

Cunning Pedagogics: the encounter between the Jesuits and the Amerindians of 17th century New France

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The encounter between the Euro-Canadian missionary and the Amerindians of Canada is an excellent, if unusual, place to begin the story of adult learning in Canada's origins in conquest and discovery. The pedagogical encounter between the Jesuits and the Amerindians of Canada highlights the way one society's learning system can disrupt, often in radical ways, that of the other. Traditional Amerindian world orientations had to cope with the changes to their way of symbolically ordering the world and learning systems over many centuries. But, Amerindian modes of subsistence and production came under relentless assault, beginning inconspicuously in the late fifteenth century, and continuing relentlessly through the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as the fur trade penetrated the St. Lawrence Valley and onward to the west.

Along with challenges to traditional ways of reproducing their existence and ordering social relations with others (animal and human) and the spiritual world, Amerindians were invaded by microbes that placed incredible stress on their cognitive maps of the biological world along with devastating their life worlds and weakening the ability of traditional cognitive maps to incorporate new knowledge and experience. The entire Amerindian learning system was under pressure to transform itself into accordance with the European understandings of the natural world, the meaning of animals and plants in relation to traditional cosmographies, relation to the supernatural world, ways of ordering relationships between men, women and children, ways of exercising authority over members of society and methods of resolving internal and external social conflicts.

By the beginnings of the seventeenth century—the age of scientific revolution and discovery—European theologians and intellectuals were able to imagine that **les sauvages** were akin to a fully mature child whose capacity for reason was present, but as yet unrealized. Theological disputation in prestigious seminaries like Salamanca in Spain broke free from the Aristotelian notion of “natural slavery.” How could the Aztecs and Inca of the Americas be thought of natural slaves who were lacking in reason and civil community, when they created cities, bureaucracies, religious systems and art? Aristotle's natural slave was incapable of achieving such creations. Natural slaves were not men (because all men had reason in potentia). Indeed, Indians were in possession of the faculty of reason. Their foolish wandering and pagan behaviour had to come from their “poor and barbarous education” (Pagden 1982: 97). They were, indeed, suitable objects of pedagogical instruction. All progressive theologians agreed with this axiom. But they did not agree on whether it was just to use violence to transform the Amerindians in their image.

Ignatious Loyola, who founded the Jesuit Order in 1534, created a formidably trained, militaristic band of men who followed intrepid explorers like Cartier and Champlain into the new worlds. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the order grew rapidly, becoming

active in many missions abroad, including China, attracting well-to-do men of high intelligence and fanatical commitment to the Church Militant. They were widely known for their willingness to use whatever means at their disposal to achieve their ends of conversion. “Jesuitical” became synonymous with a pedagogical style that sought the student’s vulnerabilities in order to undermine their beliefs and arguments. Those missionaries, our first Canadian adult educators, came to New France in the seventeenth century fired by a mystical enthusiasm to revive the ardour of the Primitive Church. They not only shared in Europe’s post-Renaissance sense of political and cultural superiority; they also believed that, with the discovery of the new world, the world itself was coming to an end. These themes—of the new world and the end of the world—blended “harmoniously in the great task of evangelizing the unconverted millions who knew nothing of the faith,...(Jaenan 1973: 48).

The older style of Canadian historiography (Trudel, Eccles, Mealing) assumed that missionary work was essentially benevolent; and, generations of school children have been nurtured on stories of the heroism and devotion of Jesuits like Jean de Brebeuf (1596-1649) and Charles Lalement (1587-1674). Works of art celebrate their burnings at the stake. More recent scholarship (Jennings, Berkhofer, Axtell, Jaenen, Trigger, Ronda) views the missionary enterprise as a “revolutionary enterprise, designed to bring about a radical transformation of Indian culture” (Ronda 1981: 66). From an adult education point of view, the Jesuit approach to instructing and persuading the Amerindians to embrace their French version of Christianity offers incalculable insights into the inner workings of the “colonial imagination” which believes that the objects of instruction have everything to learn and nothing to teach. The Jesuits came to demand that their learners forsake their beliefs, values and most of their social practices. They wanted to foster a profound transformation of the perspective of their Indian learners.

To bridge the immense gap between the Jesuit and the Amerindian, the Jesuits grappled with the new throaty sounds of Huron, Iroquois and Montagnais, fitting these languages into old Greek and Latin grammatical paradigms. They had to find words for sheep, sin, prison, cannon, king and Christ. They had to become like children, stumbling over words, being laughed at and, most difficult of all, translating ideas from a hierarchical, patriarchal, technological, status-ridden world of Christian Europe into the mental universe of the relatively egalitarian natives. If they wanted to overthrow the “Empire of Satan,” they had to “attack the enemy upon their own ground, with their own weapons” Brebeuf observed (Axtell 1985: 81).

Jesuit “cunning pedagogics” were aimed primarily at undermining the life world foundations of Indian ways of life. The life world is the taken-for-granted source of meaning and action, and various spiritual-religious practices were interwoven into everyday life. The shaman, a person of considerable spiritual power and cultural authority, performed medicinal and psychotherapeutic functions in all tribes. The Jesuits sought to dislodge him from his place of life world supremacy through ridicule, mockery and one upmanship. They wanted to insert themselves in his place. This was a brilliant, ruthless pedagogical strategy. Knowing a kingpin when they saw one, the Jesuits used their scientific knowledge of sonar and lunar eclipses, tides and the magical power of the printed world to de-authorize the shaman. They marshalled their own life world resources (increasingly penetrated by the new sciences) to undermine the Amerindian cultural foundations. By converting a native cadre, they hoped to create a fifth column for crown and God in the Devil’s Empire.

The Jesuits accepted the premise that the Amerindians could be habituated to a new way of belief and life. They were not natural slaves, doomed to subservience. But Jesuit mystical

apocalypticism and the experimentations of Spanish missionaries predisposed them to remove their neophyte believers from their natural environments. By placing them in controlled learning sites, they could then be free to mould new subjectivities and bodies. The origins of the “Indian reserve” lie in this pedagogical formulation. Thus, the Jesuits (and many other missionaries who would follow them into the Canadas) could not countenance wandering or nomadism. Wandering meant that one was uncivilized and non-docile. At first, the Jesuits sought to remove the children from their contaminated pedagogical environments. When this didn’t work, they tried to create Christian villages (like Sillery) in the wilderness. These controlled environments—Canadian history’s first intentionally designed social pedagogical spaces for adults and children—allowed the Jesuits to impose major reforms on the native life with relative impunity. “Let these barbarians remain always nomads,” exclaimed Father Le Jeune, “then their sick will die in the woods, and their children will never enter the seminar. Render them sedentary, and you will fill these institutions...” (Axtell 1985: 55).

The Jesuits were brilliant pedagogues. They had to be resourceful and guileful because their teachings were perceived as being enigmatic and profoundly threatening to Amerindian pupils. Some of the most compelling resistance to Jesuit missionizing came from the Huron and Montagnais Indians. They couldn’t understand the ideas of sin and guilt. The Christian version of heaven and hell held little appeal for the Amerindians. Some Indians were suspicious that hell was a “weapon of intimidation used by the missionaries to force acceptance of French social and political domination” (Ronda 1981: 71). They, too, anticipated an afterlife; but it was not a place of reward or punishment for actions on earth.

Jesuit pedagogical methods depended on painting lurid visual images of hell to scare their students into converting to the new faith and way of life. Baptism was another religious practice that Amerindians had problems with. In the early years, most of the Indians who received the sacrament of baptism thought that baptism might restore their health. But as smallpox and other diseases swept through the villages, baptism was believed to cause death. Charles Meachkwat, a Huron convert, was confronted by his wife who wailed disconsolately, “Dost thou not see that we are all dying since they told us to pray to God? Where are they relatives, where are mine? Most of them are dead; it is no longer a time to believe” (Ronda 1981: 72). The **Jesuit Relations** reported that Indians in New France also resisted the colonization of their life worlds by extending their criticism to the “physical symbols of European Christianity” (Ronda 1981: 74). Though fascinated with French material culture—clocks, glass, doors, weather vanes—and believing that all symbols possessed autonomous power, Huron religious leaders blamed the Jesuits for their crop failures. The Christian cross was perceived to be a grave danger. Here the Jesuits had to be extremely cunning. The Amerindians feared all images, and “conversion par l’image” (Gagnon 1975) was the Jesuits’ favoured teaching method.

The Jesuits used visual images to teach the faith. Conversion by the image has its roots in Loyola’s **Spiritual Exercises**. The Jesuit founder encouraged his novices to practice mental representation of central biblical themes, use relics, images and adornments as sensory aids to spiritual learning. Roman Catholicism is a highly visual, sensate religion, and Jesuit pedagogues sought to transform the perspectives of their pupils by appealing to the full range of the sensorium. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Jesuits gave their native proselytes oval brass or bronze medals (of Christ as an infant for instance) bearing such inscriptions as “Good and infinite Jesus have mercy on us.” The favoured rings were the L-heart (signifying Christ’s love), the double M (Mater Misericordia, Mother of mercy) and the IHS (Isus Hominis Salvator, Jesus Saviour of mankind). Father Jean Enjiran wrote from Sillery in 1676 requesting “things

which may help us to win those poor Indians. It is not stretching matters to assume that these Christian images replaced (or added to) the traditional amulets worn for protection and good fortune.

The Jesuits believed that their Indian pupils learned best at moments of heightened emotion and melodrama. Believing that perspective transformation required shock treatment, Jesuit adult educators painted frightening verbal portraits of hell, the underworld. Loyola, transferring his military mentality to the religious realm, believed that potential converts ought to be able see the “vast fires, and the souls enclosed in bodies of fire, “ hear the “wailing, howling, cries, and blasphemies’ of the damned, smell the “smoke, the sulphur, the filth, and corruption,” taste the bitterness of tears, sadness, and remorse of conscience,” and touch the “flames which envelop and burn the souls” (Axtell 1985: 114). Indian catechumens were encouraged to use the see-hear-taste-touch mode of pedagogy to instruct novice Christians. According to an eighteenth century Jesuit historian, some Indians thought the Jesuits were perpetrating a fraud because how could there be enough wood to keep a fire burning forever? An ingenious Jesuit priest figured out a way to undermine the doubters. He invited the leading men of the village and others to come to an object lesson demonstration. Passing a lump of sulphur around to the villagers, they felt it in their hands. Then the priest crumpled some of the lump into a kettle of coals. The “earth’ burned, and emitted a sickening odour. Henceforth, the historian noted, they “believed in the word of God that there is a lower world” (Axtell 1985: 114). This Jesuit chicanery could only work as long as the Indian students remained unaware of some elementary science.

The Jesuits even used popular theatre to capture their Indian students. In 1640, sponsored by Governor Montmagny in Quebec, the Jesuits created a scenario portraying an unbeliever’s soul being chased by two Algonquin-speaking demons who, upon capturing it, hurl it into a hell vomiting forth flames. These spectacles appeared to work—a spectacular pedagogy of fear designed to dynamite traditional mind-sets. But they weren’t universally appropriate or applicable in the settings where most missionaries actually worked. The Jesuits had used pictures to instruct their pupils when they first landed in Acadia in 1611. They continued to refine this pedagogical method during their tenure in New France. They managed to learn how to meet the visual preferences of their learners. In 1637 Father Le Jeune used pictures of hell featuring enchained souls “mad with pain.” “Heretics [Protestants] are very much wrong to condemn and to destroy these representations, which have so good an effect,” he told his French provincial. “These sacred pictures are half the instruction that one is able to give the Indians.” Rather sadistically, Le Jeune desired pictures for the Hurons that clearly depicted “three, four, or five demons tormenting one soul with different kinds of torture—one applying to it the torch, another serpents, another pinching it with red-hot tongs, another holding it bound with chains—it would have a good effect, especially if everything were very distinct, and if rage and sadness appeared plainly in the face of the lost soul” (Axtell 1985: 115).

The biggest pedagogical challenge the Jesuit educators faced was to implant a French Catholic sensibility in the daily practices of life. The Jesuits imposed a harsh ascetic ethic on women and men. Virginity was the favoured state in the Christian hierarchy of values. Pleasure in and of itself was bad. Once the Jesuits were institutionally secure in Amerindian villages and towns, they brought harsh measures to bear on women guilty of “wanton lewdness.” They also used the confessional to monitor the sexual feelings of women. The Jesuits believed them to be “potentially filled with sexual energy, potentially capable of pursuing sexual pleasure as an end in itself...” (Anderson 1991: 90). They wanted to render women as “docile as little lambs” (**Jesuit Relations** 20, p. 267, quoted in Anderson 1991: 93). Their machinations were not always

successful. One small girl of seven or eight tried to prevent a male relative from being baptized. She seized the holy water and trampled it on the ground. She told her relative that if he submitted to baptism, he would die. "This little fury of hell," the Jesuit concluded, "is so eloquent that the sick man goes back on his word and will not be baptized" (**Jesuit Relations** 19, p. 213, quoted in Anderson 1991: 94).

Karen Anderson, writing in **Chained by one foot** (1991), is dumbstruck that in a period of less than thirty years, the Huron and Montagnais had gone from being as free as wild animals to compelling dissenters to obey Jesuit and French rules. The Jesuits worked hard to create a moral regime that put considerable pressure on women to see themselves as the cause of domestic disputes. Young girls were even cloistered and guarded by male relatives and bells to ensure that young lovers did not crawl into their beds. The converts were actually behaving as if the Jesuit conception of the world were true. One might speculate that the erosion of the foundations of the life world undermined women's autonomy, self-esteem and confidence. This left them vulnerable to the external judgment that they were flawed human beings who could only be affirmed when they obeyed the rule of their superiors.

Some feminist historians have argued that Christianity enabled women to find voice and self-expression. This observation contains a grain of truth. But in the context of French political power, economic imbalance, persistent warfare, death and disease, crisis of faith and Jesuit persistence, native men and women had very room for manoeuvre. Native men, their livelihoods undermined, sought power through identification with the economic ends of the global fur trade. For disempowered Indian women, seventeenth century Roman Catholicism provided some channels for their affirmation of identity. The case of Kateri Tekakwitha, an Iroquois women who achieved sainthood, illustrates the way choice of a religious life provided a pathway for recognition and power within the new religious world-view. But this fact cannot stop us from understanding the Jesuit adult education project of cultural erasure within the colonial imagination of seventeenth century New France.

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