

Author of CANNIBALS AND KINGS

MARVIN HARRIS

America Now

The Anthropology Of A Changing Culture



— "a thought-provoking vision of American culture as a system, rather than a daily arrage of bewildering and isolated social and economic shocks" — *Time*



ALVIN HARRIS

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America Now

THE
ANTHROPOLOGY
OF A CHANGING
CULTURE

Marvin Harris

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1

Introduction

This book is about cults, crime, shoddy goods, and the shrinking dollar. It's about porno parlors, and sex shops, and men kissing in the streets. It's about daughters shacking up, women on the rampage, marriages postponed, divorces on the rise, and no one having kids. It's about old ladies getting mugged and raped, people shoved in front of trains, and shoot-outs at gas pumps. And letters that take weeks to get delivered, waiters who throw the food at you, rude sales help, and computers that bill you for things you never bought. It's about broken benches, waterless fountains, cracked windows, dirty toilets, crater-filled roads, graffiti-covered buildings, slashed paintings, toppled statues, stolen books. It's about shoelaces that break in a week, bulbs that keep burning out, pens that won't write, cars that rust, stamps that don't stick, stitches that don't hold, buttons that pop off, zippers that jam, planes that lose their engines, reactors that leak, dams that burst, roofs that collapse. . . . It's about astrologers, shamans, exorcists, witches, and angels in space suits. . . . It's about a lot of other things that are new and strange in America today.

Violent crime is at an all-time high. Children are disrespectful. Vandalism is rampant. Premarital and extramarital sex for both men and women have become the norm; the birthrate is at an all-time low. There are more divorces and broken families than ever before, and there is a sharp rise in the number

of homosexuals or at least in the number of people who publicly express and advertise homosexual preferences. There has also been a proliferation of California-style cults, a great burgeoning of interest in shamanism, astrology, witchcraft, exorcism, fundamentalism, and mind-changing sects ranging from est to the "Moonies" and Jim Jones's jungle temple. At the same time people have lost pride in their work. Sales help are uncooperative and ill-informed. It's hard to find competent secretaries, waiters and waitresses, bank clerks, and telephone operators. Also, America has lost its reputation for producing high-quality industrial goods. Automobiles and appliances are in constant need of repair and many items break as soon as their warranties expire. The whole economy seems to have gone berserk. A bizarre kind of inflation has attacked the dollar. Prices keep rising even though consumer demand slumps and unemployment gets worse. Billions doled to people on welfare get spent on shoes and clothing made in Taiwan or Korea while American shoe, clothing, and textile factories go out of business.

Is there a relationship between inflation and the increase in self-identified homosexuals? Between rising divorce rates and shoddy consumer products? Between women's liberation and rising urban crime rates? Between the proliferation of far-out cults and the increase in rude and uncooperative sales help? Why is all this happening at the same time?

I have been studying peoples and cultures other than my own—in South America, India, and Africa—for over three decades. In the back of my mind I always thought that the study of customs and institutions in remote areas of the world might someday be useful for understanding my native land. Can insights gleaned from research in other societies now contribute to an explanation of why American customs and institutions have changed so radically?

One important point that anthropologists have always made is that aspects of social life which do not seem to be related to each other, actually are related. When one part of a culture

changes, it has an effect on other parts that may not be seen at once. Often, the connection between one part and another may not be perceived by the very people whose lives are most affected by what is happening. If this is true, then we cannot hope to understand why any particular aspect of a people's way of life has changed if we view it in isolation and do not study the interconnectedness of all the changes taking place—or at least, the interconnectedness of all the major changes.

Trained to live alone among strangers and to record and explain the diversity of human customs and institutions, anthropologists acquire a view of culture that is broader—more “holistic”—than that of other social scientists. As lone field-workers, preceded only by missionaries or occasional traders, anthropologists have had to cope with the problem of describing whole cultures and of seeing how the various parts of whole cultures fit together.

Bronislaw Malinowski's classic studies of the Trobriand Islanders typify the anthropological “imagination.” Malinowski tried to study everything: how the Trobrianders plant their gardens, sail their canoes, placate their ancestors, steal crops by means of magical incantations, find wives and husbands, and position themselves for sexual intercourse. He described their family life, their political organization, their system of chiefs and headmen, as well as the meanings they give to life and death. Of course, even a Malinowski could not really succeed in studying everything. Human social life in the smallest primitive bands and villages is far too rich and complicated to be grasped in its entirety. But like many other anthropologists he did try to draw a sketch of customs and institutions embracing the subject matter ordinarily studied by experts in several different disciplines such as economics, sociology, political science, psychology, geography, and history. I feel that something like this broad perspective is needed to understand changes in customs and institutions in complex nations just as much as it is needed to understand small primitive societies.

In the holistic tradition of anthropology, this book pro-

vides a general framework for understanding the bewildering changes taking place in America today. Since America is immensely more populous and complicated than a Trobriand village or the small town I myself once studied in the backlands of Brazil, this may seem to be a vain and foolish endeavor. But there are mitigating circumstances. In some respects it may actually be easier to gain a holistic view of American culture than of small exotic villages or tribes. One does not have to consume months painfully acquiring the rudiments of a new language, nor need one work alone groping toward an elementary grasp of utterly new customs and institutions. Here the problem is not that an anthropologist has to act as a proxy economist, sociologist, psychologist, and the rest. All the specialists have already been here, launched thousands of research projects, interviewed millions of native "informants," and written enough articles and books to fill the Grand Canyon. Here it is the anthropologist who arrives last on the scene and has to contend not with a dearth of information but with a surfeit of information.

In other words, the problem of making sense out of the changes taking place in America today may be more a matter of having some general framework for showing the interconnectedness of data in many different disciplines than it is a matter of being an expert in any one of those disciplines. But what kind of general framework shall we use?

Moral and spiritual values provide one kind of framework. Countless books and articles maintain that Americans have lost their forefathers' work ethic and puritan sense of discipline. In former years Americans worked and saved up for their pleasures. Now young people say they owe it to themselves to have a good time, to get everything that is coming to them—booze, drugs, food, travel, multiple orgasms—right away with no down payment and with no personal entanglements, marriage, or children to worry about. A variation on the same theme characterizes the new American culture as libertarian, open, permissive—a culture in which, as in ancient Rome, anything goes.

These are apt characterizations even though one can readily point to exceptions: the grim earnestness of today's college students competing for careers in medicine, law, engineering, and business administration, or the public-spirited environmentalist and conservationist movements. But let us suppose that, on balance, it is correct to say that a new sensualist, hedonistic, and narcissistic mood has overwhelmed the traditional American sense of duty, hard work, and self-discipline. Have we really gotten closer to understanding why America changed? I don't think so. We still have to answer the question of why traditional moral and spiritual values have lost their appeal.

Rather than start from the "top" of a culture—from changes in its moral and spiritual values—I have found that it is usually more enlightening to start from the "bottom"—that is, from changes in the way people conduct the practical and mundane affairs of their everyday lives. As an anthropologist, I am impressed most by the fact that in the new U.S.A., for example, people no longer earn their living the way they did a short while ago. The majority of Americans now produce services and information rather than goods. Not only do more people now work in offices, stores, and consulting rooms than in factories, but what they do at their jobs has also changed drastically because of automation and unionization. Also, looking back over the last fifty years I see that the whole sexual composition of the labor force has changed. Married women who formerly worked exclusively in the home now work outside the home almost as often as married men do. And the organizations for which people work are very different from what they used to be. Firms are much larger and more bureaucratic, and a surprising number of Americans now work for government rather than for private companies.

I think that this set of changes may provide the best framework for understanding how the pieces of American culture now fit together. Anthropologists have long known that when people change their way of making a living, unintended consequences are likely to be felt in a broad range of customs and

institutions. For example, when primitive peoples turned from a life based on hunting to one based on planting crops and raising cattle, their family, government, and religion underwent a complete transformation. Hunters generally live in small migratory bands, lack property, are highly democratic, and tend to be monogamous. Agricultural peoples generally live in larger and more permanent settlements; accumulate property in land, houses, and furnishings; have powerful chiefs; and often take plural wives. In addition, as everyone knows, extensive cultural changes were brought about by advances in agriculture and by the introduction of the factory system and mass production. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to explore the possibility that changes in the quality of American goods and services, inflation, family life, sex, crime, welfare, and religion have something to do with the changes in the organization and type of work and the sexual composition of the U.S. labor force.

Obviously, the shift in the nature of work and in the organization and composition of the workforce cannot account for every detail of America's new life-styles. There is no single chain of causes and effects that can be followed out link by link from one basic change to all the others. Social change takes place more like the building of a web than the building of a chain. Many different causal strands cross and recross to form intricate designs in which each element has an independent role to play to some extent. But this does not mean that all of the strands are of equal size or carry equal weight; nor does it mean that the web has no center or that it lacks an overall structure. The purpose of this book is not to explain everything down to the latest sexual kink, tight-pants fad, or mugging technique. Rather, it is to determine if apparently unrelated trends in disparate aspects of the American way of life actually constitute an unintended but coherent process of change. By using a framework which emphasizes the central role of factors such as the participation of women in the labor force, automation, and the growing bureaucratic concentra-

tion of government and private enterprise, I do not think that I will be able to explain everything about U.S. culture. I merely hope that we shall find it possible to understand more about what is happening than if we simply were to blame everything on a spontaneous collapse of traditional moral and spiritual values.)

Moreover, everything presented here must be regarded as tentative and approximate, not as final and beyond improvement. I do not claim to be in possession of the one and only ultimate truth about why America changed. The principles which have shaped this inquiry do not lead to the kinds of certainties that people seek through revelation or religious faith. I will be satisfied if I succeed in showing that there are plausible, rational, and connected explanations for features of American life that are commonly regarded as random, unintelligible, and disconnected, or as the handiwork of God or the devil.

This seems to me to be an important point to make since the belief that culture and history are beyond rational human comprehension is gaining strength. From all sides, obscurantists, romantics, and mystics have sought to discredit the idea that the solution to America's practical and spiritual problems can be attained through rational endeavor guided by objective analysis. Attacks against reason and objectivity are once again intellectually fashionable. Under the banner of what Berkeley philosopher Paul Feyerabend calls "epistemological anarchy," scholars denounce the pursuit of objective truth as a waste of time. The word is out that rival "paradigms" are merely "ships that pass in the night," and that the truths of reasoned inquiry are no different from the truths of intuition and drug-induced fantasies.

Scores of sociologists proclaim that valid knowledge of society consists exclusively of "insiders' " meanings and intentions, and that there can never be an objective account of what really happens when humans interact: "Truths are always for and within a community," they say.

Meanwhile, inspired by Carlos Castaneda's story of his apprenticeship to a fictional Yaqui Indian sorcerer, many of my colleagues have been extolling the advantages of "alternate nonwestern realities" and "the shamanic state of consciousness" in which one can turn into a coyote, see hundred-foot gnats, and enter the nether world through a hole in a tree trunk.

The belief among social scientists that the description of social life "has to be a fiction, a constitution of reality" has also been endorsed enthusiastically in literary circles. Almost everyone by now has heard the critic Ronald Sukenick's: "All versions of reality are in the nature of fiction. There's your story and my story, there's the journalist's story and the historian's story, there's the philosopher's story and the scientist's story. . . . reality is imagined."

In some circles, the attack against reason and objectivity is fast reaching the proportions of a crusade. Americans in unprecedented numbers are heeding the call of home-grown ayatollahs and born-again evangelists. As one convert to a fast-growing born-again TV church told *Washington Post* columnist Dick Dabney: "I believe in Jesus. Reason sucks. And that's everything I know."

What makes this great upswelling of obscurantist and irrational fervor so alarming is its close connection with visions of the end of Western civilization, and even of life on earth. Many millions of Americans have been dismayed and frustrated by the destruction of cherished institutions and values, ground down by taxes, bureaucratic inefficiency, unemployment, crime, and inflation until they no longer seem to care whether the world goes on or not. With A.D. 2000, the end of the second millennium looming a few short years ahead, could not the premonition of a cosmic Armageddon become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Already there are suggestions that the end is near and that there is nothing we can do about it. "It's all going up," said the born-again convert who thinks "reason sucks." "It's too late for anything."

Personally, I keep enough sleeping pills around the house to kill my wife and children in case of bad radiation burns.

These dark premonitions may be generated more by a lack of understanding of America's cultural predicament than by religious faith. Why hasn't the American dream come true? Why have so many things gone wrong? Lacking an objective understanding of social life, people imagine themselves in the grip of uncontrolled Satanic forces. But we, ordinary men and women, are the sole authors of our discontents. Seeking a better world, step by step, together, we have spun the web that holds us from our dreams. Trembling, we expect the embrace of an inhuman beast, but we are only waiting for ourselves.

The task of this book is to reassert the primacy of rational endeavor and objective knowledge in the struggle to save and renew the American dream. I disagree with those who say that all knowledge and action (or as Marxists put it, all "theory and practice") are "always for and within" a particular community, ethnic group, class, race, tribe, or sex. Anthropologists regard it as their solemn duty to represent the hopes and fears, values and goals, beliefs and rituals of different groups and communities seen from within, the way people who belong to these groups and communities perceive them to be, and the way they want them to be seen by others. But that can be only half the job. The other half is to describe and explain what people are actually saying and doing from the standpoint of the objective study of culture and history.

America urgently needs to reaffirm the principle that it is possible to carry out an analysis of social life which rational human beings will recognize as being true, regardless of whether they happen to be women or men, whites or blacks, straights or gays, employers or employees, Jews or born-again Christians. The alternative is to stand by helplessly as special interest groups tear the United States apart in the name of their "separate realities," or to wait until one of them grows

strong enough to force its own irrational and subjective brand of reality on all the rest.

Let the reader be forewarned. This book does not contain a detailed set of prescriptions as to how America can regain its momentum toward affluence, democracy, and justice. This is not a “how to do it” book; it is a “why” book. I have no utopian claims to make nor can I propose any simple course of action. Yet is not the struggle to understand a problem part of its solution? If we cannot achieve a better understanding of social life, can we expect to change social life for the better? I have opinions and preferences, and I shall venture to say what they are. If my “whys” are correct, it should be possible to distinguish between desired outcomes that are plausible and those that are implausible, and I shall have something to say on that subject also.

But the central purpose of this work is to explain rather than to prescribe. I hope it will appeal to those who believe that the reasoned search for an objective understanding of nature and culture remains the most precious heritage of Western civilization.