

**Book Report - History 38P**

**Culture and Conquest**

**by George Foster**

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### Book Report - Culture and Conquest

George Foster, author of Culture and Conquest, is first and foremost an Anthropologist. As such he makes no attempt to trace historical, social and economic developments, as they occurred, in chronological order. On the contrary, he concerns himself with "culture". Culture is one of those tricky words which many people misinterpret. The anthropologist who deals with culture, in fact, treats the same subjects as those of a historian, but whereas the historian concerns himself with what people do, the cultural anthropologist studies what people are.

Foster's purpose in writing Culture and Conquest is to explicate a sociological (or if you will anthropological) theory. He feels that his concept of "conquest culture" answers questions which previous studies did not succeed in answering. Thus he spends the first thirty or forty pages in a detailed description of this theory. The body of the book, therefore, is an attempt to bear out his concept. In a sense, then, his book is a pioneer work and Foster is somewhat of a revolutionary.

The subject matter of his book, however, is far from new. It is primarily a study of acculturation, in this case the acculturation of the Sixteenth Century Spanish culture and the American Indian culture of the same period. Acculturation would generally be described as the "processes and results of the contact of cultures".\* Foster feels, however, that this definition leaves the field open to many misinterpretations that can only confuse this already complicated area of study. The basic cause for these mistakes stems from the fact that most anthropologists, because of their particular inclination, have tended to study the society of Latin America as a static entity. In other words, they study "achieved cultural transmission" rather than "cultural transmission in process".\* This attitude, Foster would say, leads them

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\* Foster - Culture and Conquest PP 7 - Quadrangle Books - Chicago 1960

-2-

to orient their inquisition in terms of a basically Indian culture which was changed and altered to some extent by Spanish domination. Thus they would use the Spanish culture as a kind of a "grab-bag" out of which to pull a few cultural traits which the Conquistadors contributed to America. Even when these anthropologists recognized Spanish cultural dominance, the static approach was unable to explain the development of the diverse Latin American culture. In effect, Foster's book is an answer to Julian Steward's remark that "many studies are made of acculturated peoples but few studies are made of their acculturation".

Foster's attempt to deal with this problem centers around his theories of "conquest culture", and "cultural crystalization". Both concepts are explained in terms of process. In other words, they exist only in action and cannot be understood statically. Conquest culture is a function of the donor culture. (This culture can be distinguished from the recipient culture inasmuch as it is dominant.) The conquest culture should not, however, be confused with the donor culture, nor should it be confused with the Colonial culture, which is a result of the contact situation. The dominant peoples do not simply transplant their entire culture unchanged to a new situation. On the contrary, the donor culture adapts to the new situation and hence is transformed into a conquest culture.

This process of alteration manifests itself in three important ways. That is to say, the conquest culture has three important attributes. The first, Foster would call "formal" conquest culture. This is the process whereby such institutions as the Church, the Government and the Army plan certain programs for their own people as well as for those they conquer. This form of conquest culture usually turns out to be a purification and simplification of the prevailing attributes of the donor group. For example, where Spanish folk Catholicism was rich with pagan

-3-

syncretisms, the Spanish Church in the New World tried, as much as possible, to eliminate those practices. Whereas this was impossible in Spain, where these beliefs were an important part of religion, there was no reason the Church should allow these customs to be a part of the American Church. Whereas, in fact, the Church was to meet similar problems in the conversion of Indians, as the earlier Christians met in pre-Christian Spain, the point is that the face the Church presented in America was not identical with the one it was forced to present in Spain proper.

The second attribute of conquest culture is a function of the contact environment itself. The dominant peoples are themselves forced to adapt to a new set of circumstances. Just as the native peoples are forced to adjust to the conquerors, so the conquerors are forced to adjust to the vanquished in a new environment. Therefore the conquest culture not only has to deal with a new people, but they have to deal with a different set of variables.

The final attribute, Foster calls "informal" conquest culture. This is very often very difficult to trace, since it is the result of personal decisions inspired by a variety of unknown circumstances and motives. On the other hand, its results are easily recognizable. Whereas it is hard to know why the decisions were made to transfer one cultural trait or belief and withhold another, it is not so difficult to identify a trait where it was adapted. For example, there is no problem in attributing a fishing net that was informally introduced by certain individuals to a specific part of Spain. Whereas it might be difficult to understand why one type of net was introduced, rather than another, the fact of its existence is self-evident and its origin is easily traceable.

We have seen how the alteration process that forms the conquest culture is a function of the contact situation and the donor culture itself. "Cultural

-4-

Crystalization" on the other hand is a function of time, and ends in a somewhat conservative Colonial culture. Foster uses this concept in an attempt to explain why the larger part of informal conquest culture originates in the Southern Provinces of Extremadura and Andalusia, while the emigration of peoples from Spain was more or less equally distributed among all the Provinces. While this is true, it is also a fact that the first Conquistadors were primarily drawn from Southern Spain, and it was this first contact with the Indians which was crucial. These first conquerors brought with them their unique cultural tradition, and forced an intensive adjustment on themselves and the Indians. The first years were the formative ones and when the Colonial culture was to some extent mature, it was much more resistant to change and to the cultural influences from Northern Spain. Thus, once the Colonial culture had an identity, it became conservative or it "crystallized", as Foster would put it.

The picture of Colonial culture is thus, at least theoretically, explained. Conquest culture is accounted for in terms of a change in the donor culture in a contact situation; and cultural crystalization is explained in terms of cultural adaptation and maturity. The potentialities of this theory are great. In the first place, the theory of process is much more verifiable by experience than is a static description of an already formed society. In fact, all societies change, but they also must conserve themselves and thus they may appear to be static. As common experience testifies, however, no state is truly static. Even such a conservative country as the United States is always progressing. How much more true is this in a culture such as that found in America in the Sixteenth Century? Where radical transformation and painful adaptation were necessary to accommodate two different cultures to the same area of space? The answer is obvious, and a theory which does not account for these changes is useless and false.

-5-

In practice the theory is vital and useful. In the first place, it opens the student's eyes to a dramatic and traumatic meeting of peoples adhering to completely diverse cultural traditions. If diligently pursued, it will carry the student into an exciting enquiry and description of a situation loaded with human stress and devastating sociological results. It will enable the student to avoid attributing an effect to the wrong cause and it will lead him to a more complete understanding of the resulting society by understanding the origin and development of the society.

In the case of Latin America, Foster's theory, if effectively used, will accredit the Spanish culture with its rightful role in the formation of the Latin American society; and it will adequately take into consideration the role of the conquest culture. At the same time, it need not neglect the role of the Indians and Mestizoes in choosing to accept or reject the conquest culture. It will also lead the diligent student into a thoughtful enquiry of the Spanish ethos. What was their view of nature, of other people, of religion, of family and of morality? How did the Indians and later the Creoles and Mestizoes react to this view of things. How much did they accept and why did they accept it? How did they react to those things they did not accept?

Finally, the theory of conquest culture allows for an extensive comparison of the two cultures involved. It requires the student to know about the donor culture, the conquest culture, the recipient culture and the final result, in this case the "Latin American culture". (I by no means mean to say that there is in fact a unified Latin American culture; however, the Spanish influence is unified and extensive enough to make Latin America a "cultural area".) The comparison between Spain and Latin America is very important because this study highlights the results of the acculturation process, thus making possible a dramatic contrast. This contrast is in turn very useful in estimating the extent of acculturation.

-6-

In light of the above potentialities of his theory, Foster's book is an unhappy disappointment. In light of the content of the book, his theory is little more than a glorious pretension; glorious inasmuch as it presents to the imagination the prospect of an exciting and important study; pretentious inasmuch as it actualizes little of what it claims to be. The few chapters which do succeed, to some extent, only highlight the unfortunate failure of the rest of the book. In the first place, Foster spends an overwhelming amount of time describing insignificant details concerning the Spanish donor culture, while he relatively neglects the conquest culture. By relegating the description of conquest culture to the last page of each chapter, he assigns the conquest cultural traits to a position of secondary importance. In fact, the section on conquest culture is often so small that in dealing with many subjects he confines himself exclusively to native Spanish culture. For a book which professes to aid the understanding of Latin America, it does precious little in even discussing the conquest culture.

To render justice to Mr. Foster, I must say that his limited illustration of conquest culture in action is very enlightening as far as it goes. For example, his discussion of the Grid-Plan cities is an excellent illustration of formal conquest culture. In fact, many of the descriptions of the conquest culture are good, they are just too limited to be of much importance.

Comparison between Spanish and Latin American culture is also insignificant because it too is lumped together with the discussion of conquest culture and relegated to the tail end of the chapter. (In some cases to the last paragraph of the chapter.) The result of this system is that the dramatic process of acculturation is totally neglected, with the result that what is gained is a rather spotty account of Spanish cultural traits. Even this account is limited. In the first place,

-7-

Foster wastes a good deal of time in a rather detailed description of such things as fishing nets, agricultural instruments, domestic animals and fiestas. Many of these subjects are unimportant in themselves and are of less importance to the New World. In the second place, Foster makes no attempt at a thoughtful discussion of the Spanish ethos. Inasmuch as the reader can extrapolate and form some idea of the ethos, he is so much the better for his labor. No such attempt, however, is made by the author.

In effect, Culture and Conquest is a failure. This failure is highlighted by the fact that it aimed so high and so far. This, however, is not a saving grace because its aims are pretenses never carried through. A philosopher has the right to be simply idealistic and logical; an anthropologist has a duty to inquire into existing situations. Foster has failed this requirement.