

STEREOSCOPIC UNDERSTANDING (For my Amherst Classmates of 1952)

In the Weekend activities associated with Amherst's May graduation a decade ago, Saturday afternoon May 22, 1992 in the Merrill Center to be exact, I had the privilege of participating in a panel and seminar for Graduating seniors and their families on International Relations along with Hedrick Smith, the former New York Times correspondent to the Soviet Union, and several members of the Amherst faculty. My own contribution to the panel's provocations, the anthropologist's mite we might say, were some brief observations on stereoscopic vision and stereoscopic understanding. I have always enjoyed teaching Introductory Anthropology to undergraduates, although I am in fact a cultural anthropologist interested in short-term cultural evolution of the last several hundred years. This is because of that part of the course devoted to what anthropologists know about the evolution of the human body. Here I used to give three lectures. One was devoted to the evolution of the hand, that marvelous appendage of power and precision. Just think what technological triumphs owe to our handiness and capacity for tinkering. Another was devoted to the evolution of our bi-pedalism, our ability to balance our bodies over just two relatively small feet (well! For most people). Just think of the challenge for practically any other animal of walking, hands free - we do it without a second thought - down a steep flight of stairs on just two appendages. The third lecture was devoted to the evolution of stereoscopic vision. This is our ability to focus and resolve the different perspectives of two separated eyes into a precise sense of depth and of the distance of things. Just think of having to negotiate our world - playing any sport, for example - without that sense of depth and distance. Precise stereoscopic vision is more widely found in the animals' world than bi-pedalism or manual dexterity... among raptor birds, for example. But still ours is a unique capacity among animals.

In our Saturday afternoon panel I used our human stereoscopy as a hopeful metaphor for the problem of international relations: the constant challenge to resolve two perspectives into a common and deeper focus without forgetting that behind this resolution there are always two perspectives involved. That's not a far-fetched analogy for what international relations are about: the search for stereoscopic understanding. Surely it's not far-fetched for a cultural anthropologist who usually spends his career among people of a distinctly different culture seeking to interpret their particular perspective on the human condition more broadly speaking. Recently, of course, I have had -we have all had no doubt- cause again to think about the challenge of stereoscopic understanding: to Israelis and Palestinians; to Catholics and Protestants in Belfast; to Basques and Spaniards in northern Spain; to Pakistanis and Indians in Kashmir. There is no easy answer but the question is a profound one. How do we take two perspectives and resolve them into increased depth of mutual understanding? Visually we do it all the time, and without a thought. How do we transfer that evolved capacity in a stereoscopic politics in international relations? And that question rises even more recently in the unilateral - can we call it the one-eyed decision or the one-eye-open, one-eye-closed decision - we have taken on global warning and the Kyoto

treaty. The treaty is itself, after all, a stereoscopic attempt to relate the two perspectives of the developed and underdeveloped world. In the land of the blind the One-Eyed Man is King, as they say. Fortunately in a democracy all citizens have the opportunity and the obligation to enter into the social compact, which includes international relations in these years of globalization, with both eyes open!

Of course, an anthropologist is not a political scientist, much less a politician-both of whom are very much involved in the agonistic actualities of everyday life and the currencies of political struggle. Theirs is the world, primarily, of special - not to say egocentric - interests in contest. It is a turbulent world constantly challenging to that value we have identified as stereoscopic understanding. But behind that ever-present play for power and the scrambles of self interest, I like to argue, lie other and perhaps more fundamental facts of our creature-hood, of our social animality, embedded in the beings we have evolved to be. These are deeply embodied values, we might say, present in the biological interface between the nature of our bodies and our social and cultural evolution and evolved capabilities. This evolutionary interface between nature and nurture, or nature and culture, is a focal interest of anthropology. We may well be in many circumstances a self-interested, power-hungry animal. But I like to think that there are other more important and more fundamental values anchored in our biology: the values of maintaining a balance between opposing gravitational forces in social life; the value of precision or fineness or "grasp" in our making contact with the problems of the social world; and, as I argue here, the value of stereoscopy in our approach to the would-be self-exclusive claims that are constantly made to our understanding by conflicting and self interested parties.