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THE FUR TRADERS

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Imagine a culture that has the following tradition. Once a year everyone's name is put into a lottery. Only one name is drawn. The person whose name is selected is then stoned to death by the lucky non-winners.

In the barest outlines this is the plot of Shirley Jackson's chilling tale, "The Lottery." No reader can miss the obvious moral message. Just because something has always been done, just because a given practice is enshrined as a "tradition" within a given culture, and just because people think their "identity" as a culture requires the continuation of this tradition, it does not follow that what they do is above moral reproach. Whether individually or collectively, people can grow accustomed to doing what is wrong (in fact, history is full of actual, not fictional, examples). Traditions, even those that are part of a group's "cultural identity," can be morally obscene.

Most people readily understand this simple truth when, as in "The Lottery," the victims who are wronged are human beings. Fewer understand that this same truth holds when we cross our species' boundaries. Increasingly, however, more and more people are coming to see that species' membership, like other biological differences (for example, race and sex) *in itself* is no barrier to an informed, nonprejudicial assessment of what is right and wrong. And this new fact — the fact that more and more people today are overcoming the prejudice of speciesism, just as more and more of our predecessors overcame the prejudices of racism and sexism — this new fact is beginning to make its presence felt.

I mention "The Lottery" and the simple truth it embodies to set the stage to examine practices in which nonhuman animals are killed for their skins, not because a culture's supposed "identity" is at stake, but because people stand to make money. Whatever else we might think of such practices, they at least are characterized by ruthless honesty. No smoke screens here. No mirrors. The yardstick is economics, pure and simple: People make money as a result of killing and skinning animals.

Some there are, however, who defend the market in skins on loftier grounds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of those apologists who tie the trade in skins to the "cultural identity" of native peoples living in the far north of Canada. Those who would bring an end to the skins emanating from this source or, more modestly, would insist on truth-in-labelling when it comes to the final products, are denounced as "moral imperialists" or "racists."

The charge of racism is a particularly difficult one for non-speciesists to imagine might apply to them. Yet it would be arrogant for any of us to suppose that we have every detail of our moral life in order. Is it possible that, in defending the rights of other animals, we are guilty of offending the rights of native peoples?

However, three ideas do not go away. One is the simple truth mentioned earlier. By itself the argument from cultural identity is woefully inadequate as a moral defense of a traditional way of behaving. The second is more anthropological in nature and will take a bit longer to explain.

The "noble savage" has a long, familiar history in Western thought. People who lived a more "primitive" way of life, we are asked to believe, were ethically purer than those whose society was more "advanced" or "civilized." The former were respectful and altruistic, the latter cruel and selfish. Respect and altruism, it sometimes is claimed, certainly characterized the indigenous peoples of North America. Before the initial contact made by European explorers, these peoples led a peaceful, harmonious life, one that respected the independent value and dignity of the natural world, wild animals included. After white contact, however, this superior ethic was destroyed, due largely to the products the Iron Age invaders introduced to the Stone Age cultures they found in North America. In the particular case of nonhuman animals, our European ancestors brought with them the impoverished view that an animal's value could be reduced to what its flesh or skin could buy, whereas the indigenous people valued and respected the inherent dignity of the animals. These people were noble. They *reverenced* animal life. In the destruction of the life-way of native peoples, therefore, we find the triumph of an inferior view of the value of animals.

This familiar view is not without its problems. Today's romance with yesterday's "noble savage" is likely to be based more on fiction than fact. Not to be disputed is whether, before white contact, native peoples normally treated animals respectfully (for example, they did not overkill, they used every part of the animals they hunted, sometimes they even apologized to the animals for being the agent of their death). The question is not whether but why they behaved as they did. The "noble savage" explanation is not the only one at hand.

A quite different answer notes that native peoples commonly believed that the location and supply of wild animals was controlled by unseen regulatory powers ("keepers of the game," as they sometimes are called). These "keepers" had the power to make wild animals plentiful or scarce, to place them nearby or far away, etc. and obviously, indigenous peoples preferred abundant, readily

accessible wildlife. To insure this required that the keepers not be offended or angered, and this in turn required that these peoples behaved in the ways the keepers demanded. What ways were these? Well, none other than those already described: the animals were not to be overhunted, every part was to be used, perhaps even an apology was to be offered.

Now, it is important to recognize that the reason or motivation for this behaviour is quite different, depending on whether we interpret it against the background of keepers of the game or in terms of the more familiar idea of the noble savage. In the latter case, native peoples *revere the animals*, in the former it is a *prudent investment for the future*; and in the latter the native hunters are pictured as being *warm innocents* just a little below the angels, while in the former they emerge as *cool calculators* no different in kind from anyone else who acts with a view to one's own, or one's group's, interest.

Which of these two views - the reverential "noble savage," or the prudential "wildlife investor" - is the true one? It is not clear that we know, or that we ever will. For there is an inerradicable ambiguity in the behaviour of native peoples, an ambiguity that deepens the more, the more we enter into the view of the world on which their behaviour was based. Perhaps someone will be able to show, clearly and convincingly, that all or some native peoples really were — or, today, really are — genuinely reverential in their attitudes towards and treatment of wild animals. I can only say, I have not seen such a demonstration. And this has made a difference to how I have viewed debates about the fatal interactions of *contemporary* native peoples with wildlife. In *their* traditions, we are asked to believe, the animals are treated reverentially (or "respectfully," "with dignity," etc.) not at all the way we "civilized" people behave. My modest observation, based on the previous discussion, is that I am not convinced. To the extent that "reverential" treatment is tied to (the often unarticulated) beliefs about the unseen powers that regulate wildlife (the "keepers of the game"), to that extent at least native peoples never were, and are not now, any "nobler" than the rest of us.

Doubts about the motivation of indigenous people, then, have been the second idea that would not go away. In comparison to this one, the third idea is considerably simpler. This is the fact that little remains of the original culture of native peoples in North America. Whether this fact is something to rejoice in or something to regret, the simple truth is: it is a fact. And a highly relevant one. Leaving aside doubts about the motivation of native hunters of the past, and notwithstanding the weakness of the argument from tradition, it is odd to hear people rhapsodize about the importance of killing wild animals for the "cultural identity" of native peoples, when that culture has all but disappeared and when the people doing the rhapsodizing are not themselves changing their own life in order to make it more expressive of what the culture once was (are not, for example, moving back to the land, into Stone Age conditions, but instead spend their evenings on the couch watching reruns of "Leave It Beaver"). How

*important* are we supposed to think "cultural identity" is to those who say they want to protect it, if that culture is dead and if they themselves are not doing anything to resurrect it?

Together with the two other ideas mentioned earlier, this third one has reasserted itself over the years. When taken together, the three ideas make a strong presumptive case against those who defend the "hunting rights" of native people on the basis of their "cultural identity."

How sharply a commitment to truth and justice contrasts with those who defend the market in skins, particularly those who do so in the name of "cultural identity." Time will unmask the hypocrisy and deceit, the misinformation and media-manipulation, and the government's (both regional and national) collusion with an industry that really has nothing to do with any group's "cultural identity" but everything to do with large profits for a comparatively small handful of individuals and companies. The people in this industry, as well as those who continue to support it will emerge as shallow, selfish, power-driven and callous, as respectful of the "cultural identity" of native peoples as they are of the rights of animals.

And therein lies the most essential point. For the fur industry has paid the final insult to native peoples; they have *used and abused* them yet again, only this time the abuse is subtler: The noblest of the ideas, the "identity" of their culture, has been used to advance the special interests of an obscene industry.

So, no, it is not "racist" to condemn the industry. Just the opposite. There is not good reason, really, to think that in working to bring an end to this industry we are destroying the "identity" of a culture whose members have a different skin colour from our own. That culture, with all its ambiguity regarding the true value of wild animals, was destroyed long ago — and was destroyed by the very forces that today wrap their pecuniary selfishness in the mantle of "preserving a way of life" they themselves helped to render extinct. The fur-traitors who grease the wheels of their industry with half-truths and lies are no friends of native peoples. The industry is in the business of exploitation, and those who are exploited include more than wild animals.

Paradoxically, therefore, the real racists are those who use the idea of "cultural identity" to defend their greed, while those who will not tolerate this fraudulent use of native peoples are the real defenders of their dignity. It is not for the sake of wild animals alone that we must work to bring an end to the market in skins. The rights of exploited racial minorities must also be defended. The two are inseparable. What is true in general, is true here: Animal liberation is human liberation.

## Note

\*I owe the title, "The Fur Traitors" to my wife, Nancy. For a fuller examination of alternative explanations of why native peoples behaved as they did, see "The Ambiguity of the Native Americans' Attitudes Toward Nature" in Tom Regan, *All That Dwell Therein: Essays on Animal Rights And Environmental Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

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