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# Cultural Relativism, Marxism, and Soviet Policy toward the Khanty

Dennis Bartels

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

The aims of this paper are fivefold: 1- to present data regarding some specific instances of conflict and change among the Khanty of western Siberia during the 1930's; 2- to show that these changes cannot be evaluated from a cultural relativist point of view; 3- to evaluate these changes in light of a critique of cultural relativism recently proposed by Arthur Hippler; 4- to tentatively outline a Marxist critique of cultural relativism which is based on the ideas of several Soviet and Western anthropologists; and, 5- to evaluate changes among the Khanty during the 1930's in light of this Marxist critique of cultural relativism.

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# Cultural Relativism, Marxism, and Soviet Policy toward the Khanty

Dennis Bartels

Sir Wilfred Grenfell College

The aims of this paper are fivefold: 1- to present data regarding some specific instances of conflict and change among the Khanty of western Siberia during the 1930's; 2- to show that these changes cannot be evaluated from a cultural relativist point of view; 3- to evaluate these changes in light of a critique of cultural relativism recently proposed by Arthur Hippler; 4- to tentatively outline a Marxist critique of cultural relativism which is based on the ideas of several Soviet and Western anthropologists; and, 5- to evaluate changes among the Khanty during the 1930's in light of this Marxist critique of cultural relativism.

*Cet article a cinq buts: 1- présenter des cas spécifiques de situations conflictuelles et de changement social durant les années 1930 au sein de la population khanty établie en Sibérie occidentale; 2- montrer que la thèse du relativisme culturel ne peut rendre compte de ces changements; 3- examiner ces changements à la lumière de la critique du relativisme culturel proposée récemment par Arthur Hippler; 4- exposer à grands traits une critique marxiste du relativisme culturel à partir des idées de quelques anthropologues soviétiques et occidentaux; 5- enfin, examiner les changements survenus chez les Khanty durant les années 1930 selon cette critique marxiste du relativisme culturel.*

## *Conflict and Change among the Khanty during the 1930's<sup>1</sup>*

My interest in cultural relativism was revived by seemingly contradictory accounts of social conflict and change among the Khanty during the 1930's. One of these accounts was written by Marjorie Balzer, a U.S. anthropologist who accompanied a group of ethnography students from the University of Leningrad to the Khant settlements of Tegy and Kazeem in the summer of 1976 (Balzer, 1980: 77). On the basis of library research and interviews with "informants, both Russian and Khanty" in Tegy and Kazeem, she characterized Soviet policy toward the Khanty during the 1920's as aimed at aiding

... Siberian natives to become literate and to reach a "level of civilization" which Soviets considered appropriate for the building of socialism (1978: 58).

She described Soviet policy toward the Khanty during the early 1930's as follows:

As governmental (Stalinist) pressure for collectivization heightened, methods of enticement became increasingly coercive. ... Khanty were asked to "voluntarily" give up their family territories, reindeer, and any livestock (horses, cattle). ... By the end of the 1930's, livestock and much land had been confiscated by the collective organizers... ... In addition, Khanty were pressured to

move from scattered temporary winter and summer villages into areas of established Soviet centers. This was reinforced because new stringent laws required that Khanty children be sent to Soviet boarding schools. ... The campaign against Kulaks [i.e., rich elders and shamans] was resisted under the leadership of elders and shamans who were still respected leaders of Khanty communities. In Kazeem and on the Sosva, these leaders urged mass sacrifices of horses and reindeer before sacred idols, with the dual purpose of sabotaging collectivization and begging assistance from the ancestors. Hundreds of animals were killed. A shaman named Yarkin was particularly active as an "agent against collective organization", and, according to Soviet sources, he and other traditional Khanty organized a plot to kill Soviet party workers which was discovered and squelched by jailing the leaders (Kartsov, 1937: 120). (Given the purge-oriented tenor of the times, it is possible that this "plot" was fabricated.) In addition, there were arrests and court trials in 1932 of 70 "kulaks", in 1933 of 91, and in 1934 of 181 (Kartsov 1937, from regional Communist Party reports). ... Khanty in Kazeem and Tegy still recall with anger the Soviet efforts to round up livestock and to designate which areas would become primarily fishing collectives and which would focus on reindeer breeding. Their greatest resentment, at the time, however, was levelled at Soviet programs to put their children into schools... (1978: 60-62; 451-56).

Data from interviews that my wife and I carried out in Leningrad during 1981-82 seemed to contradict Balzer's account. One of our Khanty informants was N.I. Teryoshkin, who lived in the Ob region from 1913 to 1935. He claimed that shamans, who controlled the best pasture land and owned the largest reindeer herds, often demanded, and received, 'tribute (e.g., reindeer, squirrel pelts, livestock, etc.) for the gods and ancestor's from poor Khanty. Animals and land belonging to *artels* (i.e., state-supported cooperatives) were not subject to shamans' demands. Thus, many young Khanty, including many who were illiterate, freely pooled their reindeer in *artels* despite opposition from shamans<sup>2</sup>. Teryoshkin did not mention whether or not reindeer and lands were taken from rich shamans and elders and added to the holdings of *artels*. It should be noted, however, that in 1932, the year in which 'Soviet power'<sup>3</sup> and the Ostiak-Vogul (i.e., Khanty-Mansi) National Okrug were established, the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party categorically forbade "complete collectivization" and restricted collective ownership to "elementary forms of co-operatives" (Taracouzio, 1938: 289). On September 1, 1932, the Central Committee decreed:

In the regions inhabited by the various Peoples of the Extreme North, attention must be concentrated upon the organization of the elementary forms of cooperation...

In regions where collectivization of the reindeer industry has already taken place, the necessary stock of reindeer must be immediately released for the personal use of the members of the collectives (guilds), the existence of the latter being permitted to continue only if already sufficiently developed, and even then with proviso that the members of these collectives express their desire that the guild be retained (Taracouzio, 1938: 293).

A young Khant woman who is currently studying at the Faculty of Northern Peoples of the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad in order to become a teacher of the Khant language in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region, told my wife and I that her grandfather, who supported Soviet power in the Ob region during the early 1930's, was killed by rich shamans<sup>4</sup>. According to Teryoshkin, some Khant shamans, armed by fugitive Kolchak officers<sup>5</sup>, rose against Soviet power in 1934. Many Khanty, especially *Komsomols*<sup>6</sup> and Communists, resisted, even though they were unarmed. Most were killed. The shamans tortured and killed practically all local Soviet officials and school teachers. Army units from Sverdlovsk had to be called in to put down the uprising. After this, there was a propaganda campaign against shamanism. Teryoshkin claimed that he witnessed some of these events, and that he was an interpreter at the trial of some of the shamans and Kolchak officers who participated in the uprising.

After the uprising, Teryoshkin, at the age of 19, was appointed director of a boarding school at



Tamara Plekhanova, the young Khant woman on the left, said that her grandfather, who supported Soviet power in the Ob region during the 1930's, was killed by rich shamans (photograph by Alice Bartels).

Kazeem, where practically all the teachers had been killed. His hardest job was persuading trans-humant Khant hunters and reindeer breeders to leave their children at school. At the beginning of every term, teachers and local officials would visit temporary Khant settlements and try to persuade parents to send their children to school. Some parents refused, and “terrorized” teachers. Other parents left their children at school but later took them out again. It was Teryoshkin’s job to persuade these parents to send their children back to school. He claimed that he was usually successful, probably because he was Khant himself, and that coercion was *not* used. Teryoshkin also claimed that resettlement of Khanty into larger population centres was not forced.

### *Cultural Relativism and Evaluation of Change and Conflict among the Khanty*

How would cultural relativists evaluate these developments? Would they support the pro-soviet Khanty, or the ‘traditional’ Khanty? Strictly speaking, they should support neither since both are products of different cultural patterns, and, according to the principles of cultural relativism, all cultural patterns are “equally valid” (Benedict, 1934). Neither should they condemn disruption of ‘traditional’ Khant culture by hundreds of years (ca. 1650-1930; see Armstrong, 1965) of Khant involvement in a fur trade roughly similar to that practiced in Canada by the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Northwest Company (Ray, 1974). As Clyde Kluckhohn put it,

If one follows out literally and logically the implications of Benedict’s words regarding the “equal” validity of all cultural patterns, one is compelled to accept any cultural patterns as vindicated precisely by its cultural status: slavery, cannibalism, Naziism, or Communism may not be congenial to Christians or to contemporary Western societies, but moral criticism of the cultural patterns of other people is precluded (1955: 663).

### *Hippler’s Critique of Cultural Relativism, and Evaluation of Conflict and Change Applied to the Khanty*

Arthur Hippler, perhaps unaware of Kluckhohn’s remarks on cultural relativism, recently wrote,

I’m sure many of my colleagues would express disapproval of Dachau. But how can one do so without a standard of what actually is optimal for humans? A true cultural relativist cannot make such a judgment (1981: 396).

He goes on to

... propose a basic criterion for looking at culture as a human tool: Cultures are better or worse depending on the degree to which they support innate capacities as those emerge...

... One area of potential research into emerging capacities is that directed toward Piaget’s observations on stages of cognitive growth and maturation which have been tested... hundreds of times. No matter how carefully such tests attempt to avoid cultural bias, there is a strong tendency for people in primitive societies to do more poorly on these than those in Euro-American culture... (1981: 395).

Hippler’s ‘criterion’ can be used to evaluate ‘traditional’ vs. ‘sovietized’ Khant society. During the 1930’s, Khant women were encouraged to go to school, to become politically active, and to participate in the activities of cooperatives. In ‘traditional’ Khant society, such opportunities did not exist. Women were subordinated to men, and regarded as inferior. Not surprisingly, shamans opposed involvement of women in political, economic, and educational activities (Balzer, 1978: 139-48)<sup>7</sup>. Insofar as the educational, political and economic opportunities made available to women in ‘sovietized’ Khant society allowed development of women’s “innate capacities”, ‘sovietized’ Khant society, according to Hippler’s criterion, was ‘better’ than ‘traditional’ Khant society.

There are, however, certain problems with Hippler’s ‘criterion’, apart from the controversy which presently surrounds Piaget’s theory of the stages of cognitive development (Alland, 1980: 517-19). Hippler apparently assumes the existence of a general consensus that optimal development of innate capacities for all humans, is good. But the lack of such a cross-cultural consensus is precisely what cultural relativists draw attention to. Kluckhohn and Kroeber, like Hippler, apparently assumed the existence of a cross-cultural consensus (or “*consensus gentium*”) that genocide, cannibalism, etc., are wrong (1952: 350-52)<sup>8</sup>. Again, the lack of such a cross-cultural consensus is precisely what cultural relativists draw attention to. David Bidney apparently recognized this, and argued that anthropologists should cooperate with other social scientists and scholars in defining “practical, progressive, rational ideals,” and then win “... a measure of universal recognition” for them (1953: 698). In other words, a cross-cultural “*consensus gentium*” does not already exist; it has to be created, and ‘sold’! Most Marxists, I believe, would argue that such a programme could only succeed under specific historical conditions.

## *A (Tentative) Marxist Critique of Cultural Relativism*

A Marxist critique of cultural relativism can be predicated upon the inevitability of social change and conflict. Whether or not change and conflict are 'internally' or 'externally' generated in particular cases (Asch, 1979; Coulson and Riddell, 1970), partisanship based upon moral judgment, class interest, or other considerations is inevitable for virtually everyone affected (Averkieva, 1978: 34). When conflict results from the attempts of particular individuals, classes, or other groups to bring about changes which will "increase labor productivity" and fulfill the "material and cultural aspirations" of most people in their own and/or other societies, the activities of such individuals, classes, etc. are, irrespective of their motivations, labelled as 'progressive' by Soviet Marxists (Averkieva, 1978: 25)<sup>9</sup>. This notion of 'progress' is somewhat similar to Terence Turner's advocacy of

optimization of people's ability to control, create, reproduce, change or adopt social and cultural patterns for their own ends (cited in Keesing, 1981: 496).

Roger Keesing argues that such advocacy requires anthropologists to

replace a fuzzy belief in the superiority of the "primitive" and sanctity of culture [i.e., cultural relativism] with a critical view of "traditional" ways of life... (1981: 496).

The kind of change advocated by Turner and Keesing is exemplified by PAIGC<sup>10</sup> attempts to change 'traditional' Balante culture in Guinea-Bissau,

Faced with conservatism by Balante elders against changes that would undermine, their domination of the traditional society, PAIGC is not using repression but seeking "To induce the Balante themselves to overthrow [those] aspects of the traditional system" that subordinate women and young men and extract their labor for investment in wives and mortuary feasting (Turner, cited in Keesing, 1981: 497).

There may be interesting similarities between the Balante case and the case of the Khanty during the 1930's.

Within the context of specific processes of change and conflict, 'progressive' change will, in most cases, be morally abhorrent or otherwise undesirable from the point of view of certain individuals, classes, or other groups<sup>11</sup>. They cannot be expected to share in any "*consensus gentium*", or be persuaded to accept any "rational ideals", which

smack of 'progress' in the sense outlined by Averkieva and other Soviet Marxists, or by Turner and Keesing. The Marxist notion of 'progress' is 'objective' and 'absolute' only insofar as Marxists expect growing numbers of people to take 'progressive' stands on issues posed by contradictions within successive modes of production (Asch, 1979; Lee, 1981). As more and more societies are drawn into similar modes of production (e.g., by state-supported expansion of the operations of privately-owned, multi-national banks and corporations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America), it seems likely that ever-increasing numbers of exploited workers and peasants will reach a cross-cultural, or multi-national "*consensus gentium*" regarding the desirability of 'progress'.

While the recurrence of social conflict and change is 'inevitable', the success of 'progressive forces' in any particular case is not. Marxist lore abounds with heroes, heroines, and social movements who championed lost, but 'progressive', causes—e.g., Spartacus, the German Peasant Revolutionaries (Engels, 1973), the Hussites (Macek, 1958), etc. Indeed, the Marxist view does not rule out the decimation or extinction of the entire human species in a nuclear holocaust.

### *Marxism and Evaluation of Conflict and Change among the Khanty*

Social change and conflict in Khant society during the 1930's provides a compelling case study for Marxists. Should the Soviet state have left the majority of Khanty hunters and reindeer breeders in the economic and ideological grip of shamans and rich elders, while Khanty women suffered double, or perhaps, triple oppression? Or should they have attempted to persuade the majority of Khanty of the advantages of Western medicine, veterinarians, educational opportunities for both sexes, cooperatives, etc.? To Marxists, no matter what their opinions of other aspects of Soviet history and society, the answer to the first question should be affirmative<sup>12</sup>.

#### NOTES

1. This paper is partly based on interviews with Siberian Native academics and students which were carried out in Leningrad by my wife and I in 1981-82. This research was supported by a Leave Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

I wish to thank my wife, Alice, Prof. Gordon Inglis (Anthropology, Memorial University of Newfoundland), Prof. Eric Mintz (Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Sir Wilfred Grenfell College), and Dr. David McNab (Office of Indian Resource Policy, Ont. Min. of Northern Resources), for their valuable comments and criticisms.

I wish to offer special thanks to Cand. N.I. Teryoshkin of the Institute of Linguistics, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Leningrad.

2. Balzer mentions 158 Khanty and Mansi Communist Party members out of a total of 858 in the Ostiak-Vogul (i.e., Khanty-Mansi) National Okrug in 1932 (1978: 454).

3. By 1932, members of soviets, or governing councils, were elected on a territorial basis. There were village soviets and regional soviets in 'autonomous regions' inhabited mainly by Native Peoples. All soviets in autonomous regions were required by law to include a large proportion of Native People (Taracouzio, 1938; Bartels and Bartels, 1983).

4. A Young Yukaghir woman, who is studying at the Faculty of Northern Peoples of the Herzen Pedagogical Institute, claimed that her grandfather had been a shaman.

5. During the Civil War in Siberia (1919-24), Kolchak led White forces in Siberia. He was supported by arms and money from the British government, and by Japanese troops (Aragon, 1964).

6. Members of the Young Communist League.

7. Teryoshkin also claimed that shamans opposed involvement of Khant women in political, economic, and educational activities.

8. Kroeber and Kluckhohn noted that, "within the in-group", no culture tolerates indiscriminate lying, stealing, violence, etc.; they apparently believed that this somehow constitutes the basis for a cross-cultural "*consensus gentium*" which allows condemnation of cannibalism, Nazi genocide, etc. (1952: 350-52). If this characterization of their views is correct, they made an unwarranted inference from norms or moral standards that exist *within* specific cultures, to norms of moral standards which *ought*, in their view, to govern the interaction of people from different groups, cultures, etc.

9. It is recognized that, while this principle allows judgments to be made regarding what is 'progressive' in some instances of change and conflict, it does not allow clear-cut judgments to be made in others. The industrial revolution in England, for example, may have increased labour productivity, but it probably did not fulfill the "material and cultural aspirations" of most new proletarians.

10. African Independence Party of Guinée and the Cape Verde Islands.

11. For example, ever-increasing bride-prices may lead a growing number of 'commoner' and 'aristocratic' lineages among the Kachin of Highland Burma to favour a return to a *gumlao* system; but this change will not be

favoured by most 'chiefly' lineages who benefit from ever-increasing bride-prices (Asch, 1979).

Examples may also be found in our own society. A growing number of Canadians may, eventually, take 'progressive' stands on economic and political issues posed by growing unemployment. Most owners of Canada's largest banks and corporations, however, will not be among this number.

12. To Hippler, who dismissed Marxism as "adolescent rebelliousness" with "high nonsense content" (1981: 394-96), the answer to the first question should, according to his own 'criterion of cultural goodness', also be affirmative. Indeed, Hippler's praise for Burrumurra, a young Australian Aborigine who brought 'progress' to his 'primitive' society (the Yolngu) by moving the sacred idols (1981: 396-97), is quite justified from a Marxist point of view.

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