength. Not infrequently, common interests gave rise to alliances that cut across ethnic lines and united various Indians and Europeans in opposition to their own people. (Trigger 1976: 24)

Earlier studies were criticized for being:

> Generally concerned with how whole tribes responded to European contact. These studies dealt mainly with features that entire peoples had in common; what happened to individuals or to specific groups within a tribe was of interest only in relationship to the more general process of adaptation. (Trigger 1976: 22)

I made it clear that I had adopted this approach because I wished to avoid writing a history in which explanation is largely premised upon the idiosyncratic behaviour of individuals. I did this partly because I wished to write social history and partly because

comprehensive biographical data about individual Hurons were very limited for the seventeenth century. Yet, by comparing what is recorded about how individuals of ascertainable status and family affiliations behaved in specific circumstances, it was possible to study the history of tribes in terms of the behaviour of various interest groups. For example, by the 1640s, the Huron tribal divisions were cross-cut by Christian, pro-French traditionalist, and anti-French traditionalist factions, which became the dominant interest groups in the final years of the confederacy. When I stated that I was not primarily concerned with "the inner dynamics of the groups themselves" (Gadacz 1981: 183), I was rejecting a preoccupation with the personalities and idiosyncratic behaviour of individual members of interest groups, not, as Gadacz suggests, with the ethnographic characteristics of ethnic groups.

The charge that I ignored ethnographic knowledge is as baseless as the claim that I ignored the inner dynamics of ethnic groups (Gadacz 1981: 184-185). In *The Children of Aataentsic* I specifically argued that "an historian's experience and personal judgement are not enough to permit him unaided to come to terms with the ideas and values that were part of the Indians' way of life prior to the coming of the Europeans" (Trigger 1976: 6) and that "without the knowledge of tribal life that only anthropology can provide, ethnohistory is impossible" (Trigger 1976: 17). In particular, I noted that the ethnographic study of how cultures function as total systems provides an important framework within which the more piecemeal historical data about Indian cultures can be fitted together (Trigger 1976: 15). I also discussed at length the problems involved in using recent ethnographic information to understand better the historical records of Indian behaviour and culture in the seventeenth century (Trigger 1976: 13-17). In his review of my book, James Axtell (1978: 137) noted that "Trigger's study does not simply stand Euro-American stereotypes and fictions on their heads, but forcefully and consistently interprets all European and Indian actions, thoughts, and motives from the perspective of Huron culture".

I am not prepared to accept Gadacz's (1981: 184) position that motives "are synonymous with the actions they purport to describe" and "go no further than to reiterate what has already occurred". No reasonable historian claims infallibility or comprehensiveness in discerning the motives that influenced the behaviour of individuals

or groups. This is especially so when dealing with members of cultural traditions that are considerably different from one's own. Yet it is clear that there are many things that an individual or group may wish to do but does not do as a result of calculations of self-interest. That actions and policies are very often the outcome of conflicting motives is repeatedly exemplified in my analysis of behaviour throughout my book. It is clearly wrong to deny values, emotions, and reason significant roles in shaping human actions. The investigation of motives is essential if the historian is to relate actions to cultural traditions as well as to the emotions and analytical abilities of individual human beings.

Gadacz (1981: 185) asserts that my use of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (VE) represents an unsuccessful attempt to achieve value-free scientific neutrality at the expense of dehumanizing the Huron and reducing them, as objects of study, to an inferior position. He sees this as synonymous with an ethnocentric conception of rationality. Throughout his paper Gadacz restricts himself to commenting on statements of methods and assumptions without reference to how they are applied. He does not cite examples of how my use of this technique dehumanizes or invalidates my interpretations of the Huron or their history. Nor does he observe that the concepts of VE and interest group are closely related. The interest group is the equivalent of Brecht's character. In my work I stated that I used the VE as a device for achieving parity in my analysis of Native and White behaviour, despite the disparate quality and quantity of the data available about the two peoples, and for avoiding passing ethnocentric value judgements on the behaviour of individuals or groups (Trigger 1975: 55). I did not claim it to be a means for achieving dispassionate scientific objectivity or to avoid value judgements. In my opinion it is not so much a question of whether or not an ethnohistorian ought to make value judgements as when and how they are made. What Brecht did not wish was that his audience should identify with any particular character or group in his plays and, on the basis of sentimental or emotional considerations, pass a superficial or uncritical moral judgement on them. Instead, the audience was to be encouraged to regard each character as the representative of a particular viewpoint or interest group and to analyse their interactions with critical detachment. Then, at the end of the play, the audience could pass a more substantial judgement on the

situation in which all these people were caught up. Like Brecht, my ultimate aim was to encourage the reader to understand a total situation rather than the problems or reactions of individuals or groups considered in isolation. While I sought to encourage a dispassionate understanding of individuals or groups as agents of an historical process, this does not mean that I did not morally evaluate the total situation of Indian-White contact that I was studying or expect and even encourage my readers to do the same. Indeed, the final paragraph of *The Children of Aataentsic* constituted a direct invitation to do so.[2]

Brecht's VE was also related to a materialistic view of history and human behaviour which maintains that "the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and intellectual processes of life" (Marx and Engels 1962, I: 362-363). Like Brecht, I believe that a materialistic perspective provides the most satisfactory basis for understanding human affairs, and such a perspective structured my analysis of Huron history and of early contact between Indians and Europeans. While recently revising my work for an up-dated, French language edition of *The Children of Aataentsic* (Trigger n.d.), I did not find that subsequent research has called into question interpretations based on this method. For example, as a result of a brilliant cross-cultural reconstruction of the symbolic meanings that the native peoples of eastern North America assigned to native copper, marine shell, and quartz crystals, George Hamell (1981) has provided valuable insights into how European goods were initially perceived and valued by native Americans and why most of them flowed into mortuary contexts. Yet the speed with which the technological advantages of certain European goods came to be appreciated and the obvious emphasis soon given to obtaining them in situations of scarcity strongly reinforce a materialistic analysis. This suggests that, while attention must be paid to the idiosyncracies of cultural traditions, a materialistic orientation is a valuable tool for understanding the nature of individual cultures, as well as how they

---

[2] These passages are extracted from a written (but unpublished) comment on a paper by James Axtell titled "A Moral History of Indian-White Relations Revisited" presented at the 75th Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Philadelphia, April 1, 1982. His paper is scheduled to be published in *The History Teacher*.

change and interact with one another. Such an approach mediates between an extreme cultural relativism, that can degenerate into being a license for romantic exoticism and extreme historical particularism, and unilinear evolutionism, which may end up pseudoscientifically justifying bigotry and oppression. Historical materialism can provide a mechanism for trying to understand whole societies and the relationships between them which influence people's behaviour and lead them, in self-interest, to commit brutal and inhuman acts. Such knowledge can be used as part of a larger struggle to eliminate the kind of oppression that has afflicted native peoples since earliest European contact, by building a society in which the exploitation of one group by another is made increasingly difficult and ultimately becomes impossible. As part of such an approach, moralizing ceases to be a commentary that is detached from the concrete practice of everyday living. Instead it becomes an integral part of the search for knowledge on which effective social action can be based.

Finally, Gadacz (1981: 188), in championing "historical ethnology", appears to claim a privileged position for ethnography. Ethnological knowledge is vital for ethnohistory, but so is historical and historiographic knowledge. Much remains unknown about the seventeenth century Huron. We can hope to learn more about them from ethnographic research, however much the Iroquoians of today are different from their ancestors of 300 years ago. Yet much too can be learned from comparative ethnology (as Hamell demonstrates), from archaeological research, and from the intensive study of seventeenth and eighteenth century Huron linguistic material. Ethnohistory can better understand the past by diversifying its sources of information and improving the skills with which these sources are exploited, individually and in combination.

REFERENCES

AXTELL, James
1978 "The Ethnohistory of Early America: A Review Essay", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3d Series 35: 110-144.

GADACZ, R. R.
1981 "Understanding and Interpretation in Historical Ethnology", *Anthropologica* 23: 181-189.

HAMELL, G. R.
1981 "Trading in Metaphors: The Magic of Beads". Albany: New York State Museum (mimeographed).

MARX, Karl and Frederick ENGELS
1962 *Selected Works in Two Volumes*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.

TRIGGER, B. G.
1975 "Brecht and Ethnohistory", *Ethnohistory* 22: 51-56.

1976 *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

n.d. *The Children of Aataentsic* (revised version to be published in French translation). Montreal: Libre Expression.