
On Maslow's Concept of "The Digested Past"

by

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Historians often speak of the impact of the past on the present. Past is prologue they often tell us, and few doubt the validity of this. Yet, few ponder how the past is perpetuated from one generation to another. If the past lives in the human mind, which can be its only effective reservoir, how can we ascertain which of its remnants are still alive and which are dead?

On this subject, A.H. Maslow, the humanistic psychologist, made a pertinent statement: "... *The past is active and alive only insofar as it has recreated the person, and has been digested into the present person. It is not or should not be something other than the person, something alien to it. It has now become Person (and has lost its own identity as something different and other), just as past steaks that I have eaten are now me, not steaks. The digested past . . . is different from the undigested past*". (1)

Some historians will no doubt claim that the past lives on in custom, habit, and institutions. But unless the collective psyche is predisposed to absorbing these remnants, they become part of the undigested past. Somehow the collective psyche must

be susceptible to digesting these components of the cultural-historical milieu, or else they become alien to it and are matters for consideration solely by the antiquarian. For the historian is concerned, among other things, with both the roots and the residue of the digested past as they live in the collective psyche. Therefore, to prove that an event has occurred in the past and still influences the present, the historian must analyse its digestion into the mind.

While working through Maslow's insight, I must dismiss Freud's and Jung's contentions on the impact of the past. Put bluntly, Freud's hypothesis that primal parricide, occurring deep in prehistory, left traces on man's psyche which were subject to Lamarckian transmission, can be consigned to the dust-bin. Nor can I accept Jung's contention that the collective unconscious contains historical archetypes which are re-activated similarly by every culture and civilisation. So much for the positions of the two great psychological pioneers. I am escaping their shadow, I am, therefore, able to ponder freely Maslow's concept of the digested past.

In dealing with the digested past, I must first consider two vital components: pooled-tradition and selective-psychoic choice. Pooled-tradition represents the parameters of a civilization's historic experience. It defines the limits of selective-psychoic choice, preparing it to become the digested past. Therefore, selective-psychoic choice, which is unconscious, shapes the raw materials of pooled-tradition into a unique historical phenomenon. In other words, the interaction of conscious pooled-tradition and unconscious selective-psychoic choice prepares the way for the digestion of the past into the collective psyche of contemporary civilizations.

In this respect, one consideration is crucial: historical events differ from the image they represent in the collective psyche. Based on contemporary conditions, selective-psychoic choice moulds past events into current thought. Thus it is that "past steaks (events)" become the transformed flesh of contemporary history. To apply this thesis, I must know objectively the historical phenomenon, something of the contemporary culture, and must trace how the interaction is absorbed into the collective psyche.

The latter one requires a catalytic agent: a contemporary emotional image. This contemporary catalyst, or psychological image, serves as a bridge between pooled-tradition and the selective-psychoic choice. Indeed, it is the psychological image which triggers the selective-psychoic choice from pooled-tradition. Hence, the digested past is the product of a three-pronged

sequence: psychological image triggers psychoic-selective choice from the civilization's pooled-tradition.

To illustrate my thesis, I have selected a brief case-study from Mexican civilization, which is the area of my expertise. This is the role of Dona Marina, otherwise known as La Malinche, in Mexican history and culture. Dona Marina was an Aztec princess, who in childhood was sold into slavery to the Tabascans by a cruel mother and stepfather. She was rescued from slavery by Hernán Cortés, under whom she became interpreter, guide, and mistress. She was a crucial factor in the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, and lives on in the pooled-tradition of Mexico.

The psychoic-selective choice from Mexico's pooled-tradition has transformed La Malinche into the personification of treason. Many Mexicans of today "*look upon Malincha . . . much as the French and Dutch regarded the village girls who fraternized with German soldiers during World War II. Anyone who adopts a position not strictly nationalistic is labeled a 'Malinchist' and lumped with those who can see some merit in foreign things or who appreciate the foreign more than the Mexican. This type of snobbery abounds and is branded with the abhorred name of the Indian princess*". (2)

It is in this way that a fragment of the pooled-tradition of Mexican civilization has been transformed by psychoic-selective choice. By this I mean that the Malinche lives not as objective fact in the collective

psyche of Mexico, but as the digested past, alive and transformed in digestion. She has become the personification of the Indian woman who betrayed Aztec civilization by cooperating and fornicating with the hated Spanish conquistador.

One remaining question needs to be answered: what is the contemporary emotional image which has fostered the integration of Malinche into the digested past? The answer: the Mexican male's fear of female betrayal. To use Maslow's terminology, Malinche has become

Mexican Person, a wound in the historical psyche which is absorbed by the catalyst of male fear of female betrayal in Mexican civilization. Chosen by psychic-selective choice from the pooled-tradition of Mexico, Malinche is absorbed into the psychological Person by the catalyst of contemporary male fears in Mexico. In this way, the digested past is perpetuated not by the objective facts of history but by durable contemporary images. In this sense, and only this, all living history is contemporary history.

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Notes

1. A.H. Maslow, **The Farther Reaches of Human Nature** (New York: Penguin, 1976), p.61.
2. Victor Alba, **The Mexicans: The Making of a Nation** (New York: Praeger, 1967), p.13.

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