

Cultural Anthropology: A New Approach to the Study of How to Conceive Our Own Future

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Until after the Second World War, most cultural anthropologists thought that progress for non-industrial cultures was towards industrialization of the main kinds we have today: the East European, the Euro-American, and the Japanese. Now (in 1984) a substantial group of cultural anthropologists think that our present mass societies show deep imperfections, two of which may lead to catastrophic life conditions. These are, first, the threat to use war with destructive weapons as an instrument of politics and, second, the neglect of clear warnings concerning the declining ecological health of our planet.

The awareness of these grave imperfections in our own contemporary kinds of culture has led cultural anthropologists to be much more open for ways to study other kinds of cultures, and to refrain from using a conceptual framework biased in favour of their own kinds.

There are in the West, at least since Rousseau, scholars who extoll so-called "primitive societies" and believe in a so-called "noble savage." However, today we have a rich scientific literature about conditions in non-industrial societies. Careful research is going on all over the world. We are in a haste because if the present trend of destruction of non-industrial cultures continues, many fewer will be left by the year 2000.

There are traits of *some* non-industrial countries that are highly laudable, or at least positively interesting from points of view common in our societies. For instance:

1. Work-hours very low, in some cultures about 3 hours a day
2. Different generations work together

3. Sharing children in big families or groups. Avoidance of family isolation
4. Local self-reliance
5. Absence of big hierarchies of power
6. Absence of haste, more dwelling in situations by enjoying intrinsic values
7. Non-mechanistic view of man and nature
8. Great and frequent feasts in which all join
9. Time for artistic and scholarly creation
10. High level of mutual help. Sharing and community (Gemeinschaft)
11. Ecologically sustainable economy and habitation
12. High general cultural competence

It is clear that some admirable traits of some of the non-industrial countries are compatible with realization of those values that we think we realize to a high degree in our societies. Therefore, the study of cultural anthropology can be used for planning the future of industrial societies.

Comparing knowledge in non-industrial countries with knowledge in our societies, there are sometimes differences of deep philosophical as well as of general interest. This makes us see our own kind of knowledge and science from the outside, from points of view which make them highly special. This is admirable in some ways, but it can be culturally, politically and ecologically dangerous in other ways.

The alternative movements in leading industrial societies have much to learn from cultural anthropology, especially to see how admirable cultural traits can be realized, and how destructive traits can be avoided. In general, cultural anthropology might profitably be used as a central source of information today in helping to shape our future.