

Dangerous Assumptions of American Culture

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"Dangerous Assumptions of American Culture" derives from Mark Cohen's experiences in American culture and in many other cultures, as well as his training in anthropology and his training in introspection. It deals with ways in which Americans' misunderstanding and intolerance of other cultures, and their blind faith in the "obvious truth" of their own cultural assumptions, are rooted in their limited understanding of the meaning of "culture," their lack of self-perception, and their failure to examine their own culture from the point of view of cultural outsiders.

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All people around the world are members of cultures, by which I mean not just art and dance, but "grammar" rules (rather like the rules of language grammar) that set up the mostly unspoken (and often unconscious) limits to their behavior. For example, culture defines the values people hold, their goals and motivations, the permitted means to achieving those goals, the roles people play and how they play them, their form of leadership and government, the styles people accept, their modes of exchange, their cosmology (how they believe their world works), the form of their supernatural beliefs, how they train their members in their culture, and even what they see and hear from the enormous amount of noise and information with which we are all bombarded (people from different cultures actually register different sights

and sounds). Perhaps most important, culture also defines the unspoken assumptions that must precede unconscious, rational, and irrational decisions and actions.

All of these things must be provided by every culture. They are needs that must be met in any culture to keep that culture and society intact. Behaviors and beliefs address these rules and needs often through manifest, conscious, recognized designs. But often, perhaps most often, the ways people fulfill these needs are unspoken or even unconscious, through what we call “latent” or hidden functions of a behavior of which people may not even be aware. Because these behaviors are unconscious they are the hardest parts of a culture to analyze or change.

Like the grammar of language, people’s conscious and unconscious choices are learned from birth and, like language, they become so deeply ingrained that, in effect, they take people prisoner, just as people are made prisoners of the language(s) they learned as children. People are like horses with blinders, prevented by their culture from seeing and reacting to anything outside their narrow view of the world.

Cultural rules are also arbitrary. Although all cultures must provide something in each area defined above, they often provide different things, just as all people must use a language, but any of the myriad of human languages will suffice. This creates a serious problem. The blinders prevent people from seeing, evaluating, and respecting the arbitrary culture systems of others, and they convince people that their system is not only the best, but also the only real one. People cannot conceive of alternatives, so they cannot recognize how arbitrary their own choices are.

American culture is no different. Americans, too, are caught in an arbitrary system of assumptions, beliefs and action, much of it never scrutinized or questioned. We often don’t comprehend what other people are doing (although we note, in line with the human propensity for ethnocentrism, that whatever they are doing is inherently inferior). Without significant training, we are unable to look at our own culture from the outside, seeing its arbitrary assumptions and its flaws. We seem totally unable to recognize that members of other cultures (e.g., those of the Middle East) may not want what we want, or believe what we believe, or see the world as we do. Anthropologists try to teach cultural relativism, meaning simply the willingness to look at other cultures fairly and to respect and understand them, even if there are pieces of those cultures we don’t like. Trained anthropologists knew what would happen in Iraq if we went in. Our untrained leaders did not, and they conduct their negotiations and then their war with neither knowledge of, nor respect for, the people with whom they are dealing—but with the arrogance that comes from complete failure to value anything outside our own system. Cultural relativism also means the ability to look at our culture from outside (i.e., the way others perceive us) and examine our assumptions critically. Our leaders cannot do that either.

I wish to focus on a few major assumptions of American culture that are certainly arbitrary, often wrong, and occasionally even dangerous for ourselves and for other people: “freedom,” property, profit, “efficiency,” “progress,” “manifest destiny,” and dominance of nature.

“Freedom”

Freedom doesn’t exist (unless you are a slave). A promise of “freedom” means nothing. What count are specific freedoms (plural): freedoms to do or say certain things; to hold certain

beliefs; to go to certain places; to be different in specific ways; and many more. Different cultures permit or prevent certain things: none allows all. Our freedoms differ from those of other cultures, but are not necessarily better, nor are they necessarily more numerous. We are not legally free to practice polygamy, but despite the fact that polygamy has been standard in many cultures around the world and throughout history, we do not even question this constraint. Limits on our behavior are so ingrained, so “obvious,” that we often tune them out. We can therefore, somewhat irrationally, refer to ourselves as a “free country” and to assume that other people envy our “freedom.”

The Real Limits to Freedoms

Our freedoms are dramatically limited by our cultural rules and our limited knowledge and perception. We are free only within certain sets of cultural constraints. We are “free,” but our blinders keep us looking straight ahead and we think and act within the limits of that view. Freedoms are limited because we cannot see alternatives. That is, our blinders limit our freedoms. This, not government, is by far our freedom’s biggest constraint. The only remedy is education in alternatives through awareness of other cultures. Without such knowledge, we can’t share their ecological and medical knowledge, their morality, their definitions, and their aspirations, which in many cases may be superior to our own.

We are slaves to fad, fashion, and social pressures, not only in clothing design but also in our thoughts and beliefs, and the conduct of large areas of our lives. We insist on conformity in areas where none need exist. (Do captains of industry really have to wear almost exactly the same suit? Does it matter? But they do.) Because of political and social pressures, we are not free to explore alternative economic or political systems other than within very narrow specified limits. More important, we are not free to explore alternative solutions to our problems “outside the box,” if they are outside our cultural “box.”

Government restrictions on our freedom are widely discussed. But government can increase freedoms for some by restricting those of others. A contemporary example is the constitutional separation of church and state that seems onerous to some, but grants others freedom to worship and make decisions as we choose and to pursue rational solutions to large-scale issues, like the uses of science, free from the dictates of particular religious beliefs. Unfortunately, that very important protection of freedoms is now being lost.

Government can also increase our freedom (and our well-being) by offering options and solutions to problems on a scale that no other institutions can match—or that have no immediate dollar profit associated with them, such as universal health care, education, and protection of the environment. Universal health care would provide freedom to move, change jobs, widen job choices, and to pause between jobs. It would widen economic choices by freeing households from fear of the costs of catastrophic illness.

Government’s support of schools widens people’s knowledge and the freedoms that accompany it—although it can also narrow perceptions by insisting on certain curricula, as it does when it insists on teaching uncritical patriotism or mandating the content of science classes. It can provide a range of choices of media (a particular freedom) that are not necessarily the most profitable or popular. Controls on pollution would free us from limits on our behaviors (and from health problems) related to pollution. We could, for example, again be free to swim in lakes, to smell and drink clean water, and to eat fish. Government’s limits on

the behavior of corporations could free us from limits to freedoms that corporate behaviors impose. "Getting governments off our backs" will not enhance freedoms for most of us. It would just permit the powerful to limit the freedoms of the rest of us. Unfortunately, our present government has decided not to impose controls on corporations.

The Perception of Unlimited Freedom

A second major problem is that "freedom" is such an overwhelming American icon that we can't imagine compromises or limits. We value freedom, but also health, prosperity, peace, family, community, and human life. These values demand some balance; freedom can't just be unlimited. All societies require the freedom of individuals to be constrained by the rules of the group and the needs of others.

Freedoms are reciprocal. Every freedom you have restricts one of mine so your freedoms must be limited by mine, and both of us must restrain our exercise of freedoms in the name of the community.

We typically fail to distinguish between "freedom *to*" and "freedom *from*," and we undervalue the latter. But again they are reciprocal: If I am free to do certain things, you are not free from their consequences. If you are free to make noise as you like, I am not free to enjoy the quiet, hear my own music, or focus on my own activities (such as sleep or studying). I think that "freedom from" should be given greater weight than it is, but in certain areas of our lives, we are aware only of "freedom to." The American concept of freedom tilts sharply toward the freedoms of the aggressor, but merely raising the battle cry of freedom, "It's a free country," trumps all further discussion.

Freedom is seen as an inflexible principle, a non-negotiable absolute rather than what it really is—a set of rights granted by a particular culture in a particular social contract, whose precise boundaries are negotiable and need careful evaluation. Freedoms must always be combined with equal doses of responsibility and civility.

Selective Application

Freedoms too often are selectively applied (like the "freedom" to own slaves, combined with force constraining the freedom of slaves to object). The freedoms of the rich are more valued (and less constrained) than those of the poor, those of whites more than nonwhites, those of men more than women, and those of husbands more than wives.

We recognize the "freedom" of the rich to take the money of the poor in various ways, many of which are ethically dubious and should be illegal: monopoly, price gouging, deceptive advertising and labeling, shoddy goods, legal sleight of hand, withholding information about the known dangers of a product, and a host of others. Some are clearly illegal—price-fixing, sweatshops, embezzlement, bribery, graft, insider trading, tax fraud. Few get serious surveillance. At the same time, government constraints protect the rich from the poor people who try to get money back using the only means available: trespass, petty theft, panhandling, and labor strikes (though strikes are nowadays far less effective in light of the latest "freedoms" granted to corporations). We focus heavily on tax compliance by the poor and effectively ignore it among the rich and the corporations. We pay a great deal of attention to welfare cheats. We even invent some, as President Ronald Reagan once did with impunity, to make the point. But

cheating is a fact on the fringe of any system. We threaten to end welfare partly for this reason, we don't threaten to end banking because of its enormous frauds. We don't even threaten to cut far more costly "welfare" (subsidies) paid to already profitable corporations, despite the clear evidence of (apparently fairly rampant) major corporate cheating.

This selectivity is built into our system so deeply that many people can't see it, and therefore many people, rich and poor, come to support the image of laissez-faire freedom and equality that Americans like to project. But no one with any property actually wants a real (as opposed to selective) laissez-faire system because it would permit others to appropriate shares of all wealth.

We apply the concept of freedom selectively in international affairs. How "free" is the "free market" if it is distorted by power? Are others free *not* to participate in our "free market," to withhold land and resources from that market, to grow what they like? We do not permit them to assign resources or choose a government as they see fit. We have used force and economic power to convert land or other resources to our desired uses and to prevent them from being reclaimed. We have forcibly "opened" other countries to participation in our trade networks as exporters and consumers. We have prevented other people from using their own systems of land ownership and their often-superior understanding of the natural world. We have hunted indigenous people to extermination to claim their resources. Many times we have used military might (when "necessary") to restrict those freedoms or to insure the supply of "our" oil. We have used force, the threat of force, or "covert action" to prevent many other countries from redistributing land or revenues from resources to their people more equitably.

We seem to want freedom only from government, only for ourselves, and only in selected ways. We assume our pattern is "natural" and don't even question it. In fact the pattern is conventional and badly out of balance.

A social contract involves reciprocal obligation. The price we pay for government protections (i.e., limits to the excessive freedom of others) ought to be government protections for others as well. The balance demands more careful and constant re-evaluation.

Property

In our culture, private property is too often seen as an absolute and inalienable right. Most Americans agree that there should be individual rights to private property. But private property is a social convention, not a God-given right. The rules about what can be owned and what rights ownership conveys are arbitrary, maintained by power or group agreement.

Private property is and should be limited by the need or desire of the larger society. The principle of limited ownership is essential to our social organization, but we argue about specific applications of that principle. There is a good deal of room to think about the boundaries of ownership without denigrating the idea of private property itself, yet our blinders prevent us from thinking clearly.

No matter what a person may accomplish, success is grounded in institutional supports as basic as roads and infrastructure, and as sophisticated as cultural knowledge stored and made available from public sources. Invention builds on invention. But Americans embrace the myth that whatever success and resulting private property a person has was gained entirely by

the person's own behavior and the individual alone should reap the benefits. Americans erroneously attribute both success and failure much more to individual effort and personal qualities than most cultures would—or than is justified. (For example, if members of minority groups don't succeed, we assume that it reflects their personal limits, not the limits on their freedoms or on their exposure to the support of the community or the culture that we maintain.)

We agree that the right to private property takes precedence over most other rights and needs—including the human need (people from many other cultures would say, “right”) to eat; and we will defend that private property by force, if needed. For private property to become so important in our cultural system, our society must not only honor it but actively develop systems to perpetuate, transfer, consolidate, store, and move it. This requires social, legal, and economic institutions that society itself must maintain. These things are expensive. Society also cleans up the physical wastes, the pollutants, and human “waste” of discarded workers. Those favors are built on community sharing, so the society that provides it has a right to demand a share of the wealth.

Why doesn't American society (which provides so much support for any private venture and invests so much in the generation and perpetuation of private property) demand a reasonable share? Why do we count what society contributes to the poor so heavily (when they actually get relatively little) but perpetuate the myth that the rich do it all themselves and deserve to keep it all? The government provides far more services to the rich than the poor. Our services give us the right to demand a share.

Few private corporations would knowingly allow someone they had trained, nurtured, and equipped (or even just employed) to leave, taking private possession of a valuable product that the employee had developed while working at the company. In fact, many companies demand a large share, if not all, of any such product when an employee leaves. Yet our society, which could claim sponsorship, inspiration, and nurturing as far more important, regularly gives away its share of such wealth. Why doesn't our society protect its interest in developed wealth in the same manner that any corporation would?

The Profit Motive

Our focus on profit is one of our arbitrary cultural values. We allow economic profits to motivate us above all else. Such a pattern is not inevitable; it is defined by our culture. The profit motive has been an important engine for economic growth in recent Western history. There is no question of its value, at least if “growth” and “progress” (whatever they mean and if they are actually good) are the goals. Not everything that we ought—or might even want—to do is profitable, and profitability should not be the only measure. But as things like medical care and now even water are put in corporate hands, we are moving ever more in that direction. Even if we accept the profit motive, why do we accept the premise that unlimited profit needs to be offered as the only possible incentive to production? Economic profit is not the only possible motivation, and it is not sufficient for all purposes. What is profitable is not necessarily good for society or the people, although that is what we assume and teach. We could place a higher value on respect, family unity and honor, tradition, pride in craftsmanship, good works, creation of beauty, responsibility, and concern for others. We could reward such behavior with honor, respect, love, and approval of peers—mechanisms that could provide motivation for meeting many of our goals.

The national obsession with the profit motive distorts our perception of our fellows and ourselves. Why should those who are more interested in art, literature, beauty, family, friends, nature, knowledge, the environment, the education and health of our children and our neighbors' children, and the care of other people simply allow those with no ambition other than profit to take everything and destroy what we value in the process? Why should we participate in the myth that profit and wealth reflect superior "intelligence" or ability, hard work, or thrift, when it often reflects only narrow-minded ambition, greed, ruthlessness, disregard for morality or law—and, for all that, most often just reflects inheritance? In fact, profit exists largely because society picks up the associated costs in such forms as injury and incapacity, costs to health, displacement of people, pollution, waste disposal and so forth.

We have to be willing to ask ourselves whether economic profit should be the only basis for exchange and interaction, whether the pursuit of profit should continue unfettered by other concerns, whether we should continue to recognize the profit motive but limit or tax profits at a higher rate or demand accountability for the real (e.g., human and environmental) costs before the profit can be measured, and whether we should try harder to teach some other values, or to define the areas in which profit is not an appropriate incentive.

What are we to make of the recent race to profit by patenting the genes of other people? The patent, and therefore the profit, will go not to the people who have the gene but to whoever identifies it to the satisfaction of an American (or Australian, etc.) court. The profit will go to people who know how to do the paperwork, not the people who produce the needed goods. Aren't there some things that belong to people by nature and, if shared, should be shared for human good, not patented for profit?

Is there a reason why, in wartime, when society calls on its sons and daughters to sacrifice much of their youth and risk their health and lives, we cannot demand that corporations and their stockholders sacrifice their profits to the same cause? (In fact, wars tend to be highly profitable for the contractors involved, and this may be one reason why we fight so many.)

In addition to contexts where profit is inappropriate, we can recognize situations in which making a profit ought to be illegal—or is illegal but goes unpunished—as, for example, when an individual in government service profits from his or her own activities. We never seriously question the mixture of the profit motive with pronouncements of patriotism and public service in our politicians, yet these motives are potentially in conflict. Should we let our Congressional representatives profit from their association with corporate lobbyists and then make decisions affecting those lobbyists? Politicians do such things, of course—in fact, the practice is rampant—and that is what lobbying is all about. Why isn't it illegal? Elsewhere it is considered bribery.

We can regulate and harness profit-seeking more effectively. It is not radical to suggest that we need to rethink our rules and limits. What is radical and dangerous is to insist that profit should continue to dominate all other human considerations.

"Efficiency"

We Americans pride ourselves on our "efficiency," but our definition of "efficiency" is very narrow. We tend to refer to efficiency as an absolute measure that is inherently desirable. However, efficiency, like freedom (singular), does not exist. Rather, it is specific *efficiencies* (plural) that count. Efficiency is a ratio between any of various measurements of input and

output. Our assessment of efficiency depends on what things are being compared, how they are measured, and what (unspoken as well as spoken) supporting assumptions are made. Different efficiencies are often in competition with one another. Something that makes the most efficient use of time, for example, does not necessarily make the most efficient use of such other resources as space, energy, or scarce resources. Driving fast to make efficient use of one's time is an inefficient use of gasoline. In agriculture, historically, the efficient use of land was often in opposition to the efficient use of labor, and even now, the most efficient use of human labor is very wasteful of other sources of energy. "Efficient" American farmers can produce many times more food for each hour of work than do Third World peasants working by hand, but they are in fact extremely wasteful of energy. Moreover, we have to decide what each value includes. Do we measure the efficiency of the farmer's own work, or include all of the other human labor that went into providing the farmer what he needs. Does the measure of a factory's efficiency include the costs of the social cleanup? We have to be careful to specify what we want to maximize and to consider the alternative forms of efficiency and the various ways to measure it before we choose our methods.

Feeding people, giving them the opportunity to participate and support themselves, and maintaining their human dignity ought to count when we assess efficiencies, as should preserving the safety and beauty of the environment, the quality and safety of the product itself, and a host of other considerations. Historically, making farming more "efficient" has typically forced people off the land, perhaps into unemployment, to become the urban poor. It typically decreases the nutrient value and safety of the food grown (because crops have to be specially bred and then fed and protected with chemical fertilizers and insecticides), so it has far larger environmental costs than farming in more traditional ways. Addressing those needs would almost certainly be more efficient for the society in many ways, if not for the farm itself. It would almost certainly increase our "efficiency" with reference to public needs and public costs.

And, even if we agree to confine ourselves to thinking about labor efficiency and dollar profits, we have an odd way of measuring productivity and costs when we estimate efficiency. We measure the output of factories and the size of private profits without evaluating the background costs in dollars (let alone in quality of lives) to the society as a whole. *Of course* a factory can be "efficient"—that is, profitable to its owners—if the rest of us absorb the costs of its pollution, transportation, discarded labor, and so forth in our taxes or in the reduced quality of our lives. Its "efficiency" results from the fact that we don't count those costs.

Examples abound in the public sector as well. Crime is terribly costly to our society but so is punishment. Putting people in prison appears to be the most efficient short-term solution to crime, but it is remarkably inefficient because it encourages future criminal activity and is very expensive (and of course we don't punish the crimes of the rich nearly so often or so severely as those of the poor). It is far more costly to keep someone in prison than in college, and four years in college clearly has a more positive effect (on earning power, not to mention breadth of vision and understanding, and therefore a range of freedoms). Moreover, the need for so many prisons is almost certainly related to our narrow definition of economic efficiency, which excludes many people from the work force. (Surely the best way to make most people obey the law is to make them feel that they, too, have a decent stake in the "system" and in the protection of the same laws.) Neither prisons nor universities will do much good, of course, if the economy is restructured, as is now

occurring, so that jobs that once paid reasonably well no longer exist. Our definition of “efficiency” seems extraordinarily narrow and shortsighted.

Economic Growth and “Progress”

There is abundant evidence that, throughout history, “growth” has not always improved people’s lives. We can’t simply assume it will, despite assurances from government and corporations. In fact, in recent decades economic growth or improvement for corporate interests have been accompanied by declining standards of living for most people. Contrary to popular American belief, we don’t all gain from “growth.” We don’t all share, even if the whole pie gets bigger. Can we reevaluate our cultural obsession with growth in ways that permit us to separate the useful parts from the dangerous parts? If growth doesn’t improve the lives of more people, what good is it? What else are we trying to accomplish? Shouldn’t those who gain from economic growth, and the effort growth takes on the part of the society as a whole, have some responsibility to those who lose as a consequence of the process?

Part of our faith in “growth” comes from a false sense of how humankind has “progressed.” We have a profound belief in “progress,” and we are willing to put our faith in it, even though we don’t actually pay much attention to how we measure it. Our faith results partly from the fact that we usually recite only the history of privileged classes and technological advances rather than exploring the realities of life faced by the common people.

Changes in the structure of cultures and societies through historic and prehistoric time have led, through competition, toward bigger political units and the accumulation of material goods. But bigger political units and more goods have not always been successful in improving human lives, at least prior to the twentieth century (when they were somewhat beneficial, primarily for the privileged). And again in the twenty-first century, “progress” and human welfare are being separated.

Data from scientific and historical sources call into question our sense of “progress,” at least if progress is about people’s health, nutrition, and quality of life. (What else is it about?) For most people, the quality and quantity of nutrition have clearly declined through history; only for the affluent populations of the twentieth century have they improved. Most of the world’s surviving “primitive” hunter-gatherers, measured earlier in this century, had diets that were better balanced and richer in protein, vitamins, minerals, and often calories, than those of all but the most affluent citizens of the modern world. And the hunter-gatherers’ caloric intake was at or above modern Third World standards, even though those hunter-gatherers remaining to be measured had been pushed into the world’s poorest environments. This comparison applies not just to the Third World, but also to the working classes of the world’s most affluent nations. The nutrition of the working classes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century urban Britain (when Britain dominated the world) was far worse than that of most “primitive” groups. Worldwide, the trend in human stature, although irregular, was more down than up until the twentieth century, when the trend was reversed for some of the affluent.

But civilization and “progress” also create the risk of disease by providing the context in which diseases can spread. Those conditions still exist, and as we “grow” and “develop” we create more diseases.

“Progress” and “civilized” lifestyles have generated or intensified most of the health problems that most people can think of, even if some diseases and health problems have existed throughout human history and some have been eliminated. Germ diseases have become more common and more widespread as human group size and overall population density increased. Malaria and schistosomiasis became more common when people began to farm and to irrigate their fields. The great epidemic diseases, like measles, smallpox, typhoid, typhus, bubonic plague, influenza, syphilis, mumps, and cholera, spread widely primarily under “civilized” conditions once large groups of people were connected by trade. It is also civilization and its trade patterns that generate the risk of AIDS, Ebola, drug-resistant tuberculosis, and a string of other once-localized infections, such as West Nile virus, that can now be spread by people traveling by airplane and in urban interactions such that it has now arrived in New York State.

With the exception of AIDS, we are now enjoying a hiatus between major epidemics. But there is good reason to assume that there will be others because natural, not to say political and military, conditions are perfect. Consider how long it is taking us to develop techniques to fight AIDS, which actually spreads very slowly. Some killer infections like SARS, which are airborne rather than sexually transmitted, and influenza may spread very quickly. We think of modern civilized science as curing or eliminating diseases, and it does, but it is barely keeping up. Tuberculosis, a disease of cities, now exists in strains that *no* antibiotic can treat.

Historically, the transmission of epidemic diseases, not cultural superiority, was a major weapon of European expansion, particularly in the Americas, where populations previously unexposed were destroyed more by diseases brought from Europe (which most Europeans had as children) than by the superiority of European technology. The conquest certainly didn't reflect superior overall European health, nutrition, or hygiene.

The major noninfectious scourges of the twentieth century—diabetes, hypertension, atherosclerosis, multiple sclerosis, coronary heart disease, and some common cancers—seem to be generated or at least exacerbated by modern dietary habits (super-refined food) and modern pollutants. Despite what most of us were taught, the increasing incidence of these diseases does not result simply or primarily from the fact that people live longer. In fact, these diseases are strongly linked to the very features of food-processing technology that make our food industry so “efficient” and profitable. These diseases rarely occur in “uncivilized” populations. When we “civilize” such people we introduce all of these health risks to them—and when we further “advance” our own society it is likely that we will add additional risks to our own lives. “Primitive” people (as opposed to the modern poor of civilization) must be doing something right, and it would be well worth our while to look at their diets and lifestyles, although our sense of superiority prevents that.

Life expectancy (approximately the *average* number of years the individuals in a population live) reflects not so much how long individual people live as how many people reach advanced ages. Life expectancy has not shown the progressive improvement through history that most people assume. Most Europeans had life expectancies indistinguishable from those of the Stone Age well into the nineteenth century, and life expectancies of working class people, especially those in many European cities, were well below any reasonable Stone Age estimate as late as about 1850. In India, despite a history of British rule, the life expectancy was at or below Stone Age levels as late as about 1920. Infant mortality in

major cities generally fell below Stone Age levels only in the twentieth century; many major cities around 1900 had infant mortality rates well above the average for “primitive” tribes. The orphanages of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Europe were commonly the places where polite society let children die, away from public scrutiny. Well-documented patterns of infant and child mortality in many of these institutions would have shocked almost any primitive population. Every act of “progress” or “modernization” threatens the well being of many people. They also call our morality in question.

Civilization is not inherently good for people or their health. The only way civilization benefits people is by sharing its wealth and knowledge and investing in public health and well-being. Civilization without investment in human welfare can be the worst environment in which people have ever lived. We need to study potential “advances” or profitable schemes more carefully. We need to look much more carefully at the costs and benefits of “progress”: who pays the costs, who reaps the benefits? How do we combat the problems “civilization” has created when we are enculturated not to see them?

In addition, we should not confuse political dominance with progress. The modern dietary privilege of Americans does not rest only or even mainly on “progress” or our ingenuity as farmers. Increasingly, it rests also on our economic and political power to take the food of others or force them to grow what we want (as when relatively nutritious subsistence farming in other parts of the world is replaced by specialized cash crops that we desire). The ability of Europeans and Americans to move wealth and military power rapidly over great distances has done untold damage to people in other parts of the world, contributing significantly to our prosperity but to their poverty. It may well be that a higher percentage of the human populations is hungry than at any prior time in the history of our species.

But we assume that our “free” market and our mechanism to move wealth (backed by military might) give us the right to own property and dominate the market, even where people did not want to play by our rules. Many Maya in Belize own no land because when the Spaniards came in as conquerors (followed by the British who displaced them) they abrogated the Maya land tenure system and gave or sold the land to one another. The modern owners use the land to grow cash crops or beef that they sell to American fast-food chains, while the Maya are malnourished for want of usable land. A political stroke of expropriation, not just a miracle of indigenous European economic growth, accounts for much of the vast disparities of wealth that now exist. So people in Central America who are hungry export their beef, and people in Africa with vitamin A deficiency export the oils that they need to consume in order to absorb the vitamin. We continue to direct the economies of other nations for our own benefit.

The Iraq war in the early twenty-first century isn’t about overthrowing a dictator—we have set up far more than we have toppled—or about fighting terrorism; it is, among other things, about who controls “our” oil wells. It is also about American hubris, the desire of some to destroy Islam, and the need of a presidential administration to bolster itself at home at whatever cost to others.

All this demands of Americans a bit more humility about our history, our superiority, and ourselves. It also demands a bit more caution about our future. We can’t assume that improvements in our lives are guaranteed by technological advances (which are often very costly to health).

The improvements in health that we have seen in the twentieth century, such as the unquestioned dramatic increase in life expectancy, come primarily not from new discoveries, but from social investments in people's environments, their education, their nutrition, and their personal and public health. The great discovery of the germ that causes cholera would have been meaningless without massive investment in restructuring water supplies and sewage systems, particularly in cities. But we are often far behind our own medical and technological sophistication in implementing solutions. We can't simultaneously take pride in our "progress" in health while denigrating and cutting off government investment in such solutions. The idea that disease control is one of the government interventions or frills we can cut back on (apparently on the theory that we have eliminated disease) is even more dangerous than it is absurd. Yet we are cutting that part of big government in the name of economic "efficiency" while preserving defense spending, although the threat of attack by disease is far more real than the threat of military attack.

The point is that we should give more thoughtful consideration to the nature and meaning of the progress that we cherish. The health benefits of progress come only from the wealth that society diverts and invests to deal with health problems—ours and those of the countries whose economies we have dominated and which, like our own cities, are likely to share their health problems with us. Civilized structures, not dirt or individual poor hygiene or ignorance, are responsible for most modern health problems around the world, and so civilization has an obligation to make the investment. And, because our wealth, health, and well-being have been achieved partly at the expense of Third World people, we have an obligation to divert more resources to solve problems that we have helped to generate.

"Manifest Destiny"

The idea of manifest destiny is America's version of the universal "Chosen People" myth. (People everywhere consider themselves the first or best.) Our vision suggests that it is human nature and the human mandate to charge ahead toward some goal (whatever it is), like an Olympic runner, and that we are the ones selected to bear the torch. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we used the ideas as an excuse for replacing, destroying or exterminating others. Now we are a bit subtler, and don't use the term, but the feeling persists, and we still act on it. We still assume that all others must conform to our expectations.

People everywhere have a perception of world history that is distorted by their biases. Our vision nonetheless serves our chauvinism, intolerance, and racism. Ignorant of history, we can't learn from its lessons.

In our version, other people don't count. We can celebrate the birth of "freedom" and "equality" as if they were universal achievements without paying attention to the fate of Africans or Native Americans or even their descendants who became American citizens. Our children are taught a version of history that makes racism and intolerance easy to maintain. The American version of world history appropriates all the great events in human progress, reinforcing our cultural pride. Then, in a bizarre twist, we denigrate the descendants of the very groups responsible for those events, refusing to offer them full participation in our society because they are inferior. The Old Testament is "ours," but Jews have often been excluded.

The United States refused much Jewish immigration even in the midst of the Nazi holocaust. The classical Greeks and Romans or the Italians of the Renaissance are in “our” tradition, but their descendants were often denied entry into the United States when they first tried to immigrate on the grounds they were inherently inferior, not up to “our” standards. African American athletes contribute to “our” Olympic glory and our art and music and are often innovators of fashion, all while they are denied the right to full participation.

Our textbooks conveniently appropriate non-European civilizations that predate and contributed heavily to our “progress,” including the Egyptians, Persians (i.e., Iranians), Indus Valley populations, and Chinese. The “cradle of civilization” in the Fertile Crescent (taken up, today, largely by Iraq) is part of “our” history, but people of the Middle East are demeaned.

We conveniently forget that the European Renaissance itself derived not directly from Greek and Roman inspiration but, in an enriched form, from Islamic Middle Eastern and North African (often dark-skinned) Moors and Arabs who dominated learning in western Eurasia between the decline of Rome and the European Renaissance, a period far longer than that of European domination.

It is conveniently forgotten that Northern Europeans were a comparatively backward people who contributed little and did not assume any form of world leadership until about four hundred years ago. Besides, many of the ancestors of Anglo-Americans were not the intellectual elite of their mother countries but the poor, riffraff, malcontents, and convicts, who are the very people dismissed as unfit today.

One obvious lesson is that no region holds cultural and political “leadership” for long. A second is that cross-fertilization of different groups of people with different traditions promotes the flowering of culture. A third is that our own “lead” is surely temporary.

Isaac Newton once said that if he could see a great distance, it was because he was standing on the shoulders of giants, and he may or should have known that many of those giants were not European. Why do twentieth-century Americans, lacking Newton’s stature, so often pat themselves on the back for their “natural superiority” and their “vision” without realizing that we, too, are standing on the shoulders of others?

We have to get beyond treating our country’s history as a cultural icon or a creation myth. This approach to history feeds our patriotism but stifles thought, self-perception, analysis, and tolerance toward others.

Consider, for example, what the word “colonial” means. It refers to societies created when one group dominates or takes over another in a different area and often sends settlers to live in the new land and develop it in the interests of the dominant country. Several sets of people—the various indigenous inhabitants of the colony, the various new settlers, and the people of the mother country—have to interact but share neither common interests nor common culture. Misunderstanding combines with aggression. Sounds familiar?

But most American schoolchildren never get the slightest inkling why our own early history is called “colonial.” They assume that the word simply refers to a time period before the American Revolution, with buckled shoes and three-cornered hats. Or, the idea of colonies conjures images of a unified and peace-loving population of Europeans throwing off tyranny by moving into largely unoccupied space, in which Native Americans were a nuisance, not defenders of their land against aggression. At worst it conveys the mythical image of wily Europeans like Peter Minuit buying land from Native Americans who were too foolish to know the relative value of land and beads.

But our colonial history was not a morality play peopled by saints. The period was marked by ethnic and cultural disagreements, class struggles, racism, and brute force, much like other colonial situations. There were shifting alliances between varying British, American, and Native American interests and the struggle for power between the British and American colonial elites (our “Founding Fathers”) over who would rule and who would profit, struggles in which common people often had relatively little at stake. (They were, however, pushed by propaganda about patriotism to do the actual fighting, as is occurring now in Iraq.) The Founding Fathers ran a revolution for the sake of their own social-class interests and then wrote a Constitution designed primarily to preserve property and privilege rather than human rights. The supreme colonial American hero, George Washington, hardly a modest farmer who “heeded his country’s call,” was probably the richest man in the colonies. Washington was fighting British restrictions on his own vast property claims. Like Benjamin Franklin, Washington was a large-scale land speculator. He wanted to invest in land on the western frontier that the British government had recognized by treaty as Native American land. The British tended to see the various Native American groups as sovereign neighbors. Washington had an enormous amount of personal wealth to gain by the colonies declaring independence from British rule.

My point is not to vilify Washington but to emphasize the complexity of his motivations, to better understand our modern leaders. The danger in allowing Washington and others to be sanctified is that it prevents us from thinking critically about leaders or our political system. Schoolchildren, and in fact all citizens, are taught that historic political leaders are faultless people impossibly far above them. Washington’s mantle of seeming perfection and superiority reinforces uncritical approval of modern leaders who do not deserve it. It reassures people that our system is the best, even if we are not getting great leadership now or within memory. We have to expose our children to complexity if they are to be free to ponder alternatives. We have to teach children that they always have the freedom, right, and duty to be informed, to question, and to expect sensible answers. If we don’t teach children to evaluate the mixed motives of our historical figures, and leaders, how can they be free to make good judgments about modern leaders or understand our country’s objectives? How will they overcome their intolerance?

Understanding our history would also help explain the failures of others. Colonized people (and slaves) are forced to deny their own identity in order to survive—and, if they are to share the values of the ruling group, they must despise people like themselves. They have to learn the self-hatred that is so evident in involuntarily encapsulated ethnic groups. They have to be like the conquering group (which is, of course, impossible). And, while demanding compliance with its values as well as its actions, the larger society often does not allow members of oppressed groups who complied full membership. Should it surprise us that our society comes up with mechanisms, like IQ tests, meant to exclude—or that minorities meant to be excluded refuse to take the tests and standards seriously?

Despite our image of a great melting pot, American history is replete with examples of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans (like Cherokees in Georgia) who *did* assimilate and become successful, only to be threatened, exiled, ruined, burned out, or even lynched by a ruling society determined that they not succeed according to the very standards it had set. African Americans, of course, faced such pressures for more than half of the twentieth century and still often face them in the form of burned

churches or in subtler forms. And they are still forced to accept white standards, even when there is no logical reason for the standards. The idea that all such people needed to do was join the “melting pot” is manifestly untrue in the face of such history. It is hardly surprising that members of “captive” or colonized minorities are ambivalent about entering the mainstream or that they lose interest in trying.

Control of Nature

At the moment there is one other aspect of manifest destiny that must be discussed. Members of the Judeo-Christian tradition are taught to believe that have a mandate to rule and exploit the natural world. They have “dominion” over it. That is in fact a very unusual and clearly dangerous perspective, since most other religions describe people as participants in nature who must obey its rules and fit into its natural cycles.

In a world in which human activities are clearly causing global warming and we are driving other organisms and resources to extinction, it becomes extremely important for us to understand how unusual and arbitrary and dangerous this vision of nature is. We cannot deal effectively with contemporary environmental problems if we think this way.

This is particularly problematic since more and more people in the United States and elsewhere, including President Bush, actively seek to undermine scientific reasoning in the name of faith and the banner of Creationism. We should perhaps ask whether they would like to fly in airplanes or use medical technology designed on faith rather than science. Worse, members of groups that have apocalyptic visions of the end of the world are actually seeking to promote it by allowing or even encouraging activities to destroy nature. That worldview, incomprehensible outside our tradition, poses a very serious threat as it spreads.

Americans have a lot to learn, but we need to get past our cultural assumptions and blinders to learn it.

Exercise

In an in-depth interview, ask a foreign student to compare his/her culture with that of the United States. Beyond the obvious differences, use the ideas discussed in this article to explore differences in values, methods of achieving goals, and perception of the world.