THIRD EDITION

Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems

JOHN H. BODLEY

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Preface

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED for cultural anthropology courses that focus on world problems and cultural ecology. Using the cross-cultural, evolutionary, and multi-disciplinary perspectives that are unique to anthropology, the text introduces students to the complex problems of contemporary global-scale cultures and helps them better understand their place on the global stage.

In addition to updating the sources, case studies, and statistics in the previous edition, I've used a different lens in this edition to view our contemporary human problems—that of culture scale. What I addressed in previous editions as a contrast between tribal culture and industrial civilization I have now recast as a contrast between small-scale and large- and global-scale cultures. This culture scale analysis is the one I used in my introductory text *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System* (Mayfield, 1994). Small-scale cultures are represented by the contemporary "indigenous peoples" and peasants who are so well-known to anthropologists for their reliance on nonmarket subsistence and kin-based support networks.

There are many advantages to the culture scale approach, but most importantly it means that contemporary problems are related to particular cultural processes, especially politicization and commercialization. The role of the transnational global elite and the importance of cultural hegemony are addressed directly. The culture scale perspective emphasizes the long-term survival value of local autonomy, the satisfaction of basic human needs, sustainable resource management, and social equality—all primary goals of small-scale cultures—because these values are often undermined by politically organized large-scale states and global-scale commercial interests. The focus on culture scale suggests that many solutions to contemporary problems may be found by developing local communities supported by regional markets and ecosystems, rather than by making the continuous accumulation of finance capital the dominant cultural process throughout the world.

Chapter 2 argues that the rapid expansion of the global-scale culture over the past 200 years is unlikely to be sustained through the next century without dramatic cultural change. The effects of continuous economic growth—intensified by great social inequality—are reducing the earth's

long-term ability to support humanity. In contrast, small-scale cultures are an inherently more sustainable cultural adaptation because they minimize culturally driven incentives to increase pressure on the environment. At the same time these decentralized societies can more equitably provide for all of their people. This argument has important implications for the continuing policy debates about whether environmental dangers are being exaggerated, how much growth can be sustained, and whether a greater emphasis on social justice, human welfare, and wealth redistribution will be needed.

Chapter 2 also includes a reassessment of the famous 1972 *Limits to Growth* study and a "worst case scenario" of environmental disaster using material newly available from the former USSR, which focuses on the human impacts of Chernobyl, industrial pollution, and the shrinking Aral Sea. The rain forest example has been updated and expanded to more broadly cover deforestation. New material is incorporated on the tragic commons, Pleistocene extinctions debates, and the loss of biodiversity. In relation to the "ecologically noble savage" debate, Chapter 2 argues that small-scale cultures do not require self-conscious conservationists, because local self-sufficiency fosters biodiversity even in subsistence crops; globally integrated market exchange systems have historically simplified and degraded ecosystems. In order to provide a more balanced view (at the same time stressing the ecological advantages of small-scale cultures) I've included material in the section on the Pacific that shows extensive ecological modification under the large-scale cultures on Tikopia.

The discussion of food systems notes that the structure of political economies and social inequality are more critical in limiting the availability of food than the ultimate limits to global food production. This discussion also covers the corporate structure of food production, processing, and distribution, especially the degree of economic concentration in these industries. This highlights the contradiction between the ideals of the free market and the realities of oligopoly. Cross-national comparisons of the organization of agricultural production in Great Britain, Norway, and California have been added.

The most significant organizational change in this edition is the merging of the original Chapter 7 on internal order and Chapter 8 on war into a new Chapter 7—"Poverty and Conflict in the Global Culture." This change reflects the end of the Cold War together with the rapid expansion of minimally regulated global markets. It recognizes that the most pressing global concerns are now famines, ecological imbalance, development failures, local wars, and the rich-poor gap. This new chapter discusses the impact of highly concentrated corporate economic power and financial investments by the global elite on households and communities in the United States as well as in the impoverished countries of the world.

The final chapter summarizes the challenge of "sustainable development," posing the problem of how to design a global system that will permit small-scale, community-based cultures to enjoy maximum autonomy within large-scale states interconnected by a global capitalist market system. The conflict between "free-market" capitalism as represented by NAFTA and GATT is considered in relation to the needs of local communities. The UN's Agenda 21 and the Biodiversity Treaty are considered in some detail as important global responses to contemporary problems. The dilemma is that capitalism assumes perpetual economic growth driven by material inequality and profit-seeking individualism, while small-scale cultures emphasize community, stability, and equality.

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Anthropological Perspectives on Contemporary Human Problems

A knowledge of anthropology enables us to look with greater freedom at the problems confronting our civilization.

FRANZ BOAS,
Anthropology and Modern Life

CULTURAL EVOLUTION, THROUGH PROCESSES that many would label *progress*, has brought humanity to major turning points many times: the adoption of upright posture, the first use of tools, the development of language, culture as an adaptive strategy, food sharing, village life, food production, social stratification, urbanization, state organization, and now the emergence of an industrially based global commercial economy. All of these changes have been decisive ones—crucial developments with critical implications for the future. However, at this point the outlook is suddenly different, because the commercial economy, together with the great inequities of wealth and power that it has fostered, has dramatically intensified all the potential problems created by earlier developments. It is difficult to imagine a continuation of present trends without the global system either breaking down or transforming in any of several ways. In that sense, the world's cultures are at a crisis point. Drastic cultural changes will occur—the questions are what these changes will be, how they will be directed, and whose interests they will serve.

In many respects this book is Volume 2 of my earlier work, *Victims of Progress*, which deals with the destruction of small-scale, independent tribal cultures by the expanding global culture. It is now clear that many of our most serious contemporary problems are inherent in the basic cultural patterns of our global-scale commercial civilization and indeed in civilization

itself. Tribal cultures were designed along fundamentally different lines and therefore managed to avoid most of the problems that threaten contemporary civilization. The contrasts between these major types of culture, small- and global-scale, are so great that the two cannot coexist unless the international order is intentionally redesigned to permit significant cultural diversity. What we are now witnessing is perhaps the final irony of cultural evolution—the latecomer, global-scale culture, has suddenly arisen as a clearly dominant and brilliant short-run success. We have conquered the earlier tribal cultures, which were proven long-run successes, and we seem about to become victims of our own evolutionary progress. To avoid such an outcome, we must view our contemporary problems in as wide a context as possible. We must reexamine small-scale cultures and compare their solutions to basic human problems with our own solutions. This is perhaps anthropology's most critical role. People must now take deliberate control over the cultural systems that sustain their households and communities. This approach suggests that many solutions to contemporary problems may be found by developing local communities supported by regional markets and ecosystems rather than by making the continuous accumulation of financial capital the dominant cultural process.

NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEMS

What we face is a *global* crisis. The entire species is in jeopardy; more is at stake now than the existence of individual tribes or nations. A further complication is that we face not one but *multiple* crises in many areas; and, as they multiply, we may suddenly be confronted with an overwhelming "crisis of crises" (Platt 1969). The pace of cultural change is now so rapid that new, unforeseen problems, each of crisis proportions, appear even before the earlier problems have been adequately identified. In effect, crises are now bigger (that is, they bring greater potential for disaster), there are more of them, and they are arising more rapidly than ever before.

We are undergoing an accelerating rate of cultural change that strains our ability to adapt and threatens to leave us in the vulnerable condition that Alvin Toffler (1971) aptly labeled "future shock." This pace of cultural change is apparent when the ages of the major archaeological periods are compared. The Paleolithic period lasted perhaps 3 million years. During that time, early humans and their immediate hominid ancestors remained hunter-gatherers, foraging in the small, thinly scattered bands that produced small-scale cultures and modern humans through a process that could be called *sapienization.* This adaptive process produced *culture,* the learned and shared symbolic ways of life and thought that *Homo sapiens* used to improve their

survival. When culture was produced, the sapienization process continued to optimize human well-being by minimizing the cost of cultural activity while maximizing long-term sustainability. The human problem now is that sapienization has been superseded by two other cultural processes, politicization and commercialization, which have dramatically raised the cost of cultural activity and threatened sustainability.

The transition through the Mesolithic period into food production and to the brink of political centralization by the end of the Neolithic period required perhaps 8,000 years. Nearly 5,000 years more were required to reach the beginnings, barely 200 years ago, of the commercially driven, industrially based, global-scale culture. As Toffler (1971:14) and others point out, much of the material culture that now dominates our daily lives appeared in the twentieth century, much of it within the space of a single lifetime. Many of the most significant technological innovations, including antibiotics, TV, computers, satellite communications, nuclear energy, mass-produced organic compounds, and jet propulsion, appeared during the last half of the twentieth century. The present generation is experiencing the most profound changes humanity has ever seen. Whereas earlier "crises" such as the Neolithic transition were certainly "revolutionary" in their long-run impact, they would have been virtually imperceptible to the individuals involved because they occurred over millenia, and their outcomes in particular communities would not have been obvious for hundreds or even thousands of years. Cultural institutions were able to adjust gradually, but today we are often totally unprepared to deal with the unexpected impact of such rapid change.

The most critical qualitative difference in the organization of contemporary cultural change is that change is now primarily commercially driven. New technologies, information, and other cultural "products" that affect the daily lives of billions of people are produced by corporate business enterprises controlled by a relative handful of people. This *commercialization* process has produced a global-scale culture that is staggeringly different from anything preceding it. Its impact on the biosphere, the process of cultural evolution, and humanity itself is impossible to predict with precision.

Not only has the pace of change increased, but its scope has dramatically widened. The early evolution of human beings was not a global crisis. Humans have occupied all of both hemispheres for only perhaps 15,000 to 30,000 years, barely .005 percent of humanity's existence. The Neolithic "crisis" produced by the global climate changes, rising sea levels, and changes in plant and animal communities that accompanied the end of the last Ice Age changed the way many human communities organized their daily lives. These cultural changes, especially the shift to village life and farming, ultimately made it possible for the social inequality and political centralization of large-scale cultures to arise under very specific conditions in certain parts of the world. This *politicization* process created governments that took

control over households and autonomous tribal communities. These local changes had ominous long-range implications. The most rapid and dramatic global level changes began when commercialization suddenly became a dominant cultural process at the beginning of the industrial era at the end of the eighteenth century. As recently as 200 years ago, perhaps 50 million people continued to live in politically autonomous small-scale cultures. These independent tribal communities still controlled vast areas of the globe and were only marginally affected by either governments or commercial business enterprises. Now, however, *commercialization* has become a global process that has destroyed or transformed virtually all previous cultural adaptations and has given humanity the power not only to bring about its own extinction as a species but also to speed the extinction of many other species and to alter basic biological and geological processes as well. This can be clearly seen in the pattern of "local" crises now occurring simultaneously throughout the world.

If the commercially driven global culture were to disappear overnight, it would leave an impoverished planet; in contrast, the extinction of humans during the Paleolithic era would have been of no more global significance than the passing of the woolly mammoth. The human impact of the present crisis is also far greater in scope than that of any previous crisis because far more people are now alive than at any time in the past. The 8 million people that may have populated the world by the end of the Paleolithic represent less than .001 percent of the 5.6 billion people living in 1994.

Crisis Levels

We are presently confronted with crises on the global, national, community, and household levels. Globally, the biosphere's capacity to absorb human insults is being seriously strained, and such critical world resources as clean water, fossil fuels, and biological diversity are rapidly shrinking. Individual national governments must meet these crises while at the same time confronting a multitude of domestic threats in the form of political instabilities and social and economic distress. Many countries are now hard pressed in their efforts merely to continue satisfying minimal human needs for food, shelter, health, and education and seem totally incapable of meeting rising demands for increased levels of material consumption. Individuals may temporarily ignore certain global and even national-level crises; but at the community and household levels, where daily needs must be met, we are now being confronted with health, family, and value crises of unprecedented frequency, scope, and complexity. Whatever level we consider, our cultural means of individual and collective survival seem to be falling behind in their ability to cope with crisis.

CRISIS INTENSITY

> Whether we have 10 years or more like 20 to 30, unless we systematically find new large-scale solutions, we are in the gravest danger of destroying our society, our world, and ourselves in any of a number of different ways well before the end of this century.
>
> (PLATT 1969)

In 1969 John Platt published an article in *Science* in which he estimated the intensity or potential severity of various world problems in order to set priorities for scientific research and intervention. He organized these problems into eight categories, ranging in severity from the threat of total annihilation of humanity due to nuclear war to overstudied noncrisis problems such as space exploration. He predicted that within twenty to fifty years the nuclear war threat would either be solved or we would all be dead. Fortunately, the Cold War ended in a peaceful standoff that could hardly have been predicted in 1969. We can now focus on the second-order crises of famine, ecological imbalance, development failures, local wars, and the rich-poor gap that still carry the potential for great destruction and change. Platt correctly predicted that we would be forced to confront these crises within five to twenty years. The third-order crises of poverty, pollution, and environmental degradation that would also bring "widespread, almost unbearable tension" within five to twenty years have also arrived on schedule. This crisis ranking clearly puts in perspective seventh-ranked issues such as melting of the polar ice caps and rising sea levels due to global warming. This potential crisis would not arrive until the middle of the twenty-first century and is therefore overshadowed by the immediacy and intensity of the social and political crises related to economic development.

CRISIS AWARENESS AND RESPONSE

> There is a question in the air, more sensed than seen, like the invisible approach of a distant storm. . . . "Is there hope for man?" [The] question asks . . . whether we do not foresee in the human prospect a deterioration of things, even an impending catastrophe of fearful dimensions.
>
> (HEILBRONER 1974:13)

The emergence of the global market economy has intensified many preexisting problems and has touched off a variety of new crises. Qualitatively unique social problems, international political problems, and now an environmental crisis have all suddenly materialized in rapid succession since the Industrial Revolution began in the eighteenth century and have now widened

to include the entire globe. Cultures perceive and respond to crisis in many different ways, but in view of the pace and scope of the present "multiple crisis," our capacity to adjust is clearly in doubt. As industrial civilization has progressed into its crisis, many individuals and institutions have sounded the alarm, and the initial negative feedback mechanisms have been activated, but corrective response has been painfully inadequate.

Certainly the earliest and most bitter resisters of the global commercial culture have been the tribal peoples who have become forced participants, but they have not been alone or unsupported in their resistance. During the height of colonial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a very active group of British anti-imperialists (Porter 1968) condemned the entire colonial adventure that was then feeding the expanding global economy and called for reduced industrial output. These scattered protests, however, were easily swept aside.

The enormous social upheavals produced by the introduction of the factory system during the early phases of the Industrial Revolution in England were widely perceived as a crisis. These changes in the ownership and technology of production were designed to increase profits, but they proved profoundly disruptive of the social order and spawned an almost instant outpouring of social criticism, dire predictions, and outright resistance. On the eve of the Industrial Revolution, the Luddites, unemployed English textile workers who lost their jobs to industrial mechanization, attempted to halt the entire process by attacking the new machines directly, and by the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx and others predicted the collapse of at least one form of industrial civilization because of its "inherent contradictions." Many of these more obvious human costs of economic inequality were partially met with belated laws setting minimum wages, providing social welfare, prescribing work conditions, allowing workers to organize, and attempting to regulate corporate economic power. The belatedness of such efforts is apparent in the fact that in the United States there were no laws prohibiting child labor in mines and factories until after 1900.

At the level of international political organization (thanks to the new industrial tools of war and the new demands for resources) the growing potential for destructive military conflict met with equally slow response even though many individuals perceived the threats. Immediately after World War I, in which nearly 13 million soldiers were killed, there were tentative efforts to regulate international conflict, but it was not until 30 million people died during World War II that more effective international regulatory organizations were established.

Industrial society's impact on the environment has been a more subtle crisis, and its full potential for catastrophe has only recently become widely recognized. The general feeling that a rapidly evolving technology could overcome any environmental limitations seems to have blinded most scientists, economists, and government planners to the need to acknowledge the

world's finite supply of resources until those limits became undeniably obvious. In the United States a group of scientists representing the American Association for the Advancement of Science petitioned Congress as early as 1873 for resource conservation measures. But the first forest reserve was not even established until 1891, nearly twenty years later (Gustafson et al. 1939:7); and it was not until Earth Day in 1970, almost a century later, that Americans generally began to acknowledge that industrial progress might not be fully compatible with nature.

So far there has been a general pattern in the responses to crises by modern nations. Once the factors that will lead to a crisis are set in motion, considerable time passes before anyone perceives the potential problem. There are further delays before the problem is widely perceived, and still further delays before corrective action is taken. For example, DDT, "discovered" in 1934, was being used as an insecticide by 1943, was killing birds by the late 1950s and fish by the early 1960s, and contaminating milk in 1963. Yet it was not even partially banned until 1972. In this case, nearly thirty years' lag time was required before a biologically disastrous technology was regulated, even though its harmful aspects had been apparent to many scientists for some two decades. Unfortunately, DDT is still being used in many countries, and the potential for damage remains. For a cultural type that seems to value changes so highly and has indeed achieved a very high rate of change, such a correspondingly slow capacity for adjustment to obviously detrimental changes seems incredibly maladaptive.

This poor response to crisis lends support to those who hold out gloomy prospects for human survival. Aside from religious movements that periodically have predicted the end of all things, only in recent decades have a significant percentage of the members of any culture had reason to seriously question the fate of humanity. This increasing doubt about the future is itself an important cultural fact that serves to highlight the gravity of the present crisis.

From a different perspective, a very powerful segment of the global culture looks enthusiastically toward the future because the end of the Cold War and the expanding information technology do open tremendous opportunities for capital growth. Trend forecasters John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene (1992), looking ahead to the millennium, exuberantly predict that almost everything will be better for everyone. In their view, thanks to new technology and the global market, there will be no limits to economic prosperity and no energy crisis. Instead there will be a renaissance in the arts, an exciting global life-style for all, and individuals will be liberated to develop their full potentials. Naisbitt (1994) even predicts that, paradoxically, a booming global economy will give small nations, small companies, and even individuals greater power. Historian Paul Kennedy finds this rosy view "breathtakingly naive in the light of this planet's demographic, environmental, and regional problems" (Kennedy 1993:53). He presents a contrasting