

# **CULTURAL SPIRIT AND THE ETHIC OF BUREAUCRACY: THE PARADOX OF CULTURAL ADMINISTRATION<sup>1</sup>**

**David A. Lynes**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
St. Francis Xavier University<R> P.O. Box 5000<+>  
Antigonish, Nova Scotia  
Canada, B2G 2W5

## **Abstract / Resume**

This paper focuses on one aspect of the difficulties facing Aboriginal cultural initiatives which depend upon support from government and related organizations for their realization. It is not unusual for obstacles encountered while negotiating such support to raise questions about the political will, commitment and integrity of all parties involved. The author examines the extent to which problems encountered can be understood in terms of an essential antipathy between the very ideas of culture and administration.

L'article étudie un aspect des difficultés se présentant aux initiatives culturelles autochtones qui dépendent de l'appui du gouvernement et de certaines organisations pour leur accomplissement. Il n'est pas rare que des obstacles rencontrés en négociant cet appui posent des questions de la volonté politique, de l'engagement, et de l'intégrité de tous les intéressés. L'auteur étudie le degré dans lequel de tels problèmes peuvent se comprendre sous l'angle d'une antipathie essentielle entre les idées mêmes de la culture et de l'administration.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' National Round Table on Health and Social Issues, which met in March of 1993, provided a valuable opportunity to observe and reflect upon the interactional dynamics at work between Aboriginal and state organizations.<sup>2</sup> What eventually became clear was that the nature of these dynamics could clearly influence the prospects for change in the area of health and social issues being sought by the Round Table participants. But what also became clear was that there was another, less obvious, level of dynamic at work which transcended the interaction.

This was not just a meeting of health care professionals, government and Aboriginal representatives. It was also an encounter between administrative priorities and cultural commitment. The challenge of administering Aboriginal culture is such that the inevitable friction between participating group priorities is often confused with interactional questions of political will, prejudice and cooperativeness. Disentangling the various threads of this potential confusion is not easy. However, it is hoped that concentrating on a few strands at a time will contribute to an understanding of the more complex whole. In this instance, doing so reveals that the effort to affirm a cultural commitment through the establishment of self-governance, is threatened as much by an inherent antagonism between culture and administration as it may be by idiosyncrasies of personality or political motivation which will characterize any particular set of negotiations.

## **Communication Without Progress**

The Royal Commission's statement of the Round Table's goals emphasized a concern for communication between all participants:

The Round Table will facilitate discussion of changes to health care and maintenance which are more holistic. All stakeholders in achieving health for Aboriginal Peoples will be challenged to overcome barriers to substantive change (Royal Commission Round Table Introduction:3).

While all of society has a stake in health for Aboriginal peoples, the "stakeholders" more specifically being addressed in the above quote included individuals "from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, who are expert and knowledgeable in the area of health and social issues" as well as "those who have experience in the creation and implementation of systems of health and social issues for Aboriginal Peoples" *Ibid.*). The challenge, in other words, "to overcome barriers to substantive change" was specifically being placed at the door of those most interested in and committed to achieving these ends. The suggestion is that the barriers

which the Round Table Commissioners had foremost in mind here were not barriers of commitment or of interest. Some participants at the meeting occasionally referred to these barriers as an absence of "political will" (Royal Commission Round Table Minutes, March 12, 1993:13). As it turns out, however, questions of political will or individual commitment are not quite so easily put to rest.

Despite clear evidence of this will and commitment amongst the Round Table participants it was suggested many times that politicians and health care practitioners as well as some Aboriginal communities themselves must change the way they think about health and social issues. It was continually emphasized that everyone involved in this effort needs to begin thinking "holistically." As one of the discussion papers from the Round Table expressed it:

Aboriginal medicine is constituted as foundational to cultural practices; which are independent of the state imposed regulatory structures of contemporary Aboriginal life.... Aboriginal medicine in this sense, is a way of life, complete with guidelines for behaviour, systems of authority and in some instances, punitive mechanisms (O'Neil, 1993:18).

An appreciation of such foundational cultural practices was closely linked to the seriousness of an official's interest in change. As the Chair of the Round Table noted in the opening comments "... communities will become healthy only if governments are serious about dealing with underlying issues" (Royal Commission Round Table Minutes, March 10, 1993:2). It was further suggested that systems of funding allocations and accountability played a significant part in obstructing moves toward Indigenous self-government in these areas.

At the same time, however, it became clear that there are politicians who know what a holistic approach to Aboriginal health means, who recognize the need for fiscal change and who are very interested in implementing alternatives. Many who fit this description were at the Round Table. Nevertheless, there persists the seemingly intractable problem of envisioning and agreeing upon how and when to put these ideas into practice as well as deciding which communities qualify for various programs. The barriers confronting the Labrador Inuit Health Commission (L.I.H.C.) in its efforts to improve community health and health care delivery represent a case in point. As this group explained:

Jurisdictional issues and eligibility still create everyday problems in our dealings with various levels of government. Each time access is requested to a new program or a new government initiative, the question of whether or not we are eligible

surfaces and delays movement for several months (1993:11-12).

They continued:

The product of the jurisdictional confusion is that there are currently four different groups that define health policy for the Labrador Inuit: (1) the Federal Government... (2) the Provincial Government... (3) Regional Health Services... (4) the Labrador Inuit Association... . These groups do not work well together, despite efforts on everyone's part. All groups have different priorities and different understandings of the needs and how they should be met (*Ibid.*:12).

Like the Round Table Commissioners, the representatives of the Labrador Inuit Health Commission do not attribute these problems to an absence of effort, interest or will. The above mentioned groups simply do not work well together "despite efforts on everyone's part." What stands in the way, apparently, is the existence of "different priorities and different understandings" among the various levels of government and the different organizations.

Interestingly, however, the L.I.H.C. does not suggest that the parties involved are unaware of these differences between them. The barriers which confront efforts to achieve substantial health and health care in Labrador Inuit communities are not, in other words, necessarily or even obviously premised upon a lack of communication or cultural insensitivity. This is not to deny that there will be differences in both sensitivity and communicativeness. On the basis of the above quote, however, it appears that even if these problems could be overcome, the challenge confronting progress could still well exist. In other words, differences in priorities and "different understandings" remain a serious problem for anyone involved with different levels of government or related health and social organizations despite very real sensitivities and serious commitments to ongoing communication. The point is that efforts in these areas alone will not necessarily promote practical progress in health and social issues if they detract attention from other, less notorious, though no less detrimental, sources of obstruction.

## **Holistic Health and the Bureaucratic Agenda**

With this in mind, one way of exploring the cause of the difficulties the Round Table was convened to address is to ask the following question: Is there something in the intrinsic organization of a large bureaucratic entity which could account for part of the difficulty Indigenous communities

encounter in the attempt to negotiate culturally-based alternatives to health and social concerns? On the surface, this question may sound largely rhetorical. The problems which Indigenous people across North America continue to have in dealing with government bureaucracies have been well documented. For the most part, however, the appreciation for the frustrations surrounding specific instances of bureaucratic "red tape" tends not to be accompanied by an examination of how they are related to much more pervasive obstacles to progress inherent in the bureaucratization process itself. The dangers facing Aboriginal health and social initiatives, insofar as their own organizational processes tend towards or are modelled after the seemingly all-pervasive bureaucratic precedent, has, in the process, also received relatively little attention.

Breton *et al.* notes, for example, that

The routinization of interaction between Native leaders and officialdom via the joint committee structure is resulting in the role of the native leader being transformed from that of equal partner in a consultation process to that of an equivalent functionary, that is, unofficial member of the bureaucratic structure itself (1980:99).

Here the bureaucracy is recognized as a threat to Aboriginal interests in that it relegates leaders interested in reform to the role of "functionary." Similarly, Edgar Dosman pointed out that provincial and federal government documents "clearly endorse the principles of "participation," "self-help," "partnership," and "consultation" in *all* programs dealing with indigenous populations" (1972:121). He then continued:

In practice, however, any self-help project that demands independent decision-making powers for the natives is awarded the most hostile reception (*Ibid.*).

In both cases, as Dosman pointed out: "The maintenance of the [bureaucratic] system is the basic point of departure and the chief good" (*Ibid.*:117). In other words, the "chief good" and point of departure for the bureaucratic efforts referred to is not, evidently, the successful achievement of the stated ends or aims of the original relationship. Furthermore, Dosman links the bureaucratic allegiance to "'workable' routines," with the concern for "job security" (*Ibid.*:117) and in the process implies that government bureaucracies are not just ineffective at furthering Indigenous interests but that their efforts to do so may even evidence bad faith.

The famous discussion of bureaucracy by Max Weber makes some very useful observations in this regard. Weber wrote:

Once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy. Bureaucracy is *the* means of carrying "community action" over into rationally ordered "societal action." Therefore, as an instrument for "societalizing" relations of power, bureaucracy has been and is a power instrument of the first order - for the one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus (1949:228).

Weber's emphasis in this quote reinforces the common perception that almost all societal action based upon communal or particular interests is dependent upon and indebted to bureaucratic organization. The second sentence draws our attention to the disproportionate power a well established bureaucracy will have over those not in control of its apparatus. The consequent disadvantage then, extends to any organization not equally well established according to bureaucratic principles, among which Indigenous cultural organizations and concerns are often an example.<sup>3</sup> It is within Weber's discussion of the nature of bureaucratic power, however, where the implications for Aboriginal health and social initiatives becomes very direct. Weber pointed out that as a bureaucracy develops, "the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is the specific nature of bureaucracy and it is appraised as its special virtue" (*Ibid.*:216). He continued:

The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly "objective" *expert*, in lieu of the master of older social structures, who was moved by personal sympathy and favour, by grace and gratitude (*Ibid.*).

Weber implicated the development of bureaucracy in the formation of a societal respect for what is personally detached and strictly objective. In the process what comes to be disrespected or devalued is the tendency to be moved by such things as sympathy, favour, grace and gratitude. All of this goes hand-in-hand with western society becoming both more complicated and specialized.

What is significant here is that the interest in developing or rather, re-establishing, a holistic model of health within Aboriginal communities speaks specifically to the need for both less complication and less specialization, at least in contemporary terms. The closer holistic health comes to resembling what Weber refers to as "older social structures" the more its viability will depend upon all of sympathy, favour, grace and gratitude. In other words, insofar as holistic health depends upon the active participation of personalities and this range of love, hate and other emotional elements,

it requires the rejection of the criteria by which the specific virtue of bureaucratic organization is appraised.

It is important to note that Weber did not say that those who are part of a well established bureaucratic organization are necessarily without any of the individual qualities which he saw as characterizing the older social orders. All he says is that these qualities are not and cannot be considered virtues within a situation established with the specific goal of discharging all official business "precisely, unambiguously, continuously, and with as much speed as possible" (*Ibid.*:215).

This does not mean that there will not be anyone within traditionally established bureaucracies who will support "communal action" (distinguished above by Weber from "societal action," which is how the bureaucracy refers to its collective aims and achievements) or that all bureaucrats are resistant to change. Nevertheless, even if the realization of holistic health initiatives in Aboriginal communities depends upon human qualities which will never be completely absent among those in government organizations, the problem remains. These organizations are necessarily bureaucratic and as such, those who will function best and so rise to positions of most authority within them, manage to do so by being able to at least playdown, if not suppress altogether, these very virtues in the fulfilment of their official obligations.

## **The Politics of Integrity**

Where does this leave us with the question of political will? At this point it may be helpful to distinguish between political will and good will. Most of what was referred to earlier in the discussion as cultural sensitivity and sincere efforts on everyone's part to communicate, can be recognized as the expression of good will. Despite this will, however, practical progress appears to be painfully slow and encumbered where it is recognized to exist at all. The problem for good will, of course, is that if it cannot manifest itself through practical progress; if it can only express itself rhetorically, the rhetoric becomes suspect. The charge of an absence of political will is the expression of this suspicion.

The only problem with this formulation is that it leaves us in the recriminatory mire or bad faith. As long as political will is merely the handmaid for good will, the drama of a genuinely good impulse's struggle with administrative imperatives is reduced to the black and white hats of a bad western movie. That the story is not necessarily so straight forward is suggested by more recent references to bureaucratization in the literature addressing the political organization of Aboriginal representatives. Woth-

erspoon and Satzewich (1993), for example, in describing tensions which developed between the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and a "new generation of Indian students" (*Ibid.*:238), write:

... while some of the hostility directed towards the current Indian leadership may be personal in nature, and may entail personal attacks on the integrity of the leadership, we suggest that some of the conflicts between the leadership and the rank and file of aboriginal organizations represents a bureaucratization of these organizations (*Ibid.*:240).

Here the "bureaucratization" of an organization is clearly being distinguished from a failure of integrity. The grounds for this distinction are laid by the commitment of the state and the organization to "work together." As Wotherspoon and Satzewich explain:

One of the key problems for state officials, particularly cabinet ministers, ...is to seek out individuals in their target client groups with whom they can work. ...there are such times when both parties need to cooperate in order to accomplish their respective aims and to maintain legitimacy. This mutual dependence of state and organization officials, then, creates the conditions for conflict with grass roots elements in communities (*Ibid.*:239).

In this instance the "grass roots" constituency can experience the leadership's inevitable and indispensable cooperation with state officials not as progress but as a failure of integrity. Insofar as the establishment of what is called a "working relationship," involves cooperation between different perspectives on an issue or problem, cooperation itself risks appearing as a betrayal of the community's original aims and commitments, especially in the eyes of those not directly involved in the process.

In his famous 1915 work entitled *Political Parties*, Robert Michels recognized the tendency for an organization's leadership to become estranged from the rank-and-file membership through his examination of the political ascendancy of socialism in Europe. As in the previous example, what is risked in the process of a collective's need to coordinate and organize its efforts is, according to Michels, not simply good will, but the organization's very *raison d'être*. The difference is that for Michels this is not only a possibility, it is inevitable. He writes:

By a universally applicable social law, every organ of the collectivity, brought into existence through the need for the division of labor, creates for itself, as soon as it becomes consolidated, interests peculiar to itself. The existence of these special interests involves a necessary conflict with the interests

of the collectivity (1949:389).

The end result of this "necessary conflict" is Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy" which, expressed in terms of the struggle for socialism states: "The socialists might conquer, but not socialism, which would perish in the moment of its adherent's triumph" (*Ibid.*:391).

As it turns out, few critics of democracy are willing to support Michels' idea that democracy inevitably leads to oligarchy (see Selznick, 1943). However, its significance in terms of the present discussion lies in its implicit redirection of our attention away from questions of integrity and towards the issue of organization itself. Despite the fact, in other words, that Michels' prediction of oligarchy is predicated upon the leadership's temptation to become more preoccupied with its organizational existence than with its original aims, the very idea that this could constitute an Iron Law suggests that there could be something more pervasive at work here than an occasionally egocentric or spineless leadership. As Selznick put it:

[Michels'] theory (taken in its sociological rather than its psychological context) stands or falls, in terms of its lasting significance, with the possibility of establishing that there are processes inherent in and internal to organization as such which tend to frustrate action toward professed goals (1943:49).

If this is true, if there are processes inherent to organization as such which inhibit the achievement of professed goals (as seems to be the case with regards to holistic health), how are Aboriginal communities to pursue this or any other self-determination initiative?

One response is to reject state bureaucracy as much as possible. As some at the Round Table suggested: "Just do it!" And in fact some communities are "just doing it" - they are moving ahead with a holistic approach towards community health without government consultation or approval and, in some cases, without funding. Of course, this is not always possible. Another possibility is to reject bureaucratization altogether. Here again, even if you do manage to reject the rationality of bureaucracy, we would have to ask, is it possible to reject organization altogether? Can doing so resist disorganization or even chaos?

Perhaps it can. But there is another way of addressing the issue, one that suggests that it is not organization or bureaucracy in and of itself that is the problem.

## The Paradox of Cultural Administration

Theodore Adorno identified an essential antithesis between culture and administration which he referred to as a paradox. He wrote:

[C]ulture suffers damage when it is planned and administrated; when it is left to itself, however, everything cultural threatens not only to lose its possibility of effect, but its very existence as well (1991:94).

In order to appreciate Adorno's contribution to the present discussion, it is important to be clear about what he is and is not saying in the attempt to apply his comments about the perils facing high, modernist artistic culture to culturally-based community initiatives.<sup>4</sup> First of all, culture is damaged or compromised by administration regardless of who is doing the administering. In Adorno's words "the more that is done for culture, the worse it fares." It could be added, "no matter who does it." The alternative, however cannot be to do nothing for culture, as this threatens its very existence.

Culture, from Adorno's perspective, is perpetually threatened. Nevertheless, it is not simply the innocent victim of administrative advances, for while culture may be threatened, it is also threatening. Against the administrative interest in precision, continuity, speed and calculability of results, culture's originality, irrationality (in administrative terms) and potential for radical change represents not just a challenge to administrative priorities, but a threat to administration's very viability.

Traditional healing practices, for example - an important constituent of holistic health - are effective in ways which neither biological medicine nor health care administrators can reliably explain. What cannot be explained becomes difficult to control. From an administrative perspective, it becomes very difficult, if not outright irresponsible, to sanction anything which is difficult to explain or control especially when the sanction implies financial support. Once again, this is not to deny that there are health care administrators who welcome traditional healing. Following Adorno, there is an essential antithesis between culture and administration, not necessarily antagonism between administrators and cultural representatives. Adorno called this antithesis a "paradox." It is a paradox that is not explained by their being administrators and cultural representatives who may not share the same world view. The paradox is inherent in culture's need to lay claim to its own legitimacy.

Adorno called this the administrative "instant."<sup>5</sup> This is not an interactional moment. It is a moment that describes the paradox which confronts culture's contemporary situation. As Adorno pointed out in the above quote, culture cannot be left to itself. It needs representatives willing to speak on

behalf of its legitimacy. The paradox is that this claim needs to be articulated in terms that specifically resist the administrative criteria for legitimacy. This is what Adorno meant when he said "The more that is done for culture the worse it fairs." The more difficult it is to establish a cultural voice, the more tempting it becomes to speak the language of the un-cultured and in so doing, to betray culture's authentic uniqueness and difference.

The echo of this temptation can be heard reverberating through Ronald Niezen's recent attempt to "understand the potential for Native institutions to base themselves on culturally appropriate policies and procedures and avoid administrative failure" (1993:223). We are now in a position to better recognize the problem inherent in such an attempt and indeed, in this very line of enquiry. The policies and procedures understood to be essential to administrative success may never be "culturally appropriate." The failure to entertain this possibility seriously risks encouraging not cultural appropriateness, but the appropriation of culture; the appropriation of cultural traditions for administrative ends.

Finally, this is not to suggest that any Aboriginal community which encounters resistance to the re-establishment of holistic health and traditional practices in their dealings with health care partners should dismiss the possibility that there may, in fact, exist a lack of good will. What needs to be recognized, however, is that along side of this possibility, there exists grounds for the difficulties encountered that are essentially related to the effort itself. As long as it remains necessary to deal with governments as well as the established health and legal professions and, insofar as any cultural collective is tempted to organize itself along bureaucratic lines, the danger exists that the goals which originally united cultural groups could be sabotaged by the very structures adopted to achieve them.

For many, the promise of Adorno's Critical Theory is that the awareness of such a possibility is key to reducing its likelihood (see Geuss [1981] and Bronner and Kellner [1989] among others). It may be an exaggeration to say that the survival of Indigenous culture depends on fulfilling this promise. However, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that an appreciation of the inherent antinomy of cultural administration will be closely linked to the verisimilitude of Indigenous cultural affirmation.

### **Notes**

1. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at The Western Association of Sociology and Anthropology Conference, held in March 1994, at the University of Saskatchewan. I would like to thank the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples for the invitation to participate in the National Round Table on Health and Social Issues held in Van-

cover, in March of 1993, out of which this paper developed. Thanks are also due to Maureen Moynagh, as well as to the Editor and the anonymous reviewers of *CJNS* for their helpful comments.

2. The distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal institutions is made not exclusively on the basis of who conceived and administers the organization in question. What I am using as the distinguishing characteristic is whether the form and aims of the collective organization in question are faithful to, and in keeping with, Aboriginal as opposed to non-Aboriginal traditions and customs, particularly in terms of health and healing. Despite the vast diversity amongst Aboriginal peoples with respect to their collective forms of health and social organization, I am assuming it is generally possible to distinguish these forms from those imposed - or at least introduced - by non-Aboriginal and especially European people.
3. Not that some Indigenous, cultural organizations are not bureaucratic, but if they are, they will not usually have had the opportunity and resources to become as well established as have most government bureaucracies.
4. It is recognized that many of Adorno's critics are uneasy with a perceived "elitist defending [of] esoteric artistic modernism against a culture available to all" (Bernstein, 1991:1). However, when placed within the wider context of the concern over the domination of rationality inherent in the Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972), the observations regarding culture-as-art resonate clearly with the threat facing the more general aspirations of a rich cultural heritage.
5. What Adorno actually says is worth quoting in its entirety:

Through the sacrifice of its possible relation to praxis, the cultural concept itself becomes an instance of organization; that which is so provokingly useless in culture is transformed into tolerated negativity or even into something negatively useful - into a lubricant for the system, into something which exists for something else, into untruth, or into goods for the culture industry calculated for the consumer. All this is registered today in the uncomfortable relation between culture and administration (1991:102).

### References

Adorno, Theodor W.

- 1991 Culture and Administration, Wes Blomster, Translator, in J.M. Bernstein (Editor): *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays in Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.

Bernstein, J.M.

- 1991 Introduction, in J.M. Bernstein (Editor): Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays in Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.

Bronner, Stephen Eric and Douglas MacKay Kellner

- 1989 Introduction, in Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (Editors): *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall.

Breton, Raymond, Jeffrey G. Reitz, Victor F. Valentine

- 1980 *Cultural Boundaries and the Cohesion of Canada*. Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy.

Dosman, Edgar, J.

- 1972 *Indians: The Urban Dilemma*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Geuss, Raymond

- 1981 *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno

- 1972 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder.

Labrador Inuit Health Commission

- 1993 Presentation to National Round Table on Health and Social Issues, in *National Round Table on Health and Social Issues: Discussion Papers*. Ottawa: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

Michels, Robert

- 1949 *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

Niezen, Ronald

- 1993 Telling a Message: Cree Perceptions of Custom and Administration. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 13(2):221-250.

O'Neil, John

- 1993 Aboriginal Health Policy for the Next Century, in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: *National Round Table on Health and Social Issues: Discussion Papers*. Ottawa: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

## Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

1993a *National Round Table on Health and Social Issues: Introduction*. Ottawa: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

1993b *National Round Table on Health and Social Issues: Minutes, March 10-12, 1993*. Ottawa: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

## Selznick, Philip

1943 An Approach to a Theory of Bureaucracy. *American Sociological Review* 8(1):47-54.

## Weber, Max

1949 Bureaucracy, in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translators, Editors): *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Wotherspoon, Terry and Vic Satzewich

1993 *First Nations: Race, Class and Gender Relations*. Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada.